

Oral Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Katie Simpson Review

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Naomi Long MLA

Minister of Justice

Introduction

We all know the name Katie Simpson - regrettably because of her senseless, untimely and tragic death.

We also know the name Jonathan Creswell – a convicted abuser and the man charged with Katie’s rape and murder and found dead at home on the second day of his criminal trial.

We also know many individuals raised concerns about the circumstances surrounding Katie’s death and the investigation that followed. May I thank all those individuals for their moral integrity, their bravery in coming forward and for their persistence. They fought to give Katie a voice; as a society, we owe them a debt of gratitude.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement today on the publication of the independent review I commissioned into Katie’s death.

I commissioned this review to seek to understand what can be done at the earliest stages to identify and manage serious offenders; and to identify and protect potential victims.

The independent review was undertaken by Dr Jan Melia and I thank and commend Dr Melia for the integrity, sensitivity and thoroughness she brought to this work.

I also wish to pay tribute to Katie’s family. Their lives changed irrevocably when Katie died. We cannot imagine the pain or magnitude of their loss, but we see their courage and determination in seeking answers and ensuring Katie’s death was not in vain.

Before I continue, may I ask members to pause and remember Katie - a beautiful, talented and innocent young woman whose memory lives on with those who knew and loved her.

I publish this report today in the alarming knowledge that since 2020, thirty women have been violently killed in Northern Ireland.

Murder is the ultimate manifestation of domestic and sexual violence and abuse. All abuse is reprehensible, but it is pervasive in all its forms and across all walks of life in Northern Ireland.

We must therefore be relentless in our condemnation of this behaviour, and we must support victims by giving them the protections they need to live safely and without fear.

As politicians it is our responsibility to compel, facilitate and deliver tangible change.

Too often, in reviews such as this, the personal story can be overshadowed by the necessary focus on external systems and procedures. Dr Melia’s report however, very much keeps Katie and her family, front and centre.

This was a bespoke review without the legislative under-pinning of a Domestic Homicide Review or a PPANI Serious Case Review. However, my department and indeed this Executive, is committed to tackling abuse and ending violence against women and girls. As such, I had to find a way to look into this case, for Katie’s sake, and to ensure that systems change, attitudes change and we all get better at: preventing harm; protecting the vulnerable; and avoiding the circumstances that led to Katie’s untimely death.

At the outset of this work I received a commitment to fully co-operate with the independent reviewer from the senior leaders of a range of relevant organisations. I am grateful to them for their active participation and candour throughout.

With the endorsement of Katie's family, the report is published today in its entirety. I urge everyone to take the time to read it and reflect on the missed opportunities - both for Katie and the agencies that encountered her and her abuser over many years. It makes for uncomfortable reading, but this transparency is vital.

I ask Members and the general public to consider whether anything in the report resonates with their lives or the lives of those they know. If the answer is yes, please take that first step and reach out to someone you can trust and can talk to. If you do not have that trusted person, then please make contact with professional services and organisations. In anticipation that the publication of this report may trigger distress for victims and survivors, I have asked my Department to engage proactively with support services to ensure they are prepared for an increase in requests for help. Anyone in immediate danger should always contact the police, without delay.

The message I hear often from victims' representatives is that we must not shy away from difficult conversations. That is a simple but critically important point. For too long, abuse has been allowed to thrive in the shadows created by fear, silence, stigma and control. We need to shine a light into those shadows. We need to remove the stigma and we need to speak openly and honestly about abuse.

Avoiding these conversations does not protect victims, it entrenches harm.

The lives of Katie's family and those who loved her have been tainted and irreversibly impacted by what happened.

The only way we can truly pay tribute to Katie's memory is to learn the lessons from the circumstances that led to, and ultimately resulted in, Katie's untimely death.

The only good that can possibly come from this tragic loss, is if others are better protected from such harms in the future.

Mr Speaker, I now turn to the report.

Recommendations

Dr Melia sets out in stark and uncompromising detail, what went wrong. This review however is not about focusing on individual practices or apportioning blame. Its fundamental purpose is to instigate collective, system-wide learning and implement change. I also welcome the fact that the review's report will help inform the ongoing Coroner's Court inquest into Katie's death.

There are sixteen detailed recommendations, codified in a proposed Action Plan.

In testament to Katie's memory and her family, we must give this Action Plan our undivided attention and without delay. I am therefore pleased to announce that Dr Melia will co-ordinate and chair an Implementation Group. This will provide much needed continuity which I welcome. I also hope it provides assurance to Katie's family and friends, that this Action Plan, will be actioned. I call on the relevant agencies and organisations to fully support and co-operate with Dr Melia in this process.

The majority of the sixteen recommendations are policing focused and the PSNI has made a number of recommendations as part of the Review. Lessons from Katie's death however are not confined to the criminal justice arena and there is no hierarchy of importance.

Mr Speaker, I wish to emphasise the six critical areas which Dr Melia identified for intervention:

Policing

There is much room for improvement. Katie's death was concealed and staged as suicide, and it is abundantly clear that investigative practices and mindsets must change. In the Chamber today, I will highlight just some of Dr Melia's detailed recommendations.

Within policing, coercive control must be recognised as a serious and potentially lethal risk factor. Patterns of behaviour, not isolated incidents, must drive assessments of risk. The Review provides a clear framework, including six new indicators of concealed homicide, which should be embedded across sudden death investigations and specialist training.

There too, is a clear need to develop mandatory use of trauma-informed, victim centred investigative models. Information about Katie was missing from this case. Suspicious death and suicide investigations should therefore include comprehensive victim profiling.

Relatedly, we must seek to combat cognitive bias and confirmation bias. Police officers need to be fully trained to recognise and challenge gendered stereotypes or victim blaming narratives. A lack of trust in victims and poor investigations empower perpetrators such as Jonathan Creswell.

This also extends to forensic investigation standards in all sudden or unexplained deaths. Forensic protocols should reflect trauma-informed and gender-sensitive practices and require pathologists to consider coercive control and staged suicide as part of their analysis.

The absence of specialist domestic abuse input at the earliest stages of Katie's investigation was also a critical failing. The Review is clear: specialist Domestic Abuse Officers must be involved from day one wherever there is any history of violence within the family. We must ensure expertise is shared, not siloed.

Police Team coordination and case ownership must also improve. In Katie's case, the investigation was passed between departments without a designated lead, causing confusion and delays. This lack of ownership contributed to missed opportunities and a failure to act on known risks.

Bail and PPANI

In her recommendations, Dr Melia also sets out that in cases involving allegations of violence, coercive control, or intimate partner abuse, bail conditions must focus on the safety of victims and their families. It is, of course, a matter for policing and the judiciary as to the granting and setting of bail conditions. However, I implore decision-makers to recognise the importance of incorporating coercive control risk indicators and including victim-family consultation when making bail decisions.

I also welcome the recommendation relating to risk assessment within the Public Protection Arrangements NI (PPANI) specifically the need for recognising coercive control as a continuing risk even in the absence of a current relationship.

Mr Speaker I alluded earlier that the lessons from Katie's case also extend beyond the sphere of criminal justice. We are all aware of the sustained pressure on our emergency departments but Recommendation 14 is a critical learning point – and that is to ensure that all attendances involving physical injury prompt safeguarding considerations, particularly where domestic abuse is suspected or could be a contributing factor, or where there are multiple presentations.

The equestrian industry was also central to Katie's young life. Recommendation sixteen makes clear the need for introducing mandatory safeguarding policies, training, and vetting across all equestrian facilities, including unaffiliated stables. It is of great concern to me, that as I stand in this chamber today, there may be other young girls or women unknowingly vulnerable or already subject to predatory and secretive abuse.

And that brings me to reflect on one final and perhaps fundamental recommendation of all – which is to develop and broaden Northern Ireland wide campaigns on coercive control to include suicide, and homicide. It is absolutely imperative that we educate all of our citizens on what coercive control is, in all its forms and potency.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, I conclude this statement today with a clear message. My Department and our partners will act on the recommendations contained in Dr Melia's report and ensure lessons are not simply learned, but embedded.

I do not underestimate the scale of this task. However, this work will be led by Dr Melia and therefore, I can confidently say, it will be in very capable hands.

I must also take this opportunity to remind Members of the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy (2024-2031) led my Department and the Department of Health. The initial three-year Action Plan contains 56 actions - a resounding reminder of how much work has yet to be done.

The Executive Strategy 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' has now also entered its second delivery phase. Both these strategies quite rightly demand this Executive works collaboratively and tenaciously to deliver on these many commitments.

We must do so in Katie's memory.

We must do so in memory of all victims before and after Katie's death.

We must do so, to reduce harm and save lives.