

Communication – Context - Curiosity

Overview of the Incident

In January 2023, **15-year-old Holly Newton** was murdered by her ex-boyfriend, then aged 16. Holly suffered fatal stab wounds despite emergency intervention.

There had been evidence of **controlling, coercive, and obsessive behaviours** throughout their 18-month relationship, including stalking, monitoring her movements and emotional manipulation. After Holly attempted to end the relationship, his behaviour escalated.

Key Learning for Safeguarding Practice

Recognising Domestic Abuse in Young People Under 16

- UK domestic abuse legislation currently applies only to those aged 16+, meaning abusive behaviours among younger teens may be categorised as “general assault” or “knife crime,” hiding key risk indicators such as coercive control or jealousy.
- The behaviour of the perpetrator—monitoring, stalking, threats, emotional blackmail—clearly mapped onto domestic abuse patterns but were not formally recognised, reducing access to appropriate risk pathways.
- Practitioners must treat harmful and controlling behaviours in any teen relationship as potential domestic abuse, regardless of age.
- Use existing safeguarding frameworks to categorise risk even if legislation does not.
- Consider coercive control, stalking behaviours, jealousy, and emotional manipulation as concerns which require escalation.
- Ensure practitioners know how to differentiate normal teenage conflict from escalating patterns of harm (e.g., controlling behaviour, surveillance, threats of self harm, isolation tactics).
- Risk in adolescent relationships requires coordinated responses, especially where coercive control or harmful behaviour is present.
- Ensure timely information sharing between police, schools, Early Help, Youth Justice, and health services.
- When a young person expresses fear or discomfort in a relationship, ensure concerns are logged and escalated.

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- Use established escalation policies if practitioners disagree on the level of risk.
- Treat stalking in adolescents with the same seriousness as in adults—early intervention is critical.
- Stalking is as an indicator of escalating risk even without physical violence.
- Engage parents immediately, provide safety advice, and coordinate with police when patterns emerge.
- Ensure young people know how to seek help, recognise warning signs, and report concerns about peers.
- Develop staff confidence to identify and refer domestic abuse like behaviours in young teens.
- Give weight to parents' and peers' observations about changes in behaviour, controlling partners, or fear in relationships.
- Ensure concerns are acted on promptly, not deferred.

Key Messages for Practitioners:

- Abuse can occur at any age—do not wait for a child to turn 16 before applying domestic abuse informed safeguarding thinking.
- Teen relationships can be high risk due to intensity, emotional volatility, and digital surveillance capabilities.
- Coercive control is a major predictor of harm.
- Early intervention saves lives—patterns seen in Holly's case are recognisable and preventable.
- Clear, prompt information sharing across agencies is essential.
- Education and awareness are vital for both practitioners and young people.