

Roundtable with Frank Mullane, CEO of AAFDA, Bereaved Families, Clive Grunshaw, Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), Lancashire, Dr. Anna Hopkins (CEO, Office of the Lancashire PCC) and Paul Greaney KC

Chaired by Jess Asato MP

EXPLORING THE NEED FOR A NEW DOMESTIC ABUSE-RELATED SUICIDE LAW

Wednesday 29 April 2026 – Westminster, 1 Parliament Street

Introduction – Jess Asato MP

1. Jess Asato MP set the scene for the discussion, aimed at exploring the legislative options available in instances of domestic abuse-related suicide. She referred to the ongoing Law Commission's Homicide Review and to the report of the Police Domestic Homicide Project, published the day before.
2. Attendees included bereaved family members, Jess Phillips MP (Minister for Safeguarding), Frank Mullane (AAFDA CEO), Clive Grunshaw (Lancashire PCC), Dr. Anna Hopkins (CEO, Office of the Lancashire PCC), Paul Greaney KC, Dame Nicole Jacobs (Domestic Abuse Commissioner), representatives of NGOs and charities, National Police Chief Council Leads, members of Lancashire Police, academics and lawyers.

Contributions from bereaved families

3. Angela Dawes, mother of Kiena Dawes, discussed the need for better handling of trials from the perspective of the families of victims, given the prevalence of victim-blaming she experienced during the trial of Wellings. She called for a "Kiena's Law" and advocated for increased support for victims of domestic abuse.
4. Bereaved family member - explained how prolonged coercive control had led to his stepdaughter's death, and how the police's failure to treat her death as a homicide resulted in lost evidence. He advocated for early crime scene preservation and stronger investigative duties, noting that the evidential review in her case had concluded that the threshold for prosecution had not been met.
5. Several other bereaved family members were present.

Frank Mullane (AAFDA)

6. Frank said the lack of criminal accountability and justice in relation to many suspects (where convictions are not successful) is a public protection issue, and called for a new law that is more explicit and helps juries to clearly see the causation of suicide by domestic abuse. AAFDA feels that juries are struggling to identify the necessary causation for the charge of unlawful act manslaughter.
7. A clear law may help surmount the difficulty caused for juries by the defence exploiting any mental health difficulties the deceased may have had, even though some or all of those difficulties may have been caused, or contributed to, by the abuse.

8. AAFDA feels that a new specific offence would signal societal condemnation of domestic abuse and controlling or coercive behaviour ("CCB"). It would define a clear offence of domestic abuse causing suicide. That would help the public understand the offence and its impacts, even if there is a delay in seeing the benefits, via juries. Frank said he had witnessed lawyers disagreeing on what the current law was, which did not bode well for the understanding of the jury.
9. A new law may give the CPS more confidence to bring cases by helping to explicitly acknowledge situations in which domestic abuse causes death.

Clive Grunshaw Lancashire PCC

10. Clive Grunshaw spoke in support of new law, expressing deep concern for victims and referring to the trial of Wellings.
11. Clive Grunshaw outlined the conversations he and his office have been having with Government in relation to the need for this new law, the area of domestic abuse related suicide and tackling violence against women and girls generally, which is at the heart of his Police and Crime Plan.
12. He highlighted the work that is ongoing including a conference looking at the area of domestic abuse related deaths, work within Lancashire Constabulary to best deliver justice for victims, and ongoing research and campaigns to prevent offending and bring vulnerable people to safety.

Paul Greaney KC

13. Paul Greaney KC was leading counsel for the prosecution in the trial of Ryan Wellings. His experience in that case demonstrated the difficulty in establishing causation in cases of unlawful act manslaughter where the death of the victim occurred through suicide. He considered that there were two issues:
 - a. whether the existing law relating to unlawful act manslaughter is fit for purpose; and
 - b. whether the CCB offence can be changed to generate short term improvements pending a more wide-ranging review and changes in the law of homicide.
14. In relation to the existing offence of unlawful act manslaughter, Paul Greaney KC stated that, in principle, the offence ought to cover domestic abuse-related suicides. However, in suicide cases, courts in England and Wales have imposed the need to prove that suicide was a reasonably foreseeable consequence of the unlawful act and, in some cases, the need to exclude that the suicide was a "voluntary" act. Those are concepts that jurors are likely to find complex.
15. Paul Greaney KC contrasted the case of Wellings in England with the recent case of Milne in Scotland. In the Milne case, following the suicide of Kimberley Milne, Lee Milne was convicted of both abusive behaviour (similar to CCB) and culpable homicide (similar to unlawful act manslaughter). The key differences between the Wellings and Milne cases included a very early jury direction in Milne which was aimed at debunking domestic abuse myths, as well as a more streamlined direction on the elements of the offence of culpable homicide in the Scottish case. He felt that the courts of England and Wales could learn significantly from the approach of the Scottish court in Milne. The Crown Court

Compendium might beneficially be changed to encourage early jury directions on myths in domestic abuse cases, as well as in cases involving sexual offending (in which cases directions are already routinely given).

16. Paul Greaney KC warned against reliance (as some had suggested) on the offence of assisting or encouraging suicide as a method of solving the current problem in unlawful act manslaughter cases, noting that the former offence requires proof that the act of the defendant was intended to encourage or assist the suicide. He therefore suggested that a new offence may be necessary, possibly one that removes the "but-for" causation test and the requirements for voluntariness and reasonable foreseeability.
17. Regarding the use of the existing offence of CCB for such cases, Paul Greaney KC noted that CCB has two major shortcomings:
 - a. the maximum sentence of five years is not adequate given the harm potentially caused – he contrasted this with the Scottish offence of abusive behaviour in section 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, which carries a maximum sentence of 14 years' imprisonment; and
 - b. extended determinate sentences ("**EDS**") cannot be passed for a CCB offence even where the perpetrator presents an ongoing threat to current and future partners – which again contrasts with the position in Scotland.
18. In response to a query, Paul Greaney KC confirmed that prior convictions may assist in demonstrating a propensity to act in an unlawful way towards a partner, which in turn may assist in proving the unlawful act that underpins the offence of unlawful act manslaughter alleged. However, that the underlying act caused death must always be proved. In the case of *Milne*, it was probably helpful for the conviction of culpable homicide that the perpetrator was at the scene of the victim's suicide.
19. Paul Greaney KC doubted that juries often "middle" their verdicts these days, convicting for the offence of CCB or assault as a compromise where manslaughter is alleged. Juries are given routes to verdict which require them to adopt a structured approach. The problem is not jury compromise, but the complexity of the directions juries are given.
20. Paul Greaney KC said he thought the central issue was the complexity of jury directions in England and Wales, which were altered following the case of *Wallace*. Juries, he thinks, struggle with the idea that there may be an offence of homicide where the victim has taken their own life. That is the issue we need to address – through early directions on myths (and possibly expert evidence on such issues) and comprehensible directions on causation at the end of the case.

Other Contributions

21. There was support for improved jury directions and introducing a duty to consider contextual evidence regarding domestic abuse, rather than the creation of a new law.
22. In relation to the point about contextual evidence regarding domestic abuse, Paul Greaney KC noted that there is a prohibition on presenting expert evidence about how victims may react in particular circumstances. Our courts have generally considered that directions will

address the risks of myths, but now may be the time to consider afresh whether expert evidence should be capable of being given to debunk myths and stereotypes.

23. Concerns were raised about tactics used by defence counsel in cases of domestic abuse-related suicide, as was seen in Trybus, that seek to attack the character of victims and weaponise the broader agenda of those advocating against domestic abuse.
24. There was encouragement to respond to the upcoming consultation on homicide law which is being looked at by the Law Commission.
25. It was raised that there are gaps between what bereaved families need and what policing in England and Wales currently delivers, but also that better policing solutions are not the whole solution. A difficulty was a requirement in England and Wales in relation to a CCB offence for the police to ask a victim to illustrate the impact of the offence on them.
26. It was raised that updates to policing and investigating methods should be supported by rigorous academic studies demonstrating effectiveness, such as those conducted by the College of Policing.
27. Not everyone agreed with a new law, one comment being that there was a huge gap between the law and the implementation of the law. An issue was raised with how police investigate suspected suicides, with families forced to do their own investigations.
28. There was a proposal that suspected suicides involving domestic abuse must be investigated as homicides in the first instance, noting the need for a shift in the cultural mindset as to how investigations take place.
29. Another view was that there should be mandatory early homicide-style responses to reported suicides that might be linked to domestic abuse, such as the approach taken in California under Joanna's Law. It could be effective to have practical, non-legislative changes to police investigations of such cases, such as compulsory body-worn video preservation.
30. An additional view offered was that deaths caused by domestic and honour-based abuse should be treated as murder, whilst appreciating there may be issues in terms of prosecution. It was shared that there had been backing from a group of MPs for amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill (which has now passed into law) to mandate that honour-based abuse be treated as a statutory aggravating factor in sentencing, so there may be wider parliamentary support regarding this issue.
31. It was shared that it is not uncommon for juries to struggle to understand certain issues during trial and this is why expert evidence and increased general awareness are required.
32. Another view offered was that there were systemic investigative failures in suspicious female deaths, including evidence contamination, marginalisation of families, and the use of victim-blaming narratives.