

Woman spurred stranger to suicide

Fariha Karim, Frances Gibb

A former pole dancer faces jail for entering into a suicide pact with a postman she had just met online and deserted before he took his own life.

Natasha Gordon, 44, was convicted yesterday of encouraging the suicide of Matthew Birkinshaw, 31, at Rutland Water in December 2015.

An "enthusiastic" supporter of suicide, Gordon had discussed pacts and methods with at least six other people online and met Mr Birkinshaw, from Walsall, West Midlands, through a suicide forum. Mr Birkinshaw's family said yesterday that it had been "heartbreaking to hear how, when Matt needed kindness and support, he met someone who wanted to do him harm".

A week-long trial at Leicester crown court was told that Gordon had been on internet forums seeking suicide partners for about a year before Mr Birkinshaw's death. Others she had been in contact with said she had "pressured" them to enter into pacts, and that she had said severe abdominal problems were causing her to want to end her life.

Mr Birkinshaw came from a "nice" family and had been in a relationship for eight months. Friends said that he appeared ready to settle down.

He was said to have had a "matter of fact" attitude towards suicide, and had seen a psychologist when he was a child. Gordon told the court he had said that since the age of 14 he had "felt he didn't belong in this world".

Mr Birkinshaw had been discussing plans online to take his own life since November 12, 2015. At 7.50am on De-

Behind the story

Campaigners have long argued that suicide forums send those searching for someone to save them into the arms instead of people who encourage them to end their life (Fariha Karim writes).

Natasha Gordon spoke frequently of seeking comfort from people feeling the same way as her on Forumjar.

On these forums, there are "clusters of

suicides where people influence each other, and almost become competitive," Marjorie Wallace, chief executive of the mental health charity Sane, said. "People reach out because they're feeling so desperately alone."

Few organisations suggest that simply shutting the forums will work or even happen, because for every forum that is shut, another can crop up easily.

Instead, many argue

that better regulation and monitoring would be more realistic. While warning of the dangers of internet forums, the Samaritans have said that the expression of suicidal thoughts can offer an opportunity to positively intervene. Searches related to suicide online will often throw up results for the Samaritans first.

Last night, Codero, the host for Forumjar, failed to respond to requests for comment.

ember 16 he said that he wanted to die the following day. He said anyone was welcome to join him — provided they did not try to change his mind.

Gordon told him in a text message: "I really can't wait to go tomorrow, hope you do not change your mind."

Mr Birkinshaw had wanted to go to Beachy Head, but after talking with Gordon he picked her up in Peterborough and settled on an alternative suicide method she had been keen on.

Gordon told the court that she and her dog went with him to Rutland Water and that she had planned to join him. "I changed my mind when I opened the door [of the car]... I knew it

shaw had given her for a taxi back. At 4.24pm she was texting another man who wanted to make plans with her. She sought suicide partners as "a comfort thing", she said. "I wasn't in a sound mind". Timothy Cray, for the prosecution, asked her: "Did it cross your mind at all ... that it's a pretty terrible thing, on the night the other man is dead or dying, to be speaking to someone else about killing themselves?"

"I needed someone to talk to," she replied. Mr Birkinshaw was pronounced dead from carbon monoxide poisoning at 7.24pm.

Gordon, of Peterborough, whose family live in Leicester, denied encouraging him to kill himself, saying she did not want him to die. Ali Naseem Bajwa, for the defence, said Mr Birkinshaw had always intended to kill himself, and needed no encouragement.

After Gordon was found guilty, Mrs Justice Cheema-Grubb said that she should expect to be sent to prison. Sentencing was adjourned.

One woman posted on an anonymous forum that she had reported Gordon to police "for harassment and cyberbullying" and allegedly "encouraging suicide pacts" five months before Mr Birkinshaw died, it was reported yesterday. Police would not comment on the claims. Mr Birkinshaw's family said: "To anyone who may be struggling with these feelings; there are people you can speak to who have your interests at heart. If not a family member or close friend, then one of the agencies who can offer support. If you try to face this alone, you become more vulnerable, as our son was."



Matthew Birkinshaw died in 2015 after meeting Natasha Gordon online

wouldn't be feasible," she said. "I didn't want him to die. He locked the car. I tapped on the window but he wouldn't look at me." She walked away at 3.50pm, she said, with £60 Mr Birkin-