

Early Awareness Stalking Intervention

Identifying lower risk domestic abuse (DA) stalking perpetrators and referring them to a diversionary programme with trained psychologists.

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Key details

Does it work?	Promising
Focus	Reoffending
Topic	Violence against women and girls Vulnerability and safeguarding
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Region	West Midlands
Partners	Police Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	August 2021
Completion date	March 2025

Key details

Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Offenders Victims

Aim

The aims of the Early Awareness Stalking Intervention (EASI) are to:

- refer perpetrators to the Black Country Women's Aid independent stalking advocacy caseworker (ISAC) for risk assessments and support, with access to counselling
- encourage perpetrators to disengage stalking behaviour towards the victim(s)
- enhance the safety and freedom of stalking victims through addressing the perpetrators' behaviour to reduce risk and reoffending
- support officers with both DA and non-DA investigations by providing investigative insight, access to digital media investigators (DMIs) and provide a referral pathway to the EASI programme via the fortnightly stalking triage clinic

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of EASI are to:

- engage with 100 perpetrators (dependent on whether they meet the EASI criteria)
- reduce reoffending and breaches from the perpetrator towards the victim
- use EASI positive requirement for stalking protection orders (SPO)

Description

Overview

West Midlands Police (WMP) trialled the EASI for those offenders who are ex-partner/rejected stalking perpetrators for a 12-month period (August 2021–July 2022). This intervention intends to

address the fixation and obsession of offenders that may be leading to stalking offences, while managing elements of effective support for the victim and offender simultaneously.

EASI is a multi-agency initiative between The Alice Ruggles Trust, Black Country Women's Aid, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Psychology Services Group, West Midlands Police, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner's Office and the University of Derby. EASI introduces psychological therapy as a remedy for ex-intimate stalking perpetrators who receive their first disposal for stalking, admit their guilt and agree to a referral into the project.

Funding

The EASI pilot project was awarded £425,000 of funding by the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner and the Home Office Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Intervention Fund 2023–25, which is expected to support the project until April 2025.

A proportion of the money awarded was used to fund:

- inspector stalking tactical lead (0.5)
- sergeant (1)
- police staff investigating officers (3)
- police staff investigators (3)

These form part of the EASI working group which consists of:

- regional strategic stalking lead (superintendent rank) (1)
- stalking service delivery manager (1)
- tactical WMP stalking lead (detective inspector rank) (1)
- local policing area non-DA stalking representative (detective Inspector rank) (1)
- EASI team sergeant (1)
- West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioners office representative (1)
- Black Country Women's Aid stalking specialist – member of the National Stalking Consortium (1)
- Crown Prosecution Service – Crown Court team – stalking single point of contact (SPOC) (1)
- senior operational lawyer from West Midlands Legal Services
- Co-creator of the EASI project and member of the stalking triage clinic from the Forensic Psychology Services

A further £15,000–£20,000 has been allocated for training and stalking evaluation from the West Midlands Police executive

EASI

EASI intends to have the following approach:

- Early – EASI is designed as a 'circuit breaker intervention' and is aimed at those offenders who have started stalking, but who are aware of their issues and are willing to receive support
- Awareness – when delivering the first training session to all stakeholders it provides an overview of stalking including definition, types and methods of detection. Through conducting Focussed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (fACT) sessions these aspects can be raised to improve the awareness of an offender's personal experiences and improve their psychological flexibility.
- Stalking – for the perpetrator to recognise their own behaviour and that it can be a risk to the victim.
- Intervention – reduce further stalking offending, improve psychological wellbeing linked to why the person may be stalking, and increase victim confidence in the police response to stalking.

Staff

A dedicated EASI team consists of one sergeant, three police staff investigators and three police staff investigating officers who follow the guidance provided for the inclusion/exclusion criteria to aid selection, however, some case discussions regarding selection may be required. The domestic abuse risk assessment is used as part of business as usual at the point of police contact. The team also use the stalking assessment indices (SAI) and screening assessment of stalking and harassment (SASH), alongside defined eligibility criteria to help identify appropriate cases, and for evaluation purposes. The key considerations here will be to assess if this diversionary outcome is appropriate given the risks posed to self and others – these assessments will provide information on the level of investment (time and repertoire of behaviours) of the person stalking, as well as risk levels. Referral decisions are made by the EASI team and discussed at the stalking triage clinics.

Daily crime screening

Daily searches have been set up for the following offences:

- stalking

- harassment with and without a fear of violence
- racially aggravated harassment with and without a fear of violence
- breaches of non-molestation orders
- breaches of community resolution orders
- breaches of stalking protection orders

Police staff investigators begin their working day with a pre-programmed crime search filter for the entire force area. The data is then reviewed and actioned. Actions include:

- Cases are recorded on a daily search spreadsheet.
- Cases are identified based on the content of the crime report, and other linked cases that may have been misidentified. If the team member identifies a case which should have been labelled as stalking but was not, the team member will either escalate to the EASI team supervision or make a submission for a reclassification via the crime service team, so it complies with the Home Office crime recording rules regarding stalking.
- Cases are identified for potential or actual referral to the force stalking triage clinic.
- Cases are identified for potential interim or full SPO applications.
- Cases are identified for victim contact and independent stalking advocacy caseworker referrals.
- Cases are identified that may be appropriate for referral to the EASI project.
- Live custody suite searches are conducted, where people have already been arrested, with a view to identifying potential EASI candidates and other cases that would benefit from an SPO.

Roles and responsibilities

WMP stalking delivery manager:

- Driving performance and service improvement.

WMP superintendent and inspector:

- Strategic and operational leadership, driving performance for stalking organisationally.
- Implementation and management of the stalking triage clinic, embedding the EASI project as a critical pathway for intervention. The stalking triage clinic is a multi-agency meeting which takes place every two weeks to help identify and manage stalking perpetrators and coordinate support for victims. Legal services, CPS and Black Country Women's Aid are represented. A monthly oversight meeting also takes place to discuss updates and keep track of action sets.

- Daily activity supporting risk identification and investigation management.
- Developing training in partnership with stalking specialist agencies and maximising rollout and impact of this across the organisation.

WMP EASI team:

- Case identification, selection, consenting and contracting of participants, and use of SASH and SAI. SPO applications, Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), Multi-agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH), One Day One Conversation (ODOC) and Multi-agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) meetings.

HMPPS Midlands Psychology Services and Forensic Psychology Consultants Ltd:

- Perpetrator and psychological intervention delivery.

Black Country's Women's Aid:

- Victims safeguarding and support.
- Receive referrals for victims via WMP, contact and engage victims to offer support.
- Conduct parallel assessments and safety monitoring to assess any further contact and risk from the offender, gain the victim's perspective on behaviour change, and highlight any risks to WMP.
- Provide a range of support interventions to victims including casework, advocacy, trauma interventions and therapeutic support.
- Support WMP staff training to embed early identification of stalking behaviour and support EASI perpetrator referral pathway.
- Attend project meetings, contribute victim feedback, data and case studies to monitoring and evaluation.

Officer training

To support awareness raising and identification of cases for the EASI pilot, police officers were provided access to eight live (and recorded) online training sessions about stalking and the project. This was delivered by West Midlands Police in conjunction with Black Country Women's Aid, HMPPS psychologists and the Alice Ruggles Trust.

A subsequent training session was provided to two police colleagues responsible for the identification, selection, consenting and contracting of participants for the intervention, regarding the utility of the SASH and SAI. SASH provides a measure of risk, whereby outcomes are used by the research team to ensure suitable responses to any high or very high-risk cases at the earliest opportunity. The SAI for both victim(s) and perpetrator(s) is used to inform risk judgements at the point of selection for the intervention, and for informing support given to the victims of the identified participants.

Delivering EASI

The EASI initiative offers an option for police implementation to support rehabilitative element aspects of SPOs, within a contract for conditional cautions and as a rehabilitative order upon 'guilty plea' convictions at court. The opportunity to engage in EASI may also be offered as a license condition upon release from a 'guilty plea' custodial sentence, subject to eligibility criteria. An open information sharing contract is in place with relevant criminal justice agencies for: progress, conditional caution, civil order, community order, license condition compliance and awareness of the reporting of any heightened risk indicators such as suicidal thoughts.

EASI uses the Focussed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (fACT) treatment approach which consists of four components to be delivered over four to six one-hour sessions, with the aim of:

- prevention of escalation in behaviours/risk to self and victim(s)
- reduced risk factors/distress symptoms among perpetrators
- improved psycho-social functioning among perpetrators
- reduced police callouts and arrests of these individuals

The sessions consist of stalking psychoeducation (increasing a person's awareness of their harmful behaviours) and therapy focussed on improving psychological wellbeing and resilience, relevant for addressing psychosocial deficits contributing to their stalking behaviour. It aims to increase and develop hope, skills and a commitment to change within participants with professional support.

EASI fACT sessions were delivered by qualified and experienced health and care professions council (HCPC) registered psychologists or British Psychological Society (BPS) chartered forensic psychologists on an individual basis via remote online live sessions on Zoom (an online platform), with laptops provided by the bidder as funded. This ensured provisions were more responsive, Covid-19 recovery compliant and cost effective and avoided detriment to a participant's existing

routine commitments, such as employment and any corresponding impact upon income. The package of intervention was developed and delivered over six, one-hour sessions (as the recommended maximum) by fACT trained forensic psychologists experienced in risk assessing and working with people who stalk, and those who commit a variety of offences, including sexual and domestic abuse. There were also consent and contracting agreements with participants that victim details were not for discussion, and victim blaming would be challenged.

Evaluation

Following a process of competitive tendering, a research team at the University of Derby was commissioned to evaluate the EASI project. EASI was evaluated using mixed methods to explore the effectiveness of the intervention and attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Does EASI work and does it achieve its goals? These are to:
 - improve knowledge and confidence in working with stalking offenders with the police and victim services
 - improve victim and safeguarding support
 - reduce reoffending rates among offenders
 - improve psychosocial functioning among offenders
2. What parts involved are making the intervention work?
3. What are the lessons from the pilot and can they be used to guide the formation of similar partnerships in the future?

Quantitative methods and findings

Quantitative methods were used, which consisted of the collection and analysis of routinely collected data from WMP. It used the following selection criteria:

- male and female adults residing in the West Midlands who have engaged in ex-intimate partner stalking
- the stalking was not driven by a serious mental illness
- conditional caution or out of court disposal option agreed
- offered on a voluntary basis to those charged with or convicted of stalking
- admission of guilt for stalking behaviour during police interview

- to have observable cognitive functioning ability to benefit from the intervention

The research team liaised closely with the WMP EASI specialist officers to collate routinely collected quantitative data obtained through their electronic police database. Information was collected on an individual basis and extracted from the database into an Excel spreadsheet by the specialist officers. Key demographic information on age, gender and ethnicity were recorded for EASI candidates and their victims who had consented to participate in the research. Anonymised available data were used for all candidates in relation to their involvement in EASI from the beginning of the intervention (1 September 2021) up until 15 June 2022. This included each EASI candidate's individual start date (the date of the first fACT session they attended), end date (the date of the final fACT session they attended) and completion status (whether the candidate attended all six sessions).

Qualitative findings

The second part of the evaluation focused on the qualitative methods, with interviews being conducted with stalking perpetrators and victims to capture their perceptions and experience of engaging with the intervention.

Once informed consent had been obtained, a total of 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with EASI completers and three in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with victims, between May and June 2022. The researchers used an anonymous Zoom account and avoided using personal identifiers (such as names) during the interviews to reduce any potential personal risks. When possible, two researchers conducted the interviews online, via Zoom. Interviews lasted 20–60 minutes and were recorded with the permission of the participant.

Interviews with key stakeholders

Stakeholders were interviewed towards the end of the evaluation to record their learning and development over the course of the project. The interviews focused on the following themes:

- stakeholders' experience of a multi-agency approach to stalking
- how the initiative evolved and matured over the 12-month period
- successes and challenges that stakeholders faced along the way

After obtaining informed consent, a total of seven semi-structured interviews were conducted via video call with police and ISACs involved in EASI between May and June 2022. With the

participants' consent, interviews were recorded and lasted 30–60 minutes.

Overall impact

It is difficult to measure whether there was an overall increase in awareness of stalking across the criminal justice system as only a certain number of referrals into EASI were made over the short course of the 10-month evaluation period and were fairly similar every month. A longer period is needed to recognise if stalking awareness training will have a subsequent effect of the number of referrals over time.

The organisations involved in the implementation of EASI were engaged in training and information-sharing initiatives aimed at enhancing practitioner knowledge and skills as well as communication among each other. It is unclear if there was an increase in referrals and identification of stalking cases in the area throughout the period of evaluation or that long-term outcomes that were intended for victims emerged. However, the known number of misidentified cases of stalking in August and September 2023 was over 100 a month. In June 2024, this number had dropped to single figures. This is believed to be as a result of improved awareness of stalking triggered by the work of the EASI.

It is unclear as to whether EASI candidates' awareness and understanding of their own behaviour and the impact on victims was truly recognised during fACT. It was also too early in the study to determine conclusively if specific health interventions decreased reoffending. However, preliminary data analysis shows that it is promising. Specifically:

- Perpetrators of ex-intimate stalking who completed all fACT sessions had fewer police contacts for further offending (stalking related or other types of offences) on average, relative to a comparator group of stalking perpetrators with similar case characteristics who had not undergone fACT.
- The pre-post intervention psychometric data to measure stalking perpetrators' psychosocial wellbeing delivered promising initial findings. Compared to measures at baseline (pre-treatment), EASI candidates who completed fACT self-reported significant improvements in their psychological flexibility post-treatment. There were also simultaneous reductions in self-reported psychological inflexibility and cognitive fusion among these individuals, following completion of fACT.

- Interviews with stakeholders and EASI candidates revealed a high level of satisfaction with the tailored FACT intervention offered, as well as a degree of confidence among EASI completers that they would be able to handle their emotions and fixations in the future.

Learning

- It is crucial to guarantee that a multi-agency partnership such as EASI has enough funding and support from essential stakeholders, and that positions are filled by professionals who engage with both victims and offenders for the purpose of reducing ex-intimate partner stalking.
- While the focus is on improving offender mental health and behavioural risk management, the force recognised the importance of victim support as well as their satisfaction.
- Though EASI is an early intervention diversionary outcome for first time offenders, a handbook or guidance reference tool would be useful for those who have completed the sessions but would need to refer to key techniques covered in the sessions and continue to practice self-regulation and risk management.
- Project management is essential for the multi-agency partnership collaboration as it helps establish processes and procedures in an adequate system, ensures appropriate data collection and management practices and ensures that information sharing agreements between partner agencies are made in a timely manner.
- Assessing the progress of the initiative involved delivering and collecting victim(s) and perpetrator(s) satisfaction questionnaires. Although organisations could be inclined to name a lead agency stakeholder as the manager and single point of contact, this practice frequently leads to a project manager's position being used for the unit's operational needs and becoming less successful.
- It takes time to establish multi-agency relationships, foster confidence among partners, and establish protocols for the exchange of data and information. Additionally, given the nature of stalking as an offence, its identification, investigation and delivery of intervention take additional time. Therefore, before the impacts can be effectively evaluated, programmes like this need have stability and funding for a significant amount of time. The benefits of spending in resource-intensive units such as EASI, over brief periods of time can be difficult to demonstrate.

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Tags

Stalking or harassment