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Our daughter was murdered by a stalker. This is why the law needs to change

Threatened by her ex, Alice Ruggles told police, but little was done and he killed her. Now her parents campaign about this neglected crime

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Published 24 April 2026
6:03am BST
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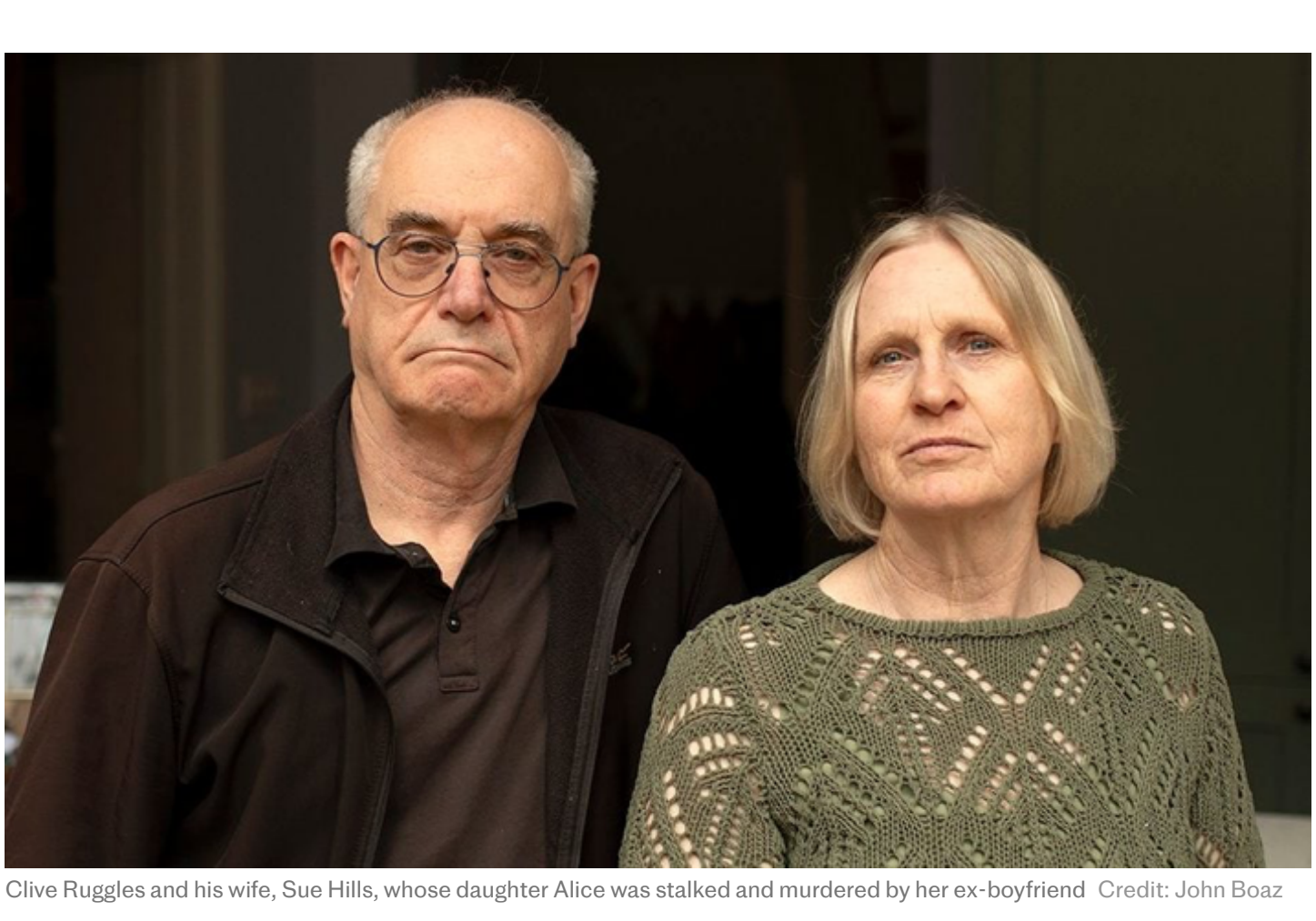
Clive Ruggles and his wife, Sue Hills, whose daughter Alice was stalked and murdered by her ex-boyfriend Credit: John Boaz

Alice Ruggles had become increasingly withdrawn, ground down by her former boyfriend's late-night calls, the constant texts, the threats to kill himself and the suspicion that he had taken control of her Facebook account. But it wasn't until he promised he *wasn't going to kill her* that the 24-year-old became really afraid.

"He was a soldier, and he had driven 120 miles to Alice's home in Gateshead from his barracks near Edinburgh in the afternoon," says Alice's father, Clive, 73. "Later, she was in bed and heard a knocking on her ground-floor window. She pulled back the curtain to see chocolates and flowers on the window ledge, and him backing off, arms open, as if to say he was going to leave her alone.

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"But as he drove home, he left a voicemail for Alice saying, 'I came down here to say that I wasn't going to kill you. I wouldn't kill you.' And he mentions *not killing her* seven or eight times. He is saying, 'I never thought of killing you.' But he obviously has thought of it because he's talking about it."

That night, in late September 2016, Alice phoned the police. By the end of the call, she felt relieved by the protection she had been promised. But less than two weeks later, she was dead, murdered by the ex-boyfriend, 26-year-old Trimaan Dhillon. He had broken into her flat, cornered her in the bathroom and cut her throat.

Alice Ruggles was killed by her ex-boyfriend in the bathroom of her home in October 2016

Alice had been let down by shortcomings in laws and procedures supposedly designed to deal with stalking – shortcomings that campaigners and academics argue are still leaving women (because it is overwhelmingly women) at the mercy of obsessive stalking that often results in injury, victim suicide or murder.

Research commissioned by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust in the wake of Alice's death, and conducted by Prof Jane Monckton-Smith, a specialist in homicide, stalking and coercive control at the University of Gloucestershire, looked into the murders by men of 358 women over three years – and found that 94 per cent involved stalking.

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The research was concluded in 2017. This week, to mark Stalking Awareness Week, the trust is highlighting the potentially deadly flaws in the way stalking is handled by the police, health professionals and the law, with a new report, *Fatal Fixation: Understanding the Link Between Stalking and Homicide*. It says that 1.4 million over-16s were victims of stalking last year. One in five women and one in 13 men report being affected.

"We know stalking can escalate into fatal fixation," says Emma Lingley-Clark, interim chief executive of the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. "Yet across public bodies and agencies it continues to be dangerously underestimated – rather than treated with the urgency it demands."

Red flags of classic coercive behaviour

Hailing from the Leicestershire village of Tur Langton, Alice was the third of Clive and wife Sue's four children, the others being Emma, now 38, Nick, 37, and Patrick, 30. They describe her as the glue that held them all together.

"When you think about Alice, her sense of humour and empathy played such big parts in her personality," says Sue, 65. "She had an enormous number of friends because she was the one people gravitated towards; she was the one they wanted to be with, the person who made them laugh and made them feel happy.

"One of the things we found difficult when she died was the way everyone describes people they have lost as being a person who 'lit up the room', but she really did. It wasn't just a cliché – she really did light up every room she went into.

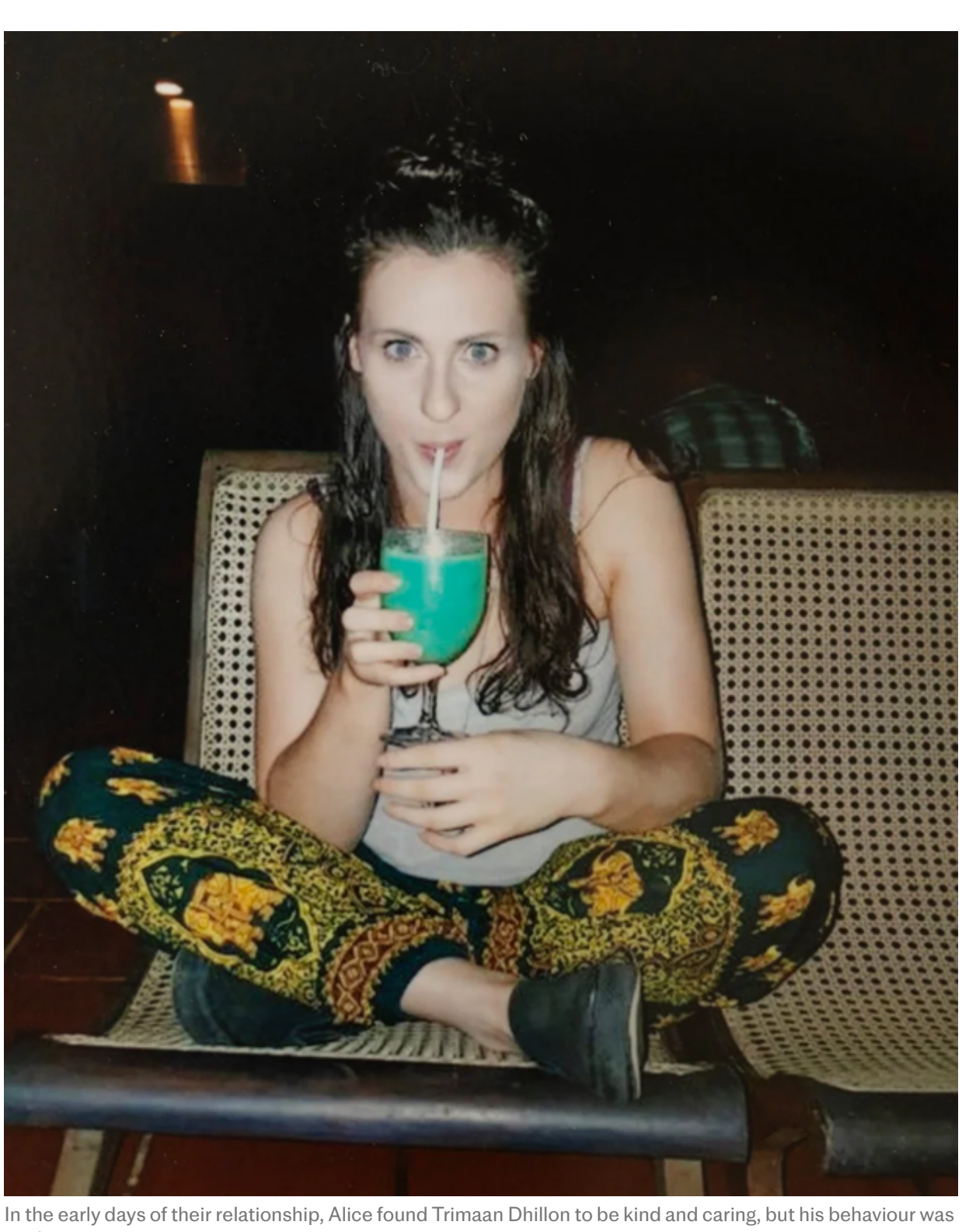
"She just loved life. She did everything to be happy in the moment and she never worried about the future. But she knew how to enjoy herself and make other people feel happy too. It took us a long time to learn to live without her, because we hadn't realised how much she had held our family together."

'Alice loved life,' says her mother. 'We hadn't realised how much she held our family together'

Alice was a fencing champion, her favourite sword being the sturdy *épée*. She won the Women's Épée at the Leeds Open in 2012. When it came to choosing a place to study product design and engineering, she opted for Northumbria University in Newcastle because it had an impressive fencing team.

It was here that another student told Alice that a male Facebook friend had seen pictures of her on her feed, and described her as "the most naturally beautiful girl I've ever seen". The friend was Dhillon, who was serving in Afghanistan in a non-combat role. Alice agreed to an introduction and they began messaging and talking on the video-calling app Skype. In January 2016, he came home on leave and the pair met in person for the first time.

"They spent his two weeks of rest and recuperation together, and Alice said they had an amazing time," recalls Sue. "She thought he was kind and caring, and he paid for things and he looked after her, and she even said to me, 'Mum, I think he's The One.' I now know that that's a red flag, a relationship going so fast. But in a way, an absolutely amazing relationship would do the same thing, wouldn't it? So it's very hard to explain to people that if you think it's really brilliant so quickly, it might not be."


In the early days of their relationship, Alice found Trimaan Dhillon to be kind and caring, but his behaviour was to change

In April 2016, Dhillon, a lance corporal trained in reconnaissance, was transferred back to barracks with the 2nd Battalion, Royal Regiment of Scotland (2 Scots) based at Penicuik, south of Edinburgh. Alice was working at Sky in Newcastle as a site co-ordinator and personal assistant to the head of sales. She was sharing a house with four male university friends, but it soon became clear they had concerns about Dhillon and the way he had begun to exercise control over her.

He insisted Alice should always pick up when he called, would make pejorative comments about her appearance and magnify small disagreements she had had with friends, encouraging her to break from them and making her increasingly dependent on him. Among coercive males, this is classic, and potentially dangerous, behaviour. Encouraged by Dhillon, she moved out of the house she shared with her male friends and into a ground-floor apartment with work colleague and friend Maxine McGill.

During two visits to the family home in Tur Langton in May, Dhillon left differing impressions. At the first, Sue and Clive felt he was overcompensating, promising to take good care of Alice, telling them what he thought they would like to hear as parents. During the second visit, he ignored everyone, instead searching for a new car on his phone. Clive and Sue could see that Alice was becoming increasingly unhappy with him.

By July 2016, during a family holiday in Cornwall, they say Alice had become withdrawn and had changed for the worse. "She didn't seem like our Alice," says Clive. "Her colleagues at Sky later said she had become preoccupied and wasn't the same fun person she used to be."

Shortly afterwards, Alice was contacted by a woman whom Dhillon had met on a dating website. He had been seeing other women too. Alice broke off the relationship, and that is when the stalking behaviour began.

"It really started during the August and September," says Clive. "He was constantly messaging her. He'd turn up and try to see her. He would cry and threaten to kill himself because he couldn't live without her. And he'd got control of her Facebook account. It seems that she had logged on to Facebook on his iPad at some point and not logged out, and he'd got the password.

"But the threats were beginning to get darker. He would say, 'If I was a bad guy, I'd do this or that, but I'm not, so I won't.' They were veiled threats, but threats for sure."

When Alice finally called Northumbria police, they treated her case as harassment and not stalking. There is a vital difference between the two. A case of harassment does not necessarily involve a personal fixation: if a householder pestered their neighbour over the location of a fence, the neighbour might move away, but the dispute would continue with the next resident.

"The problem is that the way it was identified by that first person who answered the telephone really coloured everything that followed," says Clive. "He identified it as harassment, and that was how it was followed up. It should have been recognised as stalking."

Distinguishing stalking from harassment

Stalking, according to the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, is "a pattern of fixated and obsessive behaviour which is repeated, persistent, intrusive, and causes fear of violence or engenders alarm and distress in the victim".

In 2019, the College of Policing came up with an acronym to help officers and other professionals distinguish stalking from general harassment: Four. If a perpetrator's behaviour is fixated, obsessive, unwanted and repeated, then it is stalking. The distinction is important because, under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, updated by legislation in 2012 and 2019, harassment might attract up to six months in prison, whereas serious stalking can result in a 10-year prison sentence.

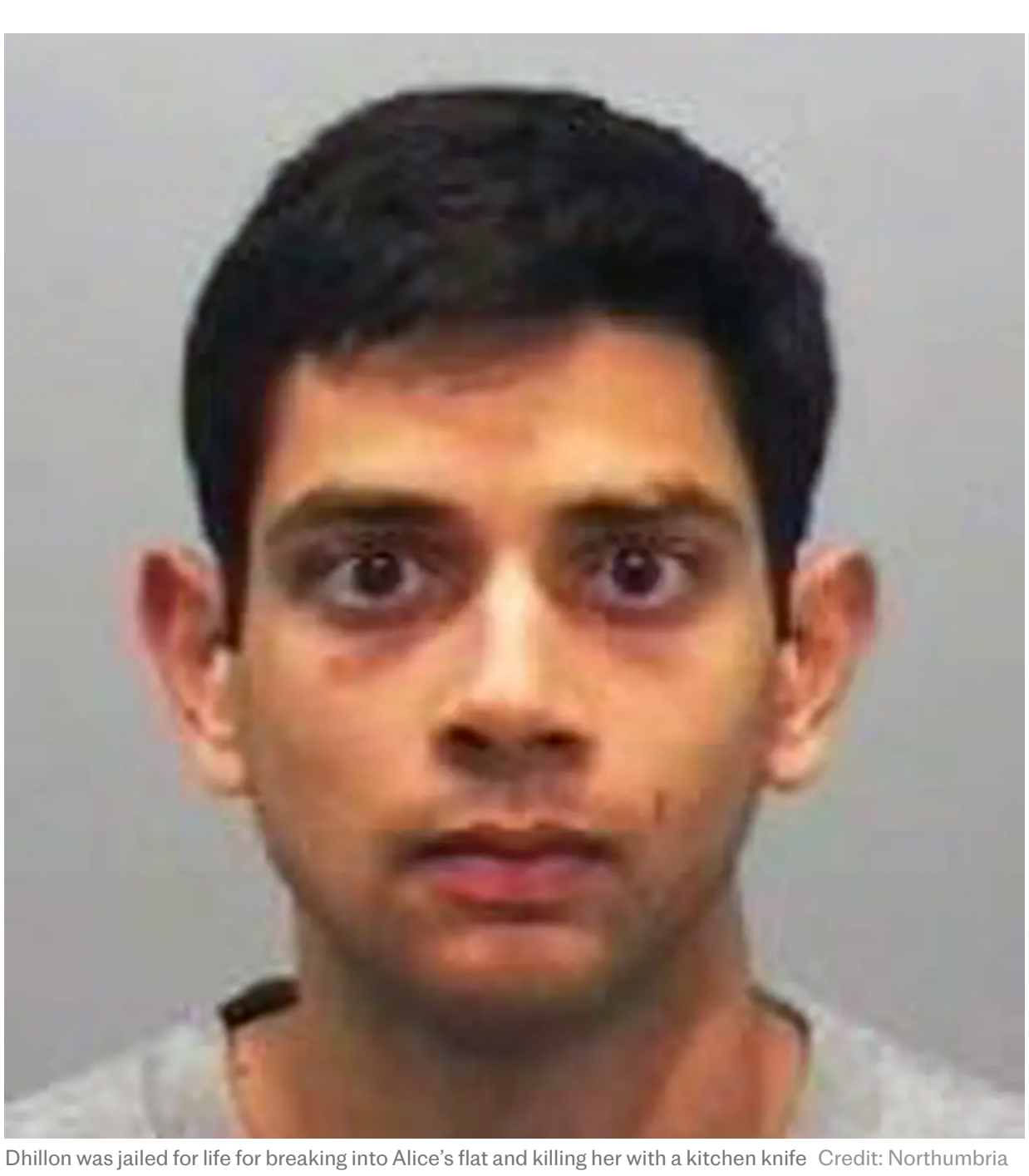
When Alice called the police, she was told Dhillon could be issued with a Police Information Notice, meaning he could be arrested if his behaviour continued. His superior officers in the Army were informed and they told him not to contact Alice, but he did, returning her possessions and writing to her.

Alice was seeing someone new, and Dhillon had found out. With her possessions he included a letter, falsely claiming: "I'm in a lot of s---, but hope you feel happy now… I'm sending you everything I have that reminds me of you, as you belong to another man. Wishing you two a happy life. I will never come in your life again."

Alice told the police about the unwanted contact, but they did nothing to protect her. During Dhillon's trial in April 2017, McGill, her friend and housemate, said Alice had felt let down and grown increasingly frightened. Colleagues would give Alice a lift home to her door, and the women kept the flat locked at all times.

"[Alice] felt as if it was palmed off," McGill told the court. "She was asked the question, 'What do you want us to do about it?' She said, 'I don't know, that's why I am phoning you. I was asked to get back in touch if I had any further contact.' She basically said it was just a waste of time."

On October 12 2016, Dhillon drove to Alice's flat, climbed over a wall and forced his way in through a window. She was home alone. He took a knife from the kitchen drawer and attacked her in the bathroom. In spite of the fact that Alice had 24 injuries and defensive wounds, and 6ft 1in Dhillon had none, he claimed she had attacked him. The jury rejected his version of events and he was jailed for life, with a minimum tariff of 22 years.


Dhillon was jailed for life for breaking into Alice's flat and killing her with a kitchen knife Credit: Northumbria Police/PA

In an interview with the BBC after the trial, McGill, who found Alice's body, said: "It was nothing short of a disaster. Nothing could have prepared me. It was worse than what you see in the films… It stays with me every day. I'll never be able to erase it from my memory. I find it hard to imagine that I'll never see her happy and beautiful smile."

After her death, Sue and Clive set up the Alice Ruggles Trust to educate young people and professionals, to raise awareness of the dangers of stalking and to promote policies to prevent it. Clive is an emeritus professor in archaeoastronomy, the study of civilisations' understanding of the cosmos, and Sue is a retired maths teacher. But now, improving awareness of stalking consumes the couple's lives. They are trying to raise money so that it can continue after they are too old to carry on.

The neglected importance of managing offenders

Prof Monckton-Smith's work continues, too, though she is frustrated that stalking is still not taken seriously enough. Under the Stalking Protection Act of 2019, perpetrators can be issued with a Stalking Protection Order by the police even before a conviction, banning them from contacting their victim or visiting specific locations.

If a stalker breaches an order, they can be arrested – but Monckton-Smith says it is commonplace for the police and the courts to do little or nothing after a breach. And that can embolden the perpetrator.

"We focus very much on safeguarding of the victim, which of course is absolutely crucial and essential," she says. "But this can come at the expense of looking at offender management; that is something that we just do not take seriously.

"We're not even following up breaches of orders. We're not even putting in Stalking Protection Orders and safeguards like that when we should. So for me, that's the big one. Why aren't we focusing on offender management at least as much as we're trying to focus on saying we are safeguarding victims? Because you can't safeguard a victim of stalking until you've managed the offender."

Monckton-Smith describes two recent cases which, she says, are not unusual. In one, "a very dangerous man" had bail conditions put in place but he breached them within 12 hours of being released. He was re-arrested by police, but then released by a magistrate with exactly the same bail conditions he had just breached. He faced no further sanctions.

"In another, I was reporting to the police breaches of bail, and the officer I spoke to said, 'Ah, we don't even bother dealing with that until there has been a third breach,'" she says. "But that leaves the victim dangerously unprotected.

"Society has to stop viewing these incidents as 'crimes of passion' and thinking that these are just lovelorn men who will get over it, because sometimes they don't, and the consequences can be catastrophic, as in Alice's case."

The Alice Ruggles Trust was set up to raise awareness of the dangers of stalking and to promote policies to prevent it

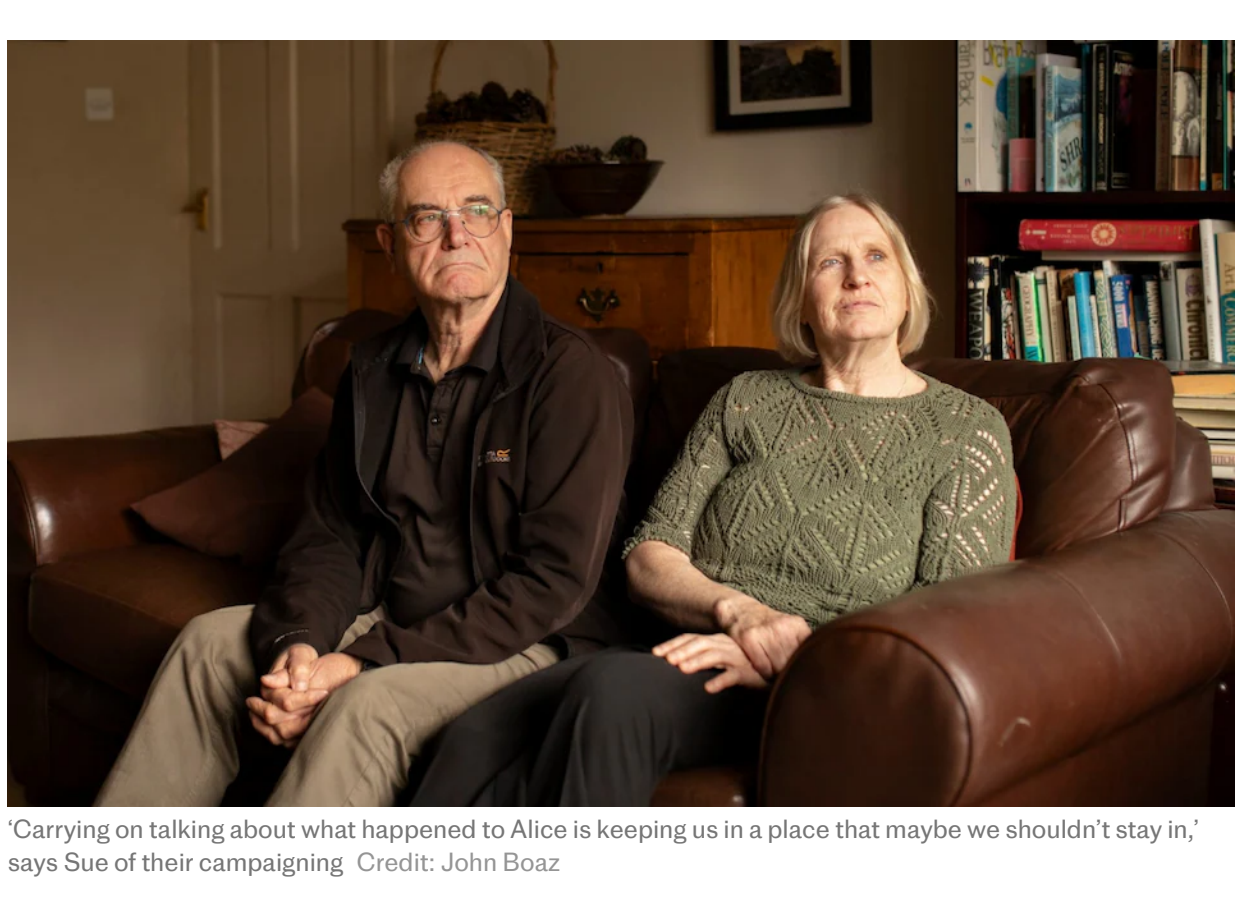
In 2022, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, on behalf of the National Stalking Consortium, issued a legal "super complaint" highlighting systemic failures in police responses to stalking in England and Wales. A super complaint can be brought by statutory bodies or recognised interest groups such as the trust.

It was investigated by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue, the Independent Office of Police Conduct and the College of Policing. When they reported back in 2024, they made 29 recommendations designed to protect victims and manage perpetrators.

Richard Wright KC, who had been involved in the prosecution of Dhillon, was asked to conduct an independent review of existing legislation. His findings and recommendations were submitted at the end of March and haven't been announced yet.

Campaigners are hoping that one of his recommendations will end an anomaly whereby there are two different offences of stalking in England and Wales. One requires police to prove victims are "in fear" for their safety, and one (treated less seriously) does not. Only in the former can the toughest sentences be brought against perpetrators – but often victims have no idea they are being stalked until it is too late.

Covert behaviour like this often involves cyberstalking and electronic tracking that a victim could be unaware of until an unrelated arrest or, perhaps, a tip-off results in the stalking being found on the perpetrator's phone or computer.


'Carrying on talking about what happened to Alice is keeping us in a place that maybe we shouldn't stay in,' says Sue of their campaigning Credit: John Boaz

Alice Ruggles's parents are among those who would support the adoption of a single offence of stalking that didn't rely on proof of fear. In the meantime, they are doing what they can to raise awareness and save lives, but they need help. They look exhausted.

"It does make you feel better to know that you're making a difference," says Sue of the campaigning she and her husband have undertaken for the past decade. "But carrying on talking about what happened to Alice is keeping us in a place that maybe we shouldn't stay in. I feel like my life stopped and I can't move on."

It's clear the pain is still raw. But Alice would surely be immensely proud of them both.

Donations to the Alice Ruggles Trust can be made at alicerugglestrust.org/donate

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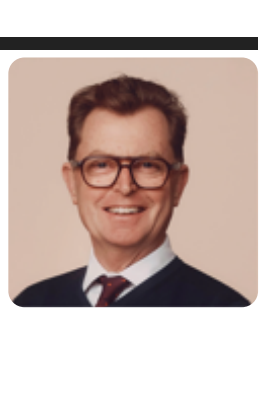

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