

Beyond Security: Supporting Young Survivors in the Aftermath of Terror



Why Prevention Isn't Enough

Terrorism, a serious act of violence that endangers life and profoundly affects the health and wellbeing of victims, is intended to influence governments, intimidate the public, and advance a political, religious, or ideological cause. Thankfully, the likelihood of being a victim of terrorism in the UK is small. Although comparisons to other fatal incidents can seem simplistic, the reality is that statistically, you are more likely to die taking a bath than to be killed by a terrorist. Yet the impact of surviving or witnessing a terrorist attack is immense; it can have lifelong psychological consequences and erode trust and cohesion within communities.

In response, Western governments, and consequently the public, have been frightened into committing significant resources and effort to counter the threat and minimise the risk of future attacks. Indeed, recently, thanks to the determination of Figen Murray, whose son was killed in the 2017 Manchester terror attacks, a new law, [Martyn's law](#), has been introduced to strengthen security at public premises and events. Of course, it is vital to prevent attacks from happening in the first place, but to address the long-term consequences, the lasting impact on individuals and communities that terrorist organisations seek to create, it is equally essential that support for survivors is resourced robustly and comprehensively.

The Manchester Attack and Its Legacy

I'll focus in on the [Manchester Arena attack](#), where thousands young people came from all over the country to see a pop concert. Tragically, a terrorist, undetected by security services, was able to detonate a home-made suicide bomb killing twenty-two people. In that moment, the lives of many young people and their families changed forever.

This was an attack that deliberately targeted young people. Unlike all other attacks that year, people under the age of eighteen were disproportionately affected. Bewildered by what they had endured (and for the youngest, perhaps not even fully aware of the concept of terrorism) they were thrust into a world where a joyous event became the site of unimaginable violence.

When Systems Fall Short

The fact that children were among the victims and survivors of this attack made it all the more deplorable. Many people reflected on how easily it could have been their own child. As those young people returned to their homes and schools and tried to get on with their lives, the legacy of that night was only beginning to unfold. Thousands were traumatised by what they experienced and sought help.

Adolescent mental health provision, already weakened by years of austerity, struggled to cope with the influx of new referrals, which far exceeded the resources routinely available. Charities such as the [Peace Collective](#) in Warrington provided excellent support, but with small teams and limited funding, their capacity was inevitably restricted. Teachers did their best to help pupils, but the psychological support some children required went beyond their professional training. Many young people were left feeling alone, anxious and unable to cope as they faced long waiting lists for specialist help. With so many young people falling through the gaps, it could be argued that the terrorists had the upper hand, their aims to disrupt and weaken society was, in part, achieved.

Learning from Survivors: Bee the Difference

Lobbied by the survivor-led charity, [Survivors Against Terror](#), the Home Office conducted an internal review in 2023 into the support provided to victims of terrorism. The review examined how government considers victims of terrorism, what gaps exist in current provision, and whether communication of available support is effective.

Determined to ensure that the needs of children and young people were not overlooked, it was essential that findings from our [Bee the Difference research](#), co-developed at Lancaster University with the [National Emergencies Trust](#), were included in the review. Providing a unique contribution to knowledge in this field, the research drew on the voices of more than two hundred young people who survived the Manchester attack, documenting their experience of support services five years after the event.

Seventy-five per cent of participants stated that they were psychologically injured by the attack, and, concerningly, twenty-nine per cent reported that they had not received professional support. The qualitative data consistently highlighted the absence of dedicated and coordinated response. Survivors described feeling lost in a fragmented system, not knowing where to turn for help. In the worst cases, young people were re-traumatised by having to repeatedly retell their story in order to access care.

Steps Toward Change

Two years on, there is some light at the end of the tunnel. In July this year, the government opened a tender for a new [Victims and Survivors of Terrorism Support Hub](#), a dedicated service to meet the needs of survivors in both the immediate and long-term aftermath of an attack. The Hub will provide specialist, trauma-informed care, ensuring that all those affected are able to access appropriate help. This is a huge step forward.

It has been heartening to see how much the [Victims of Terrorism Unit](#) at the Home Office has sought, and genuinely responded to, the voices of survivors, ensuring that their experiences are shaping the offer for future survivors. The tender process has now closed, and the announcement of which organisations have been awarded the funding is expected imminently.

Cautious Hope

As we await the outcome of the tender and the establishment of the new Victims and Survivors of Terrorism Support Hub, there is reason to feel cautiously hopeful. The government's recognition that survivors require long-term, coordinated, and trauma-informed care marks a shift towards learning from past shortcomings rather than repeating them.

But progress must not stop here. Continued investment, collaboration, and, above all, a commitment to listening to those directly affected will be essential to ensure that no young person, family, or community is left to cope alone in the aftermath of terror.

If we are to truly counter the aims of terrorism, we must do more than prevent attacks, we must stand alongside survivors as they rebuild their lives. Only then can compassion and solidarity, not fear, define the society we choose to be.

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