

Lessons learned by the 7th July Assistance Centre staff, steering group and partners

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Introduction and scope

The 7th of July Assistance Centre (7JAC) formed part of the humanitarian support offered to those affected by the London bombings on 7 July 2005. It was a first for the UK – piloting ideas and principles. It used the skills, experience and expertise of professionals from the statutory and voluntary sector. The service evolved as more was learned about the affected individuals and their responses to their terrible experiences. Each major incident is unique, and will require a different response, but hopefully the 7JAC's learning can be added to the body of worldwide knowledge so that those affected by future disasters can benefit.

This document is specifically to share what many of those involved in the past three years of the 7JAC believe they have learned. This is not a 'how to' guide, nor an evaluation. It does not provide explicit advice or any checklists, nor give any planning tips. It is not independent, comparative or based on research with service users.

Rather it attempts to represent the experience of the members of the 7JAC Steering Group [listed in the Appendix] and some of the professionals who have given their time to guide the Group or provide services to the Centre's clients – in order to, simply, pass on the lessons. The document therefore reflects these combined views, sifted and summarised over time, and in discussion. It might not fully present every individual's views, or the organisation which they represent. The lessons are those of general consensus, with attention drawn to areas on which there are mixed views. It is by default a historical document and new ways of doing things may evolve, but it was considered that there was a duty to document the 7JAC's story in this way as its contribution to collective knowledge in this area. Most of the lessons included here are the generic ones which may be of interest to others – so there is little specifically about 7JAC funding, venues or particular relationships, unless it was felt to be useful to highlight aspects of delivery. There is minimal reference to the fact that the 7JAC took on the support of the survivors and bereaved from a number of overseas incidents, as this was a circumstance peculiar to this service, at this time. This is intended to be an honest account, indicating where more things could have been done or they could have been done better – with the benefit of hindsight and no blame attached.

The term 'humanitarian assistance' is used to describe the practical and emotional assistance provided to those affected by the 7th July London bombings, and others. Within the emergency planning, social services and mental health sectors the terms 'welfare response' and 'psychosocial support' are used to describe the same concept.

A number of the lessons learned by the 7JAC have already been included in a number of accessible and excellent documents. This in itself is a good lesson – to get the learning out there as soon as possible, not to wait until the end.

Who is this for?

This document is intended to complement the more formal guidance, perhaps as a different way in for anyone involved in emergency response and psycho-social care after major incidents. In particular it will be of interest to local authority emergency planners, members of regional and local resilience teams, and those from voluntary sector organisations who might find themselves in a similar position in the future.

History and context

In the direct aftermath of the London bombings on 7th July 2005, Government Ministers, the Police, Government officials, and representatives of statutory and voluntary organisations met to discuss and plan for the humanitarian support needed following the attacks. The decision was made on Friday 8th July that an assistance centre should be set up to act as a focal point of information and support, taking as its first model the services provided in recent years in Madrid and New York after their major incidents. On Saturday 9th July 2005, the Family Assistance Centre (FAC) was set up for all those affected by the London bombings, with the 0845 054 7444 helpline in place on 12th July 2005. The FAC was to be a 'one-stop shop' assistance centre, with multiple organisations in one location to provide information, practical and crisis support for relatives and friends of those who died, and survivors, whether or not physically injured.

Once it was agreed that a longer-term support centre was needed Westminster City Council identified premises nearby and the 7th July Assistance Centre was opened on 20 August. The change of name was in response to feedback which indicated confusion around the word 'family' which was perceived to suggest the service was limited to bereaved relatives.

A contract for running the service independently of the original management group was put out to tender during the autumn of 2005. Brent Bereavement Services took over the running from November, but with continuity of some staff and volunteers. Many members of the multi-agency management group sat on a new steering group.

Services provided were:

- Help-line – for information and emotional support
- Public website (for news, invitations, guidance)
- Secure website (for the bereaved and survivors only)
- Counselling
- Drop-in opportunities
- Support at events and meetings with Government Ministers
- Briefings (e.g. before the trial)
- Workshops (e.g. coping with travel and 'moving on')
- Newsletter
- Guidance to partners about correspondence and arrangements
- Advice and training to sector specialists and support organisations worldwide
- Support groups

Stakeholders and Partners: (no distinction is made here between those who participated only in the Family Assistance Centre or only in the 7th July Assistance Centre as there were no specific distinctions made, particularly by the individuals involved)

- Association of Chief Police Officers
- British Transport Police
- British Red Cross
- Coroners Office
- Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority
- Cruse Bereavement Care
- Department for Work & Pensions
- Disaster Action
- Greater London Authority
- Health Protection Agency
- Humanitarian Assistance Unit at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport
- London Bombings Relief Charitable Fund
- London Development Centre
- London Resilience Team
- Metropolitan Police
- NHS London Mental Health trusts
- Salvation Army

- Social Services from across London
- Transport for London
- Victim Support
- Westminster City Council
- WRVS

The 7JAC's staffing structure, as of February 2009, is:

A Project Director (part-time) responsible for management, development, financial accountability, consultation, support of staff and volunteers and website maintenance and development.

A Project Manager (full-time) responsible for psychosocial response for service users, helpline responses, assessing and supporting service users, coordinating supervision, supporting volunteers and providing consultation as appropriate.

A Deputy Coordinator (part-time) responsible for supporting the Project Manager and, as required, the Project Director.

Administrator (part-time) responsible for general office support.

Data Manager (part-time) responsible for developing, updating and analysing office databases.

Supervisor to permanent and voluntary staff.

Volunteers – A team of experienced, trained and supervised volunteers providing individual counselling.

Key lessons

Clients as individuals

The 7JAC aimed to provide all its users with emotional and practical support. The people they saw had differing needs and varying degrees of intervention were required:

- No two people reacted in the same way to what had happened to them and their needs were therefore different. The 7JAC learned that people are more likely to need support and information than clinical treatment.
- The bereaved families and survivors had different needs and expectations. They did not want to be treated as a single group.
- The 7JAC provided an informal kind of 'triage' which, for those who wanted it, was followed by a more thorough assessment of need. From this the Centre offered choices and direction about the services or support the individual might wish to pursue.
- The 7JAC provided a combination of conventional counselling sessions and more informal opportunities such as email, website, confidential message board, phone helpline and an open door. These were found to be as valuable as the structured communications, organised meetings and individual appointments.
- The 'screen and treat' service of the NHS trauma clinic provided immediate access to experienced professionals.

The end game

The services provided by the 7JAC were aimed at empowering its users to get on with their lives. Accordingly, the 7JAC knew that its work was time limited and that an exit strategy was required. It took some time to work out how to do this, how to consult on the ending and how to communicate it.

Using volunteers

The 7JAC found that not every potential volunteer was right for their work. It is better to say no to a well-intentioned individual who is clearly not right for the tasks involved. Volunteers need to be able to demonstrate evidence of relevant training and experience. Any staff member or volunteer undertaking assessment or counselling work must have a recognised qualification/accreditation. This is essential for service quality and, by extension, to protect the reputation of your organisation. Staff and volunteers supporting people affected by emotional and/or physical injuries are also likely to need a significant degree of professional support. Professional supervision must be available.

Define your role

A centre will be much more than a physical space. The majority of the 7JAC's work was virtual or remote. Whilst the centre premises were important to some people, far more individuals made use of the 7JAC's services via the public website, on the secure website, by phone, by email, by receiving its newsletters, and attending the events at which the 7JAC supported them.

Clients' needs

Do not underestimate the resilience of your clients. The 7JAC learned that generally people are very resilient and they can cope. Some need longer, and more support, and to be reminded that they will recover.

Be informative

Previous incidents, such as 9/11 suggest that information is as important as listening.

Anticipate activity

Some patterns of demand could have been predicted. Usage increases after Christmas, before, during and after anniversaries, around the time of court cases or related events. It decreases before Christmas and over the summer.

Get known

Have a media and communication strategy and establish a 'brand'. The name, image, style of writing, tone of all communications etc. all needed to be professional and recognisable to provide the credibility to negotiate with partners, influence stakeholders and encourage potential clients.

All lessons learned (including key lessons)

Define what the service will be and do

Base strategy on the most updated research findings: The 7JAC learned that the lack of empirical evidence or professional consensus must not hinder its work. However this did make it mindful of the responsibility to read, research, consult, engage, listen, be imaginative, be flexible and look carefully for evidence of 'success' (or otherwise) to add to the body of knowledge to better serve its clients, and those affected in the future.

Consider the service as a preventative health service: This is a useful analogy as the 7JAC was aiming to provide care, information and support to individuals at risk of trauma, stress or depression and requiring medical intervention. The 7JAC saw itself as promoting natural coping and empowerment.

Make clear what the service will not or cannot do: The 7JAC found there were misunderstandings about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – both its diagnosis and treatment, despite the existence of NICE guidelines. It was not for the service to either diagnose or treat but to refer on. Clients were referred to the appropriate clinical care, GPs or the Trauma Screen and Treat service.

Decide who can use the services: The 7JAC decided that anyone affected by the bombs, including the bereaved, survivors, those who had "near misses" or walked away uninjured or anyone otherwise affected should be able to use the services.

Don't pretend it is possible to be a 'one-stop-shop': There was a transition from the services provided at the FAC to those provided at the 7JAC. The latter was a 'gateway' – through which people could either be guided to other providers or, to the centre's own services if these didn't exist elsewhere. The 7JAC became a focal point around which others providing for the bereaved and survivors were placed.

Become a familiar place: For many people the 7JAC was the only place where they did not need to retell their story if they didn't want to, did not need to explain themselves and did not need to appear 'brave', but would meet others with the shared experience.

Provide a virtual 'drop-in' centre: Different people need different ways of accessing services and support and the informal opportunities the 7JAC provided such as email, website, confidential message board, phone helpline and an open door were as valuable as the structured communications, organised meetings and individual appointments. A physical centre may not be necessary.

Be a safe space: The 7JAC provided a secure and confidential environment, where those affected could be assured of their own physical safety and free from external intrusion. This attention to security was thanks to the vigilance and advice of the police service, and it needed continual revisiting. The 7JAC had to represent a place of safety to all those affected, whether they were using the physical centre or the confidential website.

Get the right building(s) (if there is a building): The service needed different types of building at different times. After the early large rather public venues that were used, the 7JAC found that a domestic type setting, and not a stark office environment, worked best. Don't forget the need for a meeting space. The 7JAC used a nearby community building for meetings and events.

Have the administration, helpline, counselling and drop-in in one location: This was important for internal communication and quality control – but physical space and the lack of privacy were limitations.

A centre will be much more than a physical space: The majority of the 7JAC's work was virtual or remote. Whilst the centre premises were important to some people, far more individuals made use of its services via the public website, on the secure website, by phone, by email, by receiving its newsletters, and attending the events at which the 7JAC supported them.

Provide a seamless – or at least joined-up – service: Those affected did not necessarily know the difference between the sources of help available – and the 7JAC acted as a gateway to them. For example to the charitable fund for grants, which was separate from the service but with whom the 7JAC worked closely on referrals and advice.

The 7JAC aimed for clients to feel supported, helped and led to other services. In practical terms this often meant that the 7JAC made the contact or appointment for them, and perhaps explained their needs – to avoid them having to tell their story again and again.

There was an unmet clinical need outside London and a great deal of time was spent on finding individual solutions to this. An informal body of knowledge grew up in the Centre about national provision, but without regular updating this was soon out of date.

Responsibility comes with referrals: The 7JAC needed to know the appropriateness and quality of the service to which the individual was being referred, and it needed to log the referral for future tracking/reference/follow-up. The confidence of clients and the service's reputation depended on its professionalism and the skills with which it undertook this task. It was important to take advantage of the experience and knowledge of partner organisations for advice on specific services.

Be responsive and flexible: The 7JAC built on the lessons learned from previous incidents, but also had to listen and learn, and adapt to changing circumstances. The staff team were given sufficient autonomy and flexibility to make necessary changes appropriate to the services without constant reference to the full management body. However there was always access to key representatives from the management group to endorse proposed changes. Longer term strategic changes would be discussed at the management group.

Build up trust through being reliable: It was essential that individuals trusted the 7JAC or they would not access its services. This meant being administratively efficient and accurate with information, as well as demonstrating confidentiality and ethical standards for a psychosocial response.

Introduce a 'call-back' system: The 7JAC offered the choice of being contacted by it 'in a week or so, to see how you are' to all first-time callers to the help-line, or those who emailed in. This proved to be exactly the right tone and approach, in that the service neither exaggerated need where it didn't exist, but made it clear that help was available. It also meant that the individual knew they did not have to tell their whole story again if they did not wish to as the 7JAC's records summarised this.

Complementary therapy, such as massage and reflexology can complement other services offered: Clinicians continue to affirm that the benefits of complementary therapy are unproven, but the 7JAC learned that the therapies it provided served two specific purposes. Firstly, for individuals for whom talking about their experience was particularly difficult, it provided a 'way in' to the Centre's work which could lead them to benefit further. This is particularly important given the ethnicity of the 7JAC's clients, as the majority of therapies provided in the UK for mental illness or distress are based on a Western paradigm of 'talking cures'.

Secondly, many individuals said it directly helped with their physical symptoms of stress such as not sleeping, or having panic attacks. In theory, these therapies can be obtained everywhere, but the 7JAC introduced many people to something they would never have considered otherwise, and its therapists were briefed and supported along with the rest of the team in the particular issues relating to these clients.

Make suggestions and gentle offers of help: As well as offering call backs and complementary therapy, the 7JAC invited clients to briefings before significant events and provided opportunities to meet other agencies. The 7JAC made suggestions about activities people could attend, reading they could do, or treatment provided. The service learned to simply ask 'how are you?' whenever it received a call for information or advice, and to provide plenty of time to hear what might be behind the request.

Keep your promises: The 7JAC learned to be very careful about advising the availability of the helpline. If it was ever advertised as available 24 hours, then it really had to be. In fact, it was little used overnight and its hours were reduced with plenty of communication about this, except for at key times such as around the anniversaries.

Have sufficient administration to deal with queries from people other than those directly affected:

At one point the 7JAC was getting over 80 emails a day asking for information and advice. This included emails from other support providers, the media and other professionals from around the world.

Catering is always important: The symbolic offering of a cup of tea; inviting someone to come 'just for a coffee and a chat'; holding a thank you tea party for volunteers; having lunch in the middle of a support group meeting to allow informal conversation; inviting clients to come for an open evening before Christmas – all these were invaluable (and the service had to ensure that the budget permitted them). It should be noted that alcohol was not served on any occasion.

Don't worry about hoax callers: The service knew that it got some calls from journalists, conspiracy theorists or the simply curious, but were confident that they were dealt with on the telephone, or by email, with as much care and professionalism as those genuinely in need. Its close working relationship meant the 7JAC could take advice from its colleagues at the Metropolitan Police about the very few who were attempting to make trouble or be offensive without compromising its standards of confidentiality.

Anticipate your clients' needs

Do not underestimate fear and loss of security: The 7JAC learned that its clients, volunteers and staff considered themselves to be under continuous threat. After a terrorist incident in particular people are constantly re-exposed to a high level of anxiety which can affect their recovery.

But – do not underestimate resilience: The 7JAC learned that generally people are very resilient and they can cope. Some need longer, and more support, and to be reminded that they will recover.

Care must be taken not to pathologise survivors: The service learned that most people are more likely to need support and provision of resources than clinical treatment to ease the transition back to normalcy, but the 'screen and treat' service of the NHS trauma clinic was the ideal way to be sure for those individuals showing signs of being traumatised. It also learned that its services complemented each other – but it took time to understand this and explain it to clients.

Many people didn't seek or want mental health services: The 7JAC learned to emphasise that this was not what it was providing, but would, if required, refer them onwards to expert help. Evaluation of the NHS Trauma Centre service is being undertaken and this will helpfully inform opinion about whether those affected should be invited for formal screening.

Take the care to those who need it: Not everyone could come, or wanted to come to the Centre – some people need to be visited, or accompanied to appointments. The service also held some support groups outside London.

Remember that access to treatment for PTSD and NHS mental health services varies considerably across the UK: Because of the disparity of this kind of provision and waiting times across the country, the 7JAC sometimes sought out support and arranged treatment for its users where this was proving difficult. The Centre was also involved in the financing arrangements on occasion.

Consider providing separate services for bereaved and survivors according to their wishes: The 7JAC was acutely aware of the sensitivities felt by members of these distinct sets of clients and that their experiences during recovery were very different. Many of the survivors witnessed the deaths of the victims. The appropriateness of hearing or telling these stories can present a huge risk. Survivors may be ready and willing to tell, before relatives are ready to hear – or vice versa. The service provided separate briefings and support groups, and the secure website had different pages for these groups which were password protected. However this may have resulted in splitting the clientele for too long and potentially reinforced 'survivors' guilt'. The 7JAC also knew that the bereaved and survivors would meet at specific events and helped prepare them for these if they wished.

Prepare for anger and blame: The 7JAC learned to understand, anticipate and deal with anger and other emotional outpourings, and to ensure that members of its team were prepared for this. It learned that this anger was seldom personal – rather that the service provided an opportunity to express frustration and despair.

Be prepared for privacy issues: Those affected believed, understandably, that their details would be shared between those agencies assigned to support them. When succeeding the FAC, overcautious interpretation of the Data Protection Act hampered the 7JAC's work and damaged its reputation by denying the 7JAC access to its predecessor's records.

In January 2007, in response to a number of incidents the Cabinet Office published "Data Protection and Sharing – Guidance for Emergency Planners and Responders" which should help in future. The future ownership of the data specifically captured by the Centre needs to be made clear, given it is a temporary body.

Don't underestimate the practical needs: Advice on finance and benefits, travel, employment, housing etc. may be the most urgent need for many of those involved in an incident, and their emotional recovery could be stalled until practical problems are addressed. Likewise, the partners and carers of those who have been injured need to know they can receive assistance if they need it, so they can concentrate on the needs of their loved one.

The 7JAC ensured it had a library of information and referral options in order to provide a holistic

response.

Offer administrative help: The 7JAC found that many individuals were overwhelmed with administrative demands as a result of their bereavement or incapacity, just when they were least able to cope with them.

The Law Society's legal helpline was a huge benefit to many, but others said they needed assistance with paperwork – ideally from people who knew what they were going through. Capacity to do this was limited but, like the provision of accurate information, the 7JAC was well-placed to provide this practical aid to relieving stress.

Remember that those who were already vulnerable may be significantly affected by an emergency or disaster: Those who were already vulnerable, for example, because of a recent bereavement or another traumatic event may face increased risk when affected by an emergency or disaster. Some may have complex needs that require complex assessment and responses.

It shouldn't have been surprising to find that some of those affected by the London bombings already had mental health problems that were exacerbated by their experience. In these cases the service made referrals and supported their other requirements as far as it could.

The different needs of children and young people need to be addressed: Although the service was not engaged in responding directly with children it should be remembered that for all children and young people it is important to encourage verbalisation of their thoughts and feelings. It is also important to recognise that they should have specialist help from an experienced practitioner.

Users did not have to 'sign-up' for all services: The 7JAC realised that some people wanted everything it could provide, whilst others only wanted to be able to read its website. Anecdotally the service knew that its existence was sufficient reassurance for some people – that it was there in case they needed it. This 'containment' is, of course, hard to prove but undoubtedly offers reassurance.

Clients come and go: The 7JAC learned that it might not hear from someone for some time, and they might then ask for information or come to a workshop. Allowing for this informal relationship was important, so that individuals could make choices that were meaningful to them at a time right for them.

Some people prefer to communicate by email: The 7JAC learned to balance this wish for privacy as far as possible with the security checking against the police's database which was essential for those who were to attend the Centre or organised events. Some individuals were very keen to avoid statutory services, for fear of having mental health issues recorded in their GP notes or social services taking an interest in the effect on their children. These concerns may have been fuelled by a real fear of "losing their mind" or "going mad".

Symbols and signs are significant: Depending on the incident and the experiences, different things will have a symbolic significance to those affected. These sensitivities affected the service's practical arrangements for its clients – it had to consider matters such as public transport and lifts and what food to serve – as well as terminology or particular words.

On the positive side, the 7JAC found specific physical settings could really help its work – for example it held 'open evenings' in informal spaces, including an enclosed garden which was ideal as a neutral, safe and relaxing situation.

Every individual affected has an individual response and journey to recovery: But there are patterns and trends, and some predicted behaviour or common reactions which really can help planning/training/resourcing. Many of these are well documented by the relevant studies about trauma, major incidents and bereavement. One of the 7JAC's general observations was that after the first four to six months it appeared there was a shift from requests for information about compensation, transport and employment issues to individuals contacting the service because they were worried about their mental health. This may be significant for planning and resourcing.

Some individuals will not need you: They were supported by family and friends, their own faith group, or community group. However, the service's 'educational' role could extend to these groups.

Encourage self-help and reliance

There is no single way in which individuals can become self-reliant for their recovery after such an incident: However, the service could suggest activities and ideas that aided this, and adopt standard practice in setting limits to counselling sessions to avoid continuing dependency. In its exit strategy the 7JAC proposes handing over the continuation of some aspects of its work to those who have benefited from it.

It should be for the individuals affected to decide for themselves whether, when and why they may wish to form or join a group: Self-help or support groups are not for everyone (and there is no single model of how a group may work). The 7JAC facilitated groups at the Centre but groups and supportive friendships emerge or grow depending on individuals' personalities, their issues, their backgrounds, their demographic and where there is common ground.

Self-help or support groups may not be immediately recognisable: For example, the confidential website became a huge source of mutual support, information and forum for discussion with numbers involved far greater than ever seen in person at the Centre. Other individuals forged one-to-one friendships for mutual support, after meeting through the Centre, and this provided them with their on-going care.

The 7JAC wasn't the only source of help: Self-help and support groups grew independently from the Centre. These served specific purposes, particularly in respect of a campaigning role. As time passed the 7JAC could see that these complemented its work, particularly as several individuals used its services as well as holding membership of these groups. Other individuals used their own faith group or community group for the same purposes.

A secure website is a form of support group: It was established within two weeks of the London bombings and still has 500 registered users and 2,000 'hits' a day. The 7JAC know that its secure nature is one of the reasons for its continued use. (All those applying for access are checked against the Metropolitan Police witness database and/or referred directly from the 7JAC team, and the data security has been a priority).

A secure website needs an appropriate manager: This is not an occasional role, or to be undertaken by staff who are inexperienced in dealing with distressed or angry people. It requires discretion and the right tone to get the trust of users.

Websites must be seen to be 'live': The 7JAC had to add to the public website very regularly, so that people knew it was still live. The secure website requires almost daily work – to moderate discussions and add news.

Don't assume that apparently fallow topics on a discussion board can be removed: The service has discovered, after trying to remove historical items, that many users of the secure website return frequently to reread previous items – these include discussions about symptoms of trauma and ways of coping but also news and information posted by the web manager.

Those affected also want to help: Wanting to do something is an important part of recovery for many of those affected. The 7JAC was delighted to benefit from fundraising activities, some administration and publicity help and to receive pieces for the newsletter, but probably did not recognise soon enough that this engagement in activity could be integrated into its services for mutual benefit.

Those leading support groups need support too: The affects of handling the strong emotions of others can be extremely stressful.

Be informed and pass it on

Previous incidents, such as 9/11 suggest that information is as important as listening in humanitarian assistance: The provision of accurate and timely information is essential. Some people came to the service for authoritative information and advice and, without it, the Centre could not have gained the trust of those seeking help. The 7JAC knows that it underestimated the resources required for this. News or advice often needs to be passed on in a number of different ways (and perhaps repeated) and there may be an argument for including an information specialist as part of the staff team.

Provide early advice about ways to cope with the effects of trauma: Many expert organisations have produced useful guidance about coping strategies – adapt this for the circumstances and find as many ways as possible of communicating it, repeating it again and again to all those who might need help. The service used the website, newsletter, meetings and leaflets – but there are many other ways, perhaps using the media more, that could be employed too. Much comfort can be gained from knowing that reactions and symptoms can be expected, and will pass.

People feel safer if they feel informed: The service learned to be an accurate, organised, informed, continuous voice, providing advance news to its partners and clients about forthcoming events or other possible 'triggers' for anxiety such as the press reports about an asbestosis scare. The 7JAC knows, for example, that the pre-trial briefing and daily online reports from the court proceedings of spring/summer 2008 were much valued by those for whom this was a time of great significance. With the information on the criminal investigation and the trial, and facilitation of meetings with Government Ministers, the 7JAC actually provided access to justice and truth, and a voice for the survivors and bereaved.

Find ways of gathering what survivors and bereaved are thinking and saying in order to plan and respond: The 7JAC staff team found formal and informal ways of picking up the issues of immediate concern.

Advise others on their information provision: Whenever the 7JAC could it suggested both wording and timing for communications from other agencies.

Educate the wider community in their dealings with survivors and bereaved: The 7JAC felt itself to have the potential to have a significant outreach role and a duty to do this, or at least to engage with the Government and other bodies involved in developing this work. For example, the Centre was asked to help with employment issues where survivors were having difficulty explaining their ongoing problems to unsympathetic bosses or HR departments. This mediation might be extended further to, for example, financial institutions.

Have influence and an authoritative voice: In a broader sense the 7JAC's knowledge of the survivors and bereaved allowed it to speak on their behalf on some of the occasions when they found it difficult to be heard. The service learned to use its stakeholders and partners to speak on their behalf to the media, to those organising events or fundraising, to those offering services and to those involved in criminal investigation and legal proceedings as they communicated with the bereaved and survivors.

Evaluate the quality of information and how it is delivered: It is important to know whether the methods, as well as the content, are fit for purpose.

Keep abreast of developments in the field: All those involved in managing or running the service were reading up examples of international good practice in dealing with victims of trauma. The developments in this field are sophisticated, and come from a multitude of professional practices, and instilling a culture of learning into a body such as the 7JAC is the responsibility of those in board or committee roles as well as staff.

Plan to close – and tell everyone

There is no blueprint for how long the service will be needed: Planning for closure is fundamental. Expert advice is that most PTSD cases emerge between six weeks and two years after a traumatic incident.

External events such as trials and inquests can act as triggers. The third anniversary can be an important milestone for some, the bereaved in particular. Several have now found they are able to talk about their loss for the very first time and have only just contacted the 7JAC.

The service began to reduce overall after two years and nine months (and this process will continue through to the 7JAC's end date of 31 August 2009). This followed consultation with all clients and reductions in service use. Consultation processes need to be simple and clear. The reduction and ending of the service needs to be explained honestly.

Closure will be phased: The 7JAC knew that the service must be time-limited with an aim of empowering its clients, and this was clear to staff, management and advisors from the outset. An exit strategy needed to be planned for staff too. However, the 7JAC also learned that it should have fully communicated this much sooner externally.

It is essential, positive, and at the heart of the work, to make clear to all those affected that at some point they will not need support. And importantly, care needs to be taken not to encourage a culture of dependency on a service like the 7JAC's.

Closure doesn't mean abandoning anyone: Whenever services stop being provided by the 7JAC some people will still require some forms of support. The 7JAC's job will be to direct them to alternative sources and ensure they do not suffer a second 'loss' by its exit.

Think less about closure and more about 'transition': The 7JAC found that many of its users moved on to other ways of supporting themselves when and if they needed help. Some of these transitions were enabled by the 7JAC (such as to local sources of counselling), others were suggested, such as continuing complementary therapies or using the confidential website for discussions with fellow survivors or other bereaved relatives.

Celebrate not being needed.

Adopt good generic management practices

The 7JAC may have been providing a specialist service, but normal good management practice still applies.

Define your objectives and revisit them: It is impossible to judge whether the service is working without explicit objectives. The 7JAC found that these needed to be reviewed – and possibly revised – at pre-planned intervals by the management group and subsequent steering group. They should also be shared, appropriately, with all stakeholders including users.

Plan for the short, medium and long-term: The service was operating on weekly plans for much of its work, knowing that new information or requests could, quite rightly, influence activity through increased demand. As experience was gained there was improvement in planning for particular dates and milestones, and predicting better patterns of need from those affected.

Adopt a formal management structure: More traditional and widely understood governance arrangements are preferable for accountability and decision-making.

Clarify roles and responsibilities for decision-making and management issues:

Conventional structures suggest this means separating the funder/contractor, the 'board of management' and the executive/operations.

Have standing agendas for the management or steering group: It took the 7JAC time to learn to separate the practical organisational issues from the vital debates about types of care and service delivery.

Adopt a professional code of conduct: The 7JAC could not have gained the trust of its stakeholders without having a code of conduct including confidentiality and privacy. Good practice suggests this should be available to everyone, and referred to in all documentation. The centre's code was based on that of the Brent Bereavement Services.

Be independent: An independent and dedicated organisation can have a voice and make relationships that some of its partners and other institutions may not be able to. The 7JAC earned the trust of those who were reluctant, at least initially, to engage with other agencies.

Carefully manage your 'image': The 7JAC could not have earned the trust of its clients without carefully balancing its independent voice with being the place for authoritative information from, and a conduit to, the Government, the police and others such as the coroner, London Transport and the judicial system.

Define your boundaries and know your limits: This may mean saying no to requests and referring clients onward to more specialist or expert services (whilst keeping a good record, to track and inform either internal or partner organisations' planning).

Voluntary doesn't mean amateur or cheap: Despite the use of volunteer counsellors and some administration support, all parties agreed that this work requires experienced professionals at its heart – and proper rewards for demanding work well.

Make financial management an early priority: In terms of procurement procedures, it is possible that normal procurement rules and accounting procedures may not, with ease, favour emergency response nor the likely continuing unpredictability and flexibility of activity of humanitarian recovery. Therefore making financial management an early priority – and engaging with those responsible in all involved organisations – may save a great deal of time later.

'Contract out' management services: A partner organisation can provide these. Local authority commercial services can provide payroll, office services, IT support etc. – a temporary organisation does not need these in-house. The 7JAC ran as a project within Brent Bereavement, and between them and Westminster City Council most of these practical matters were dealt with externally.

People will support you: As an expression of their concern some commercial organisations and members of the general public made the 7JAC the beneficiary of donations in kind and their fundraising activities. The service was not resourced to fundraise itself but recognised the important part that 'giving

back' plays in some people's recovery. The service was delighted to also be able to enhance its work because of extra money from some of those it helped but consequently had to make receiving, and accounting for, donations part of its financial management.

Find out how you are doing

Without activity data, monitoring, measurement and evaluation the 7JAC would not have been able to review or plan: Therefore it ensured that this was part of the service and management provision.

Keep asking ‘Are we doing the right thing?’ ‘Is it working?’ and ‘Are expectations being met?’: The service did, but know now that it didn’t share or document sufficiently. If objectives are defined then checking against progress can be done formally and informally, internally and externally. Be ready to respond to constructive criticism from others and change or adapt as appropriate.

Seek structured feedback from users: The 7JAC used emails and comments made to it directly to guide its work, and the manner in which it was delivered. There were questionnaires for attendees to specific workshops or therapies. Collating this feedback and proactively seeking comments, including ways of hearing the quiet voices – perhaps online or on simple cards, would have aided the on-going performance measurement as well as the formal evaluation.

There is a place for anecdotes and case studies in evaluation: These can be very valuable illustrations and need to be carefully recorded and shared.

Have a complaints procedure: The 7JAC learned that this should be separate from any normal feedback method, as it reassures users that complaints will be taken seriously. Without this any feedback from dissatisfied users tended to be heard second-hand only.

Take negative feedback seriously but recognise that the individuals with the loudest voices may not be representative: This is emotive work. Different clients will react in different ways and have different expectations.

Measuring performance for this kind of work is difficult, especially in qualitative terms: But there were indicators of how the 7JAC was doing and an ‘evaluation toolkit’ could be constructed for this kind of work and ‘success’ defined.

Set up appropriate data capture methods – even if the software comes later:

The Family Assistance Centre had a good log book system but the 7JAC learned that information about all contacts from day one was important – and initially made errors not recognising, for example, the importance of logging details of calls and emails which weren’t from survivors or the bereaved (such as media/other service providers).

Capture as much data as you can: The Centre provided weekly reports on numbers of callers and attendees from the beginning but did not prioritise this data collection sufficiently to provide sophisticated analysis of how combinations of services were used or to break down the types of phone call and email received.

Activity data needs to be viewed quantitatively and qualitatively: The 7JAC offered a service that people could access directly, by either calling or attending groups, or remotely via the websites or reading the newsletters. The Centre found that low take-up at particular times was balanced by higher usage at others, typically around an anniversary. There was a feeling that the Centre served a purpose by giving the bereaved or survivors the comfort of knowing that it was there, whether they chose to access its services or not.

For example, less than a third of those who had said they would be at the second anniversary event, and at the court case actually came. However, the Centre was aware that far more people were reading and re-reading pages on the secure website than were actually contributing to it. From that, the 7JAC concluded that the information and support was valued.

Some patterns of demand could have been predicted: Usage increases after Christmas, before, during and after anniversaries, around the time of court cases or related events. It decreases before Christmas and over the summer.

Understand the demographics: The 7JAC was challenged by the diversity of those involved – though not surprised given those affected were travelling in London’s rush hour. With earlier information, better tracking, and consideration of the demographics more could have been done to ensure the suitability of

the service – perhaps by including some more targeted activities or communications, and using specialised voluntary agencies as partners.

Good proof of 'success' was in the take-up: Individuals responded to suggestions made and invitations offered in the newsletter and, the service believes, the majority who used it at all used more than one of its services over the years. But it is also the 7JAC's belief that many of those affected, but not using the services, experienced a sense of containment from its existence.

Further proof of success is when people sign off: Over 200 of the 895 on the service's database have now said a positive 'thank you and goodbye' – indicating that they no longer need or wish to receive its newsletter or e-mail alerts.

Have a media and communications strategy

Have senior professional press and communications resources on the team and fully integrated into the work: It's unlikely to be a full-time role but the service learned that it can't be done by a beginner, or as an add-on to a management role.

Build a professional and proactive relationship with the media – and maintain it:

This could have provided more opportunities to reach those who the 7JAC wanted to serve, and others who can help in this service.

The media can play an extremely beneficial role in publicising the Centre's work, giving a voice to those affected, fulfilling an educational role about recovery and encouraging wider community support. However, these positive opportunities didn't come easily when news about the emergency itself, the perpetrators, or Government blame were perceived to be the more marketable headlines.

A good relationship with the media can provide early warnings to anticipate what might provide a 'trigger' for those affected: For the 7JAC these included a new set of photos, evidence, documentary, publication etc.

Consider having a media and communications budget: Some free advertising space was given in one of the free London papers but further judicious placing of advertisements about the 7JAC's work in the early days – when it could not get the editorial space – might have avoided the criticism of those who said they did not know about the service for some months.

Demonstrate what is available through fictional case studies: Whilst absolute confidentiality about individuals was essential the 7JAC did use unidentifiable examples to illustrate its work in conversation with other professionals. The service could have used this technique for placing editorial to reach more individuals. There may be a 'bargaining position' where some human interest stories can be traded for a promise to publicise a centre's services appropriately.

Find the right vocabulary for the media and Government to use: The terms humanitarian assistance, family assistance, social care were used – none sent out quite the right inclusive or explanatory message.

Find the right words for potential users: The service learned that the term 'family assistance centre' (its initial name) made people think it was only there for those who had lost a relative. It took advice not to use the word 'victim' – and similarly advised its partners as appropriate and instead used the phrases 'survivors and bereaved' or 'those affected' - but worried that this did not make it clear that those who were not physically injured were welcome too. The 7JAC referred to 'emergencies' or 'crises' rather than 'disasters' on the advice of those who had been through similar experiences and knew how emotive such terms can be. The service continued to search for words to describe its work – worrying that the terms 'help', 'emotional support' and 'assistance' were all euphemisms that may not be clear enough to everyone.

Keep all written communication simple: The vocabulary of psychosocial care is new to most people and the 7JAC knows that traumatised people find it difficult to absorb long or complex text. Lessons were learned about the need to use very simple wording – and that it takes skill to do this.

The tone of all communication to users should be about empowerment, not reliance on the Centre – but the normality of using the service should be stressed: A strong message could be sent from any future service that all are welcome to participate in any way they find helpful. This assumption of use would take away any confusion or stigma about who or what the service is for.

Virtual social networking has changed the 7JAC's work: The rise of the internet chat-room, blogs and far greater expectations of internet services have shaped the service's work considerably. The secure website has provided some access to the service's work for overseas survivors and bereaved. Developments planned include live chat rooms and video links. Any future service would have to prioritise providing the appropriate virtual forum for those affected and consider incorporating 'e-counselling' too.

Not everyone uses the internet: The service knew that it could not shift all its communications into

electronic form but recommends that access to the web may be an additional service that a centre could consider providing to make self-help easier.

Test suggestions or requested services in the newsletter and on the website: This helped the 7JAC gauge likely take-up, and ensured it could respond to most suggestions in a positive way, even if it turned out not to be appropriate for it to provide directly.

Guidance/advice for how to deal with media enquiries, which can be intrusive and persistent, is required by all those affected: The service was able to provide some advice but could have considered offering a more specific service and basic training to avoid some distressing experiences. Over time, some media professionals who themselves were affected, did advise others on the secure website when media enquiries were posted there by the 'web-manager'.

Establish a 'brand': The name, image, style of writing, tone of all communications etc. all need to be professional and recognisable to provide the credibility to negotiate with partners, influence stakeholders and encourage potential clients.

Work with partners

The provision of humanitarian assistance must be a multi-agency project: The complementary work of the partners in the 7th July Assistance work has been vital – for skills, information, credibility, reputation and resources. A different incident and different demographic would require alternative or extra members but the principle of shared ownership and commitment was vital for getting the Centre in place and sustaining it.

Partners are needed to provide many direct services: They have been, and will be, around longer than the 7JAC will be. The service's job was to brief them on the special needs or characteristics of those affected and ensure a good transition.

Working well with some partners may not be easy: The 7JAC learned, over time, about investing more time into relationships between statutory and voluntary services for the benefit of clients who were moving between the two, so that risk of 'duplication' was replaced with added value.

Encourage partners to provide continuity: Representatives of many partner organisations were part of the initial management group, at an appropriately senior level to make decisions and commit resources. The 7JAC really benefited when the same representative could attend regularly and when they were thoroughly debriefing colleagues so that information about its work extended further into their organisations.

Recruit, train and retain resilient people

Get the right management and staff: The 7JAC cannot advise on numbers as circumstances will be different. But it did learn about the skills needed and the requirement for considerable flexibility, particularly because demand fluctuates, and because weekend and evening cover is never straightforward to arrange.

Experience is not the same as expertise: Simply having experienced similar events does not necessarily provide the skill or understanding to help others, even within related areas of work. Nor does experience of supporting grieving people imply knowledge about how trauma affects individuals. The service learned to seek out and take advice from respected experts, not accept all offers of sympathetic help.

Identify the right people to be your Assistance Centre volunteers: This was one of the great successes of the 7JAC. Select staff who can demonstrate evidence of relevant training and experience. Any staff member or volunteer undertaking assessment or counselling work must have a recognised qualification/accreditation. This is essential for ensuring the quality of service provided and your reputation.

Select staff who can demonstrate evidence of training and experience in trauma and disaster – and retain them: The 7JAC was fortunate to have consistency of staffing and steering group members throughout its work. The management techniques for ensuring this are no different from in any other organisation, but while the commitment may be greater, the risks of losing staff are far higher.

Have a clinical psychologist with knowledge of trauma response on the management group or in a close advisory role: The service realised that it risked an unhelpful separation between its work and that of the mental health specialists who were supporting the survivors unless there was a mutual understanding of practice. This individual could have a remit for staff care and support.

Staff – and volunteers – can burn-out: With the hours put in and the emotional intensity of the work anyone can become exhausted and suffer ‘secondary trauma’ – and may not recognise it. The consequent risks of breakdown, impaired judgement and basic inefficiency are acute and therefore the use of professional supervision, personal support networks and other advisors are essential.

Staff and volunteers were frightened too: They were affected by the same fears as many of the users, such as concerns of travelling on the tube – and these were increased by hearing the stories of those involved in the bombings. Managers have a responsibility to recognise if anyone is too affected to be working directly with clients at any time.

Staff and volunteers can become too involved or attached: This is not particular to this kind of work, except that staff or volunteers were providing more holistic care than would be traditional for therapists or counsellors. They might therefore meet their counselling client at a workshop, at an external meeting which the Centre was facilitating, and have to take particular care not to have a social relationship. This became more difficult over time as some affected individuals were assisting the staff with ideas and feedback.

Have a manager who only manages: One of the 7JAC team was able to maintain a more managerial overview by not being present at the Centre the entire time. The service learned that it is valuable to have at least one member of the team who has no contact with clients so that they are at a distance from the emotional intensity of the work.

Manage your volunteers as you would your staff

Professional counsellors require highly professional management: This is a very particular kind of volunteer management as the volunteer counsellors were providing a huge part of the 7JAC's front-line service.

Do not accept all offers of help: The 7JAC learned that an insufficiently experienced or capable volunteer can cause considerable upset and is an unnecessary management burden. The quality control methods for volunteer management of all partner organisations may not be high enough for this difficult work. If in doubt, the service learned to say no – at least until it had the resources for managing them directly.

There's nothing wrong with volunteers benefiting too: The 7JAC's volunteer counsellors gained from their own professional development, contact hours, training and different experience. Enhancing their own career is quite acceptable motivation.

Keep your volunteers fully informed: The service made sure that volunteers were emailed briefings whenever it had news, however small, and sent them newsletters or other correspondence before the clients, so they were prepared for any response or reaction.

Provide volunteers with accredited supervision and plenty of opportunities for peer group support: Volunteer counsellors needed to talk informally to each other to share their fears, worries, and personal reactions. The 7JAC found they needed to immediately 'download' by talking to colleagues after the most difficult helpline calls – which could last for up to an hour – or counselling sessions, as well as use the formal supervision structure.

Involve volunteers in your planning: They had valuable suggestions, comments and experiences from elsewhere and needed to be up to speed with any new services or changes planned.

Show volunteers you value them as professionals: Regular and varied training was, along with the experience, very valuable to the 7JAC's volunteers. This enhanced their immediate work and longer term careers as well as benefiting the clients.

Provide training specifically in trauma counselling: Having experience in supporting the bereaved or victims of crime is a good background for the volunteer counsellors to have – but they must also have training relating to traumatic events.

Show volunteers you value them as colleagues and as part of the team: The 7JAC gave them small "tangibles" such as making a contribution towards meals and travel expenses when they were working for the centre.

And lastly – thank everyone: Many brilliant professionals and caring individuals went beyond the call of duty and their official roles – the 7JAC thanked them again and again and do so now on behalf of the Steering Group and the service's team.

Further reading

7th July Assistance

www.7julyassistance.org.uk

Disaster Action

www.disasteraction.org.uk

British Red Cross

www.redcross.org.uk

Directgov

www.direct.gov.uk

London Bombings Relief Charitable Fund

www.lbrcf.org.uk

Emergency Planning Society

www.emergplansoc.org.uk

UK Resilience

www.ukresilience.gov.uk

Emergency Preparedness, Cabinet Office, 2005. Emergency Response and Recovery, Cabinet Office, 2005.

The Needs of Faith Communities in Major Emergencies: Some Guidelines, Home Office/Cabinet Office, 2005

Data protection and sharing – guidance for emergency planners and responders, Cabinet Office, 2007

Humanitarian Assistance in Emergencies: Non statutory guidance on establishing humanitarian assistance centres, DCMS and ACPO (November 2006)

A detailed guide to roles and responsibilities in humanitarian assistance, DCMS (available at www.ukresilience.info)

Eyre, Anne (2006) Identifying People's Needs in Major Emergencies and Best Practice in Humanitarian Response

Eyre, Anne (2006) Literature and best practice review and assessment: Identifying people's needs in major emergencies and best practice in humanitarian response

Eyre A (2006) Community Support After Disasters – Report of Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship, Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, 2006

Appendix

The 7th July Assistance Centre Steering Group

The following were members of the 7JAC Steering Group:

- Janet Haddington Westminster City Council
- Vivienne Lukey Westminster City Council/Consultant
- Carol Stone London Bombings Relief Charitable Fund/Consultant
- Ali Davies London Development Centre
- Pamela Dix Disaster Action
- Professor Chris Brewin Consultant Clinical Psychologist
- Annette Wightman Metropolitan Police
- Briony Thomas British Red Cross
- Brian Jones Cruse
- Susan Winton-Lyle Brent Bereavement Services
- Paulo Pimentel 7th July Assistance Centre
- Liz Prosser 7th July Assistance Centre (until March 2008)
- Jo Best 7th July Assistance Centre
- Alex Towers DCMS - (Until December 2007)
- Frances MacLeod DCMS – (From May 2007)