BEYOND THE BLADE

Nick Jordan *reveals why UK venues need to rethink security in the age of evolving knife threats*

For many years, discussions around terrorism and public safety in the United Kingdom centred on sophisticated plots involving explosives, firearms and organised extremist networks. Yet over the last decade, a different threat profile has emerged-one defined not by complexity, but by accessibility.

Today, some of the most devastating attacks and violent incidents across the UK involve everyday bladed weapons, often carried openly, concealed creatively or used opportunistically in crowded public environments. From transport hubs and shopping centres to stadiums, festivals and nightlife venues, operators are now confronting a security landscape in which low-cost, easily accessible weapons can generate mass panic, severe casualties and widespread operational disruption.

At Detectnology, we have spent decades supporting event organisers, venue operators and public authorities with security screening and detection strategies. Over that period, one reality has become increasingly clear: the knife threat facing UK venues has evolved significantly faster than many security procedures designed to stop it.

That understanding formed the basis of our latest white paper, *Decade Review of Bladed Weapon Trends and Terrorist Incidents in the United Kingdom (2016–2026)*. The report examines ten years of criminal data, terrorist incidents, law enforcement intelligence and operational observations to identify how bladed weapon threats have changed and what security professionals must do next.

The findings are stark. Knife-enabled offences in the UK have increased by approximately 80 percent over the last decade and now remain consistently high, fluctuating between 50,000 and 55,000 offences annually. While media attention often focuses on youth violence, our research found that adult possession offences have risen sharply as well, widening the threat actor profile far beyond traditional assumptions.

Equally concerning is the changing nature of the weapons themselves. We are no longer dealing solely with domestic kitchen knives or opportunistic carry items. The market and cultural landscape surrounding bladed weapons has diversified considerably, with offenders increasingly carrying machetes, zombie-style knives, tactical blades and so-called ninja swords. In many cases, individuals are carrying more than one implement simultaneously. For security operators, this changes everything.

One of the clearest trends identified in our research is the growing prevalence of 'dual-carrying' – the practice of carrying multiple weapons or combining a bladed weapon with another offensive item. Historically, many venue search procedures focused on finding a single prohibited item. But modern threat behaviour is increasingly layered. An individual may surrender a visible item during screening while retaining a secondary concealed blade. Others distribute weapons across clothing zones, bags, body-worn concealment areas or among group members entering separately. This has significant implications for venue screening strategies.

Social media trends, online extremist ecosystems, weapon availability, organised criminal culture and global conflict dynamics all influence how bladed threats evolve in the UK

Traditional bag checks alone are no longer enough for many high-footfall environments. While manual inspection remains important, adversaries have adapted quickly to predictable screening processes. Security professionals are now encountering concealed blades hidden in false bag linings, taped to body areas, disguised within everyday objects or intentionally obscured within cluttered personal belongings. The operational challenge is compounded by throughput pressure.

At major events, venue operators are under constant pressure to move attendees quickly through entry points while maintaining customer satisfaction and minimising queues. However, queues themselves are now recognised as vulnerable spaces. Congestion outside stadiums, concert arenas, or transport hubs can create soft targets for attackers seeking maximum psychological and physical impact.

This means screening systems can no longer be designed around compliance alone. They must be designed around operational resilience. In practice, that requires layered security approaches capable of balancing efficiency with threat mitigation.

For years, many venues approached security primarily through a compliance lens: implementing measures necessary to satisfy licensing conditions, insurance requirements or minimum regulatory standards. That approach is becoming increasingly inadequate.

The forthcoming implementation of Protect Duty – also known as Martyn's Law – reflects a broader shift toward proactive risk management in public spaces. Named in memory of Martyn Hett, who was killed in the 2017 Manchester Arena attack, the legislation aims to improve preparedness against terrorist threats at publicly accessible locations. But legislation alone will not solve operational vulnerabilities.

The reality is that hostile actors continuously adapt. They study venue layouts, identify procedural weaknesses and exploit predictable routines. Security strategies therefore need to evolve from static compliance exercises into dynamic, intelligence-led operations. This includes integrating behavioural detection into frontline security.

Our research highlights the growing importance of recognising hostile reconnaissance and behavioural indicators associated with violent intent. Individuals conducting repeated perimeter walks, avoiding screening lanes, displaying 'tunnelling' behaviour or demonstrating heightened fixation on security procedures may warrant additional attention. Technology plays a vital role here, but technology alone is not enough.

The most effective security environments combine trained personnel, layered detection systems, operational planning and rapid communication structures. Successful screening operations rely not simply on identifying prohibited items, but on understanding behaviour, context and intent.

Perhaps the most significant security concern explored in the white paper is the rise of Marauding Sharp Instrument Attacks (MSIA). Unlike traditional coordinated terrorist operations requiring extensive planning and resources, MSIA incidents can be carried out with minimal preparation using legally obtainable or easily modified weapons. This makes them exceptionally difficult to predict.

The UK has experienced several high-profile attacks over the last decade involving bladed weapons used in crowded public environments. Such incidents have demonstrated how rapidly attackers can move through densely populated spaces, inflicting casualties and triggering widespread panic before armed intervention can occur. Importantly, these attacks are not always ideologically sophisticated.

Modern threat actors often combine extremist inspiration with opportunistic tactics, personal grievance, mental instability or online radicalisation. In many cases, the operational simplicity of bladed weapons makes them attractive precisely because they are difficult to regulate comprehensively. For venue operators, this changes preparedness requirements significantly.

MARTYN'S LAW WILL RESHAPE EXPECTATIONS ACROSS THE EVENTS AND VENUE SECTOR

Historically, some counterterrorism planning focused heavily on explosive detection or firearms interdiction. While those threats remain important, the accessibility and concealability of sharp instruments mean that knife threats must now occupy a central position within protective security planning. This is particularly relevant for crowded places with high public accessibility, including: sports stadiums, music festivals, nightclubs and entertainment venues, transport infrastructure, shopping centres, tourist attractions, educational institutions, faith venues and civic spaces and public events. In these environments, response time is critical.

The difference between a contained incident and a mass casualty event may depend on how quickly suspicious behaviour is identified, how effectively screening is implemented and how well staff are trained to react under pressure.

A recurring misconception within venue security is that one technology solution can solve every threat challenge. In reality, effective security depends on layered integration.

No single screening method is infallible. Metal detection, X-ray screening, behavioural analysis, physical searches, canine teams and surveillance systems all possess strengths and limitations. The goal is not perfection through one system, but risk reduction through multiple overlapping controls. At Detectnology, we advocate strongly for risk-based layered screening strategies.

For high-profile venues or elevated threat environments, universal screening of both bags and persons should increasingly be viewed as best practice rather than exceptional practice. This is particularly important where crowd density, public profile or symbolic significance increases potential attacker interest. However, layered security does not necessarily mean creating intimidating environments.

Picture credit: AdobeStock

One of the most important operational lessons of the last decade is that security must remain proportionate, efficient and visitor-focused. Poorly designed entry systems can generate frustration, delay and crowd vulnerability. Conversely, intelligently designed screening operations can maintain smooth throughput while significantly enhancing protection. This requires close attention to entry point architecture, lane design, staffing ratios and technology integration.

For example, modern walk-through detection systems capable of passive high-throughput screening can reduce bottlenecks significantly compared with older stop-and-search approaches. Likewise, integrating secondary search zones away from primary queues helps prevent congestion while allowing security staff to investigate concerns discreetly.

Operational planning is equally critical. Venue operators should conduct realistic scenario testing, including dual-carrying discovery situations, coordinated entry attempts, abandoned bags and aggressive refusal scenarios. Tabletop exercises and live drills help identify weaknesses long before a real incident occurs.

CONGESTION OUTSIDE STADIUMS, ARENAS OR TRANSPORT HUBS CAN CREATE SOFT TARGETS

Despite advances in screening technology, people remain the foundation of effective security. Well-trained frontline personnel are often the first and most important layer of defence. In our experience, some of the most successful interventions occur not because of equipment alerts alone, but because vigilant staff recognised behavioural anomalies, inconsistencies, or suspicious interactions. This is why investment in staff training remains essential.

Security teams should understand not only how to operate equipment, but why procedures matter. They should be trained to identify stress indicators, hostile reconnaissance patterns, concealment behaviours and escalation risks. Crucially, they must also know how to communicate.

Professional, calm and respectful engagement can de-escalate tensions rapidly while preserving positive visitor experiences. In contrast, inconsistent or confrontational screening approaches may increase operational friction and undermine public confidence. The psychological dimension of security is frequently underestimated.

Visible, competent and confident security operations reassure attendees, deter hostile actors and strengthen overall venue resilience. When visitors perceive that a venue takes safety seriously, compliance tends to improve naturally.

The anticipated implementation of Martyn's Law in 2027 will undoubtedly reshape expectations across the events and venue sector. Although final operational requirements continue to evolve, the direction of travel is clear: publicly accessible locations will be expected to demonstrate proportionate preparedness against terrorist threats.

For many organisations, this represents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge lies in adapting infrastructure, staffing, and procedures to meet heightened expectations within financially constrained operating environments. The opportunity lies in creating more resilient, professionalised, and intelligence-led security cultures.

Preparedness should not be viewed solely as a legal obligation. Robust security planning protects people, preserves business continuity, safeguards reputation and reduces risk. In an era where incidents are amplified through social media and 24-hour news cycles, even relatively contained events can have lasting consequences.

Forward-thinking operators are already recognising this. Across the UK, we are seeing increased investment in integrated screening systems, staff development, hostile reconnaissance awareness training, and enhanced command-and-control structures. The venues best positioned for the future are not necessarily those with the largest budgets, but those adopting adaptive, evidence-led approaches.

One of the central conclusions of our white paper is simple: threat evolution is continuous. The tactics used by offenders and attackers today are unlikely to remain static tomorrow. Social media trends, online extremist ecosystems, weapon availability, organised criminal culture and global conflict dynamics all influence how bladed threats evolve within the UK. Security strategies therefore cannot remain fixed.

The industry must embrace continuous assessment, operational learning and collaborative intelligence-sharing. This includes closer cooperation between venues, law enforcement, private security providers, local authorities and counterterrorism partners. No organisation operates in isolation and no venue is immune from emerging risks.

At Detectnology, we believe the future of venue protection lies in combining operational realism with technological innovation. That means moving beyond 'tick-box' security toward genuinely adaptive protection strategies capable of addressing modern threat realities. It means recognising that low-sophistication attacks can still produce catastrophic outcomes. And it means understanding that effective security is not simply about stopping prohibited items at the gate. It is about creating environments where threats are identified early, managed intelligently, and mitigated without compromising public confidence or visitor experience.

The next decade will place increasing pressure on venue operators and security professionals. Crowded places remain attractive targets precisely because they are open, accessible and symbolically powerful. At the same time, public expectations around safety continue to rise. Balancing openness with protection will be one of the defining operational challenges facing the industry. The good news is that the sector is evolving.

Across the UK, we are seeing growing recognition that effective security requires strategic planning, layered technology, behavioural awareness and operational adaptability. The conversation is moving beyond reactive response and toward proactive prevention. That shift is essential. Because while bladed threats may continue to evolve, so too can our ability to detect, deter and disrupt them. Ultimately, security is not a static product or a one-time investment. It is an ongoing operational discipline. And in today's threat landscape, preparedness is no longer optional. It is fundamental ●

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