businesscompanion
trading standards law explained

Part 2. Knives, bladed articles and bladed products

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Background

Knife and offensive weapon offending has a devastating effect on individuals, families and communities. The unlawful provision and possession of weapons encourages violence and can cause serious injury and death, in addition to facilitating other criminal offences.

Controls on the sale of knives and offensive weapons have been in place for decades, including age restrictions. However, not all knife and offensive weapon offending is committed by young people. The carrying, without a good reason, of an offensive weapon, a knife, or a bladed / pointed article by anyone is a serious offence. Following rises in knife crime and concerns about the possession and use of prohibited offensive weapons, the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA) brought in further restrictions on knives and 'bladed products' and controls on their supply and delivery.

The OWA creates an important distinction between 'bladed articles' and 'bladed products'. Bladed products are a specific type of bladed article, and they have extra restrictions on sale and delivery. This will be looked at in detail below.

The Government has introduced a voluntary retailers' agreement; Trading Standards and the Police encourage retailers to sign up to the agreement, which aims to restrict access by persons aged under 18

to these products. There is also a knife retailer toolkit, which can be found on the National Business Crime Centre website.

The guidance in this document aims to help you prevent serious crimes, as well as fulfil your legal obligations.

Selling knives and bladed articles presents particular issues for retailers (both for on-premises sales and those made remotely - online, for example) and delivery agents. They must all have effective systems in place for identifying products of concern and preventing unlawful sales or deliveries.

These products are covered by a number of controls, including:

- Age restrictions, meaning they are prohibited from sale to a person under the age of 18
- Restrictions on where these products can be delivered
- Prohibitions of certain types of knives and bladed articles
- Prohibitions on the marketing of knives as combat weapons or the use of knives as a weapon, and on marketing material promoting the use of the articles in violence

Alongside the controls on the sale of knives and bladed articles, you should ensure that these items are displayed and packaged securely as appropriate to minimise risk. This will include taking practical and proportionate steps to restrict accessibility and avoid immediate use, to reduce the possibility of injury and to prevent theft.

The following precautions are recommended:

- Consider removing knives from display or keep them away from public access in a safe and secure position
- Ask your supplier / manufacturer if they provide dummy displays, dummy packaging, or similar for in-store use
- If you are going to display knives and bladed items, do so by displaying them all in one place in a way that ensures they can be kept under supervision and cannot easily be stolen - for instance, by using approaches that require intervention from a member of staff in order to release the knife from secure display, or positioning them in secure locations within the store; enhanced stock checks could also be put in place
- These arrangements should also include the display of kitchen knife blocks containing multiple knives in a box

Age-restricted bladed articles

It is an offence to sell the following bladed articles to a person under 18:

- Knife
- Knife blade
- Razor blade
- Axe
- Any other article that has a blade or is sharply pointed, and is made or adapted for use for causing injury to the person

The Criminal Justice Act 1988 (CJA) does not define the terms 'knife' etc and therefore the words carry their normal meaning. The general principle is that items that can commonly be described as 'knives', for example, are to be considered as such. Retailers are expected to act responsibly and to consider carefully whether an item could commonly be defined as a knife.

This applies to any article that is, or has, a blade. This can include things that you may not initially think of

as a knife - for example, carpentry adzes, gardening tools, hooks and slashers, paint scrapers and multi-tools (tools that contain a knife or blade alongside other devices such as a screwdriver, can opener, etc).

The only exceptions in law to the bladed or sharply pointed age-restriction provisions are:

- A folding pocket knife, and only if the blade does not exceed three inches (7.62 cm). Typically this would include Swiss army-style knives. 'Folding pocket knife' means immediately foldable, simply by pressing it into place. If the knife has any mechanism to lock the blade, the knife is not a folding pocket knife and not exempted
- Razor blades permanently enclosed in a cartridge or housing where less than 2 mm of any blade is exposed beyond the plane that intersects the highest point of the surfaces preceding and following such blades - for example, what are referred to as 'safety' razors

Whilst the courts are the final arbiter, the following lists contain items that are likely to fall within the meaning of the 1988 Act prohibition on the sale to under 18s, and those that do not.

Items likely to be age-restricted:

- Any kitchen knife regardless of size or design
- Cutlery knives
- Bread knives
- Knives that can be used for the purpose of hobbies and trades, regardless of whether they are marketed as knives - for example, Stanley knives and snap-off cutters
- Cut-throat razors
- Gardening and farming tools or any other trade tool that could commonly be described as a knife
- Butcher knives, including meat cleavers

The following items are not age-restricted:

- Skewers
- Screwdrivers
- Scissors
- Pruning saws
- Plasterboard saws
- Peelers

The objective of the legislation is to address public concern about knife crime and the risk that dangerous knives and blades fall into the hands of persons under 18.

For the purposes of sections 139 and 139A of the Criminal Justice Act 1988, a number of important decisions have been made in court cases:

- A butterknife, with no cutting edge and no point, is a bladed article (*Booker v DPP* [2005] 169J.P. 368, DG)
- A screwdriver is not a bladed article (*R v Davis* [1998] Crim L.R 564 CA)
- A 'lock knife' does not come into the category of 'folding pocket knife' because it is not immediately foldable at all times (*R v Deegan* [1998] 2 Cr. App. R. 121 CA)
- A folding 'cut throat' razor that is not capable of being locked in the open position and has a blade less than three inches long is not a folding pocket knife (*R v D* [2019] ECWA (Crim) 45)

If sold remotely, sellers must not deliver any age-restricted bladed article, or arrange for it to be delivered, to a locker. This is because there is no means of verifying age at the point of collection.

In addition to these controls, if these items also fall within the OWA definition of 'bladed product' (see

below) then they must not be delivered to residential premises unless certain conditions are met (if sold remotely).

Bladed products

The term 'bladed product' is a term that was introduced in the OWA and is intended to cover a subset of bladed articles. It means an article with a blade that is capable of causing a serious injury to a person which involves cutting that person's skin.

When sold remotely (online, for example), bladed products must not be delivered to residential premises unless certain conditions are met; these are covered in the 'Delivery of bladed products to residential premises' section below.

Bladed products are a subset of the wider range of bladed articles to which section 141A of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 applies (in other words, any article with a blade or sharp point). Whilst the courts are the final arbiter of whether an article is a bladed product or not, the items in the list below are **unlikely** to be considered bladed products:

- Cutlery knives (other than sharply pointed steak knives)
- Utility knives with small cutting blades
- Snap-off cutters
- Pizza cutters
- Small cheese knives

This is because the objective is to reduce access to dangerous knives and blades and their use in violent crime. The types of bladed articles listed above are unlikely to fall within the definition of a bladed product, and can be delivered to residential premises providing the seller follows the conditions set out in the OWA for bladed articles, namely that the:

- Seller has a system in place to verify the age of the purchaser and that they are not under 18 and that the system is likely to prevent purchases by under 18s
- Package, when dispatched by the seller, is clearly marked that it both contains a bladed article and can only be delivered and handed over to a person aged 18 or over
- Seller has taken all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to ensure that when the package is delivered, it is handed over to a person aged 18 or over. This applies whether the seller delivers the package themselves or through a third party

If sold remotely, sellers must not deliver any bladed product, or arrange for it to be delivered, to a locker. Again, this is because there is no means of verifying age at the point of collection.

Age verification

Whether you sell in-store or remotely, you must ensure that your sales system has robust age-verification and ID checks.

The legislation does not specify what type of age-verification system is required; it is up to sellers to make a decision on whether their system meets the requirement that it is "likely to prevent" persons under 18 from buying a bladed article.

If you already have existing Challenge 21 / 25 policies to ensure that anyone who appears to be below the age of 18 provides acceptable identification before purchasing an age-restricted product, these can be extended to cover the sale of articles with a point or blade. Although the OWA does not specify, acceptable ID is:

- A valid passport
- Photocard driving licence (UK, EU or other country)
- A proof of age card such as the PASS card from the national Proof of Age Standards Scheme
- Other valid forms of identification, including (for England and Wales) electronic age verification

You do not have to accept all of the above forms of identification, and it may be best to exclude any type of document that your staff are not familiar with.

You can also verify someone's age visually if they are clearly over the age of 21 / 25 - for example, if they look middle aged.

Electronic and digital age verification

Online age-verification software is available that makes use of various sources of information in order to verify both age and identity during the ordering process.

These checks include using the electoral register and/or credit reference agencies. There are also businesses that offer online access to electoral register information, which could be used to verify a purchaser's age.

Technology-based systems may be right for some retailers but not all, and both retailers and customers may want a range of different options to be available. It is for businesses to decide what system works best for them.

Collection points

For some retailers that also have a high street presence, purchasers could view and reserve products online and then collect in-store, where age-verification checks could be carried out by members of staff. This applies whether they are the actual purchaser or someone collecting the products on the purchaser's behalf.

Delivery

If the item is being delivered, the age-verification system must, in addition to the above, be capable of ensuring that the item is:

- Clearly and properly labelled on its packaging
- Only given to an age-verified person
- Not left unattended
- Not delivered to a residential address without the necessary checks (these are covered in more detail in the 'Delivery of bladed products to residential premises' section below)
- Not delivered to a locker

Your delivery staff / provider must record that these checks and requirements have all been complied with and provide this evidence to you after delivery. You should retain this evidence (as stated in part 1 of this guidance, retention for at least three years is recommended).

Where a delivery company may use a local shop run by a third party as a collection point for customers to pick up a parcel, rather than - for example - having it delivered to their home address, then age verification must still occur upon collection by the purchaser or someone collecting on their behalf; this is to prevent the offence of delivery to a person under 18 being committed. It will be for the delivery company and the seller to ensure that their contractual arrangements are sufficiently robust to ensure effective checks are done by any third party operating such shops in these circumstances. They should

obtain (and retain) evidence of this, or it will be difficult for them to show that they took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to prevent age-restricted items being delivered to a person under 18. See the section 'Using delivery companies / couriers' below for more detailed information regarding defences available to sellers and delivery companies.

See 'Online sales of age-restricted products' for more information regarding online sales.

See 'Underage sales' for more information on effective age-verification procedures.

Labelling

All packages must be clearly marked to indicate that they contain a bladed article and must only be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over. The law does not specify the type of labelling or the size or style. However, it must be clear and visible, so you should consider the size and colour of the warning - for example, taking into account the size and nature of the packaging. If the package is particularly small it may be necessary to send it in a manner that ensures any label can be read easily, such as by putting it inside a larger outer envelope or wrap that carries the necessary information.

The requirement may be met, for example, by a clear and visible sticker.

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) and the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) recommend the use of Arial font with point 12 as a minimum size. Contrast dark type against a light background as a general rule. Black type on a white or yellow background gives a good contrast. Avoid using colour alone to convey information because some people may be unable to distinguish between the colours. Some people have difficulty distinguishing between red and green, in particular; others find light text on a dark background difficult to read.

Example labelling:

This package contains a bladed article and must only be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over
The Act is clear that the package itself must be clearly labelled, so it is unlikely that the electronic labels used on handheld signature devices often used by delivery companies and couriers would satisfy this requirement. However, these technologies would improve the visibility of the warning and could be used in addition to the label.

Clear and visible labelling is important for retail staff, delivery staff and couriers so that they are fully aware that the package contains a bladed article and must not be handed over to someone under 18.

Delivery of bladed products to residential premises

The OWA makes it an offence for the seller to deliver, or arrange the delivery of, bladed products to residential premises, unless certain conditions are met that would allow the seller to prove that they took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to prevent the item from being delivered to a person under 18. This would apply equally to sellers that have their own delivery arm and to those that arrange delivery to a residential address by a separate delivery company.

Sellers that make their own deliveries have defences available to them. Where a seller is delivering the bladed product themselves, they will need to ensure that they have internal procedures in place to ensure that when delivered, the bladed product would not be handed to a person under 18. They also need to prove they have taken all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to ensure that this occurred. Steps that sellers would need to take are likely to include those for the sale of bladed articles,

such as having an adequate age-verification system in place, labelled packaging and taking measures to ensure that the package is only handed over to someone aged 18 or over.

The effect of this is that where a seller has such procedures and has taken all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence, they **can** deliver bladed products to residential premises.

For example, you may sell online and have specific online age-verification processes in place, prior to the sale being processed, to confirm that the purchaser is 18 or over. Where these checks are carried out and you allow the sale to occur, there must be further checks by your delivery arm to ensure that the item is properly labelled and only delivered to that person (or another person whose age is verified at point of delivery). Where no such arrangements are in place, the item will have to be collected in person at a collection point where you can carry out proper age-verification checks.

The Act defines 'residential premises' as premises used solely for residential purposes. This means that if a premises is used for both business and residential purposes (for instance, if a person is running a business from their home, such as a decorator, a carpenter or a farmer), it is possible to deliver bladed products to the address.

Using delivery companies / couriers

Where a seller is arranging delivery of the product by a delivery company, the seller has a defence where they can demonstrate that they have arrangements in place with the delivery company, which require it to have arrangements in place to ensure that the bladed product would not be handed to a person under 18. The seller also needs to be able to show that they took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to ensure this occurred.

This might include having contractual arrangements in place with a delivery company requiring age verification at the point of delivery and monitoring this to ensure that it is effective at preventing items reaching under 18s. If you have a pre-existing contractual arrangement with a third-party delivery company to deliver knives and other bladed articles / products, then you should ensure this is reviewed. The courier / delivery agent must be required to carry out checks upon delivery to ensure that these items are only delivered to a person who is at least 18.

These checks are in addition to the seller's checks to ensure bladed products are not going to a person under 18 at a residential address.

Sellers who contract with third-party delivery companies to deliver knives and other bladed products on their behalf must explicitly make it clear in their contractual arrangement that these items are being delivered. This will enable the delivery company to ensure that effective age check controls are in place within their delivery processes to avoid committing an offence. There are usually contractual terms and conditions with delivery companies that require such disclosure. For example, Royal Mail, Parcelforce and the UPS age-verification service have such terms.

Sellers who sell to residential addresses must not use delivery companies that do not provide an age-verification service, or whose terms and conditions expressly forbid the carriage of knives - for example, DPD or Evri. If age verification is not available to ensure that a bladed product would not be handed over to a person under 18, it will be difficult for sellers to show that they took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to prevent this occurring.

The seller must ensure that parcels containing these items are clearly labelled as required when they are dispatched; it is not the responsibility of the delivery company to do so. If the seller does not tell the delivery company that they are delivering a bladed product and label it as such, the seller would commit an offence if the package is delivered to someone under 18.

Where sellers do not make such explicit declarations and contractual arrangements with a delivery company that provides an age-verification service, then they will not be able to rely on that defence if they send bladed products to a residential address. For example, if you just send the item through a mail carrier as a normal parcel, instead of using their age-verified services.

Delivery companies must ensure that they have in place effective training procedures and processes so that these items are only left with a person that their staff have confirmed is 18 or over, and that they keep a record of these checks.

The OWA also makes it an offence for a delivery company to deliver bladed products sold by UK-based sellers to someone under 18 at a residential premises. The delivery company would commit an offence if they do not deliver the bladed product into the hands of a person aged 18 or over.

There is a defence available to delivery companies where they can show that they took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to prevent the item from being delivered to a person under 18. Sellers and delivery companies will need to decide how they will ensure that packages containing bladed products are not delivered to a person under 18. This may include clear labelling that the package contains an age-restricted product and must only be delivered into the hands of someone aged 18 or over.

Delivery companies may need to ensure that anyone who delivers the package for them is aware of the OWA and the need for age verification to take place. They may want to ensure that they have internal systems in place, which confirm that the package has not been delivered to someone under 18, to reassure both themselves and sellers.

Delivery of bladed articles to persons under 18: overseas sellers

The OWA also makes it an offence for a delivery company that has entered into an arrangement with a seller based outside the UK to deliver a bladed article to a person under 18. If the delivery company has not entered into such arrangements, or they do not know when entering into the arrangement that it covered the delivery of a bladed article, then no offence is committed.

There is a defence available to delivery companies where they can show that they took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to prevent the item from being delivered to a person under 18.

It is up to overseas sellers and delivery companies how they will ensure that packages containing bladed articles are not delivered to a person under 18. To assist delivery companies, all packages containing a bladed article should be clearly marked (by the overseas seller prior to dispatch) to indicate that they contain an age-restricted product and must only be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over.

Examples of a weak age-verification system

The following are examples that are unlikely to be enough to satisfy the requirements of taking all reasonable precautions and exercising all due diligence:

- Relying on the purchaser confirming they are over the minimum age
- Asking the purchaser simply to provide a date of birth
- Using tick boxes to ask purchasers to confirm they are over the minimum age
- Using a general disclaimer such as: 'Anyone ordering this product from our website will be deemed to be at least 18'
- Using an 'accept' statement for the purchaser to confirm that they have read the terms and conditions and are over the minimum age
- Using e-payment services such as PayPal, Nochex or Worldpay. These services may require a

customer to be over 18, but they may not verify a user's age
- Only accepting payment by credit card. Credit cards are not available to under 18s but certain debit and prepaid cards are. Your payment systems are unlikely to be able to differentiate between the different types of cards, so it is essential that you have additional age verification in place

Young people will seek to challenge conventions and test boundaries. In the case of online sales, young people could potentially evade the stringent proof-of-age checks that are required on the high street unless retailers make positive checks.

See 'Online sales of age-restricted products' for more information regarding online sales.

Banned (prohibited) offensive weapons

In addition to the age restriction on the sale of 'legal' knives and bladed articles, there are a large number of banned offensive weapons that it is illegal to manufacture, import, sell or hire, offer for sale or hire, expose or have in your possession for the purpose of sale or hire, or lend or give to anyone irrespective of their age. These are:

- **Batons.** Straight, side-handled or friction-lock truncheons
- **Belt buckle knife.** A buckle that incorporates or conceals a knife
- **Blowpipes (sometimes known as 'blow guns').** A hollow tube out of which hard pellets or darts are shot by the use of breath
- **Butterfly knives (also known as 'balisongs').** A handle that splits in the middle to reveal a blade
- **Cyclone or spiral knives.** A blade with one or more cutting edges that form a spiral and come to a point
- **Disguised knives.** A blade or sharp point hidden inside something that looks like an everyday object such as a buckle, phone, brush or lipstick
- **Flick knives or gravity knives.** Also known as 'switchblades' or 'automatic knives'. Folding knives where the blade opens automatically, by gravity or by pressing a button or something else on the knife
- **Footclaws.** A bar of metal or other hard material worn on the foot, from which a number of sharp spikes come out
- **Handclaws.** A band of metal or other hard material worn on the hand, from which sharp spikes come out
- **Hollow kubotan.** A cylinder-shaped container containing a number of sharp spikes
- **Knuckle dusters.** A band of metal or other hard material worn on one or more fingers
- **Kusari or 'manrikigusari'.** A weight or hand grip attached to a rope, cord, chain or wire
- **Kusari gama.** A sickle attached to a rope, cord, chain or wire
- **Kyoketsu shoge.** A hook-knife attached to a rope, cord, chain or wire
- **Ninja sword.** See below for a full description
- **Push dagger.** A knife where the handle fits within a clenched fist and the blade comes out from between two fingers
- **Shurikens (also known as 'shaken', 'death stars' or 'throwing stars').** A hard non-flexible plate with three or more sharp radiating points, designed to be thrown
- **Stealth knives.** Non-metal knives or spikes that are not made for use at home, for food or as a toy
- **Swords.** A curved blade over 50 cm; there are some exceptions, such as antiques, swords made to traditional methods, or swords made before 1954
- **Swordstick.** A hollow walking stick or cane containing a blade
- **Telescopic truncheons.** A knife that extends automatically, or by pressing a button or spring that is in or attached to the handle
- **Zombie knives.** A knife with a cutting edge, a serrated edge and images or words suggesting it is used for violence
- **Zombie-style knives and machetes.** See below for a full description

More information about the OWA, including a video and images of these weapons, is available on the National Business Crime Centre website.

The Sentencing Council has consulted on amending the sentencing guidelines relating to possession of bladed articles and offensive weapons so that possession of a prohibited weapon is treated more seriously than possession of a non-prohibited weapon. It is expected that the results of this consultation will be published towards the end of 2026.

Zombie-style knives and certain types of machetes

After the 2016 ban of zombie knives, some manufacturers changed their designs to produce zombie-style knives and certain types of machetes, attempting to avoid the ban. This loophole was closed in September 2024, when these types of weapons were also banned.

The types of bladed articles that fall under the ban are those with all of the following:

- A plain cutting edge
- A sharp pointed end
- A blade of over eight inches (20.32 cm) in length (the length of the blade being the straight-line distance from the top of the handle to the tip of the blade)

To fall under the ban, the blade must also have one or more of the following features:

- A serrated cutting edge (other than a serrated cutting edge of up to two inches (5.08 cm) next to the handle)
- More than one hole in the blade
- Spikes
- More than two sharp points in the blade (other than (a) a sharp point where the angle between the edges which create the point is an angle of at least 90° (where there is a curved edge, the angle will be measured by reference to the tangent of the curve); or (b) a sharp point on the cutting edge of the blade near the handle

In addition, there is:

- A Police power to seize, retain and destroy lawfully held bladed articles in private premises, if the Police are in the property lawfully and have reasonable grounds to suspect that the article will be used in crime
- An increase in the maximum penalty for the offence of importation, manufacture, sale and general supply of prohibited and dangerous weapons and the sale of knives to persons under 18 years old to two years
- A offence of possession of bladed articles with the intention to endanger life or to cause fear of violence

Ninja swords

In August 2025, ninja swords were added to the list of banned weapons. In July 2026, their legal definition changed, as follows.

A 'ninja sword' is legally defined as a fixed bladed article that has all of the following:

- A blade whose length is at least 14 inches, but no more than 24 inches (the length of the blade being the straight-line distance from the top of the handle to the tip of the blade)
- A primary straight cutting edge
- A secondary straight cutting edge
- A blunt spine
- Either a tanto style point or a reversed tanto style point

A sword has a tanto style point if:

- The angle between its primary straight cutting edge and its secondary straight cutting edge is greater than 90 degrees
  and
- The angle between its secondary straight cutting edge and its spine is less than 90 degrees

A sword has a reversed tanto style point if:

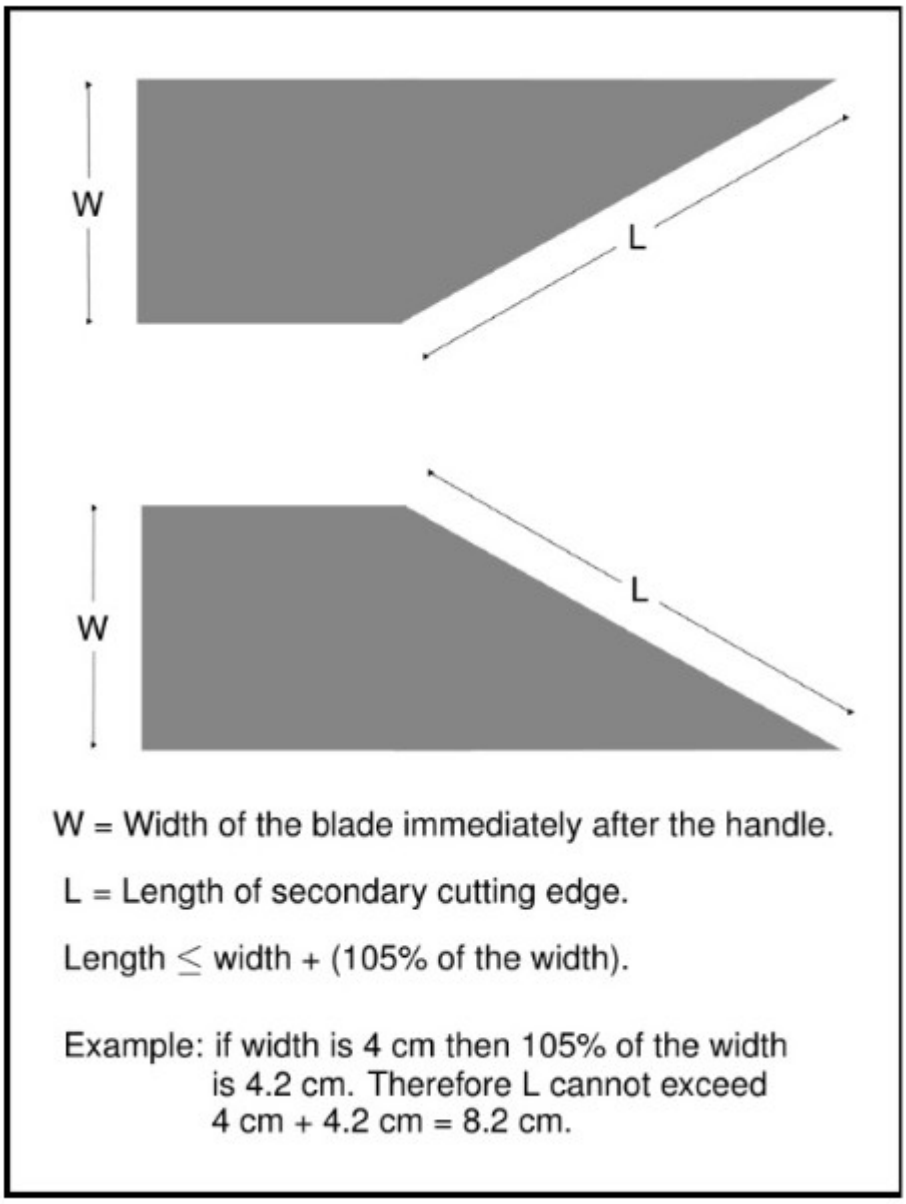
- The angle between its primary straight cutting edge and its secondary straight cutting edge is less than 90 degrees
  and
- The angle between its secondary straight cutting edge and its spine is greater than 90 degrees

A primary straight cutting edge is the longest cutting edge of a blade which immediately connects to the handle.

A secondary straight cutting edge is a cutting edge:

- That forms an angle with the primary straight cutting edge and the spine
  and
- That is no more than 105% longer than the width of the blade immediately after the handle

Illustration:



The possession, manufacture, sale and supply of such swords is banned.

Knives Act 1997

This piece of legislation makes it an offence to market a knife and also an offence to publish marketing material in relation to a knife in a way that either:

- Indicates or suggests that it is suitable for combat (the term 'suitable for combat' means that the knife is suitable for use as a weapon for inflicting injury or causing fear of injury to the person) or
- Is otherwise likely to stimulate or encourage violent behaviour involving the use of the knife as a weapon

An indication or suggestion that a knife is suitable for combat may be made by a name or description in any of the following ways:

- Applied to the knife
- On the knife or on any packaging in which it is contained
- Included in any advertisement that expressly or by implication relates to the knife

There are exemptions to allow sales of such items for legitimate purposes, such as for use by armed

forces, as antiques or as collectors' pieces.

When considering the sale of knives and bladed articles and the marketing of such, it is therefore essential that you actively review and document your decisions as to:

- The type and nature of each article
- Why you consider it to be a lawful type and not banned
- How it is marketed, including what is on the product itself or its packaging
- What marketing material you may use (advertisements, webpage descriptions, etc)

Further guidance on the sale of knives, including restrictions on the marketing of knives, see 'Knives, other bladed items and corrosive substances'.

Enforcement

Trading Standards Officers enforce the laws on age-restricted products and their supply.

< Part 1. Acids and corrosive substances

> Legislation etc

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