businesscompanion
trading standards law explained

Knives, other bladed items and corrosive substances

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In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

This guidance is for England and Wales

It is illegal to sell and deliver knives, other bladed products and corrosive substances to anyone under the age of 18. When they are delivered, they must not be handed over to anyone under that age. Corrosive substances, when sold remotely, must not be delivered to a residential address.

The legislation is enforced by the Police and Trading Standards. Sellers should always verify the age of the purchaser before a sale, and delivery companies should do so on delivery.

Further restrictions are included in the Knives Act 1997, which specifically deals with knives advertised for use in 'combat'.

The Government has introduced schemes that aim to restrict access by under-18s to these products:

- Responsible sales of acid and corrosive substances: voluntary commitments
- Sale of knives: voluntary agreement by retailers

Sellers are encouraged to sign up to these schemes.

Certain types of knives and similar products are banned entirely.

The law

In the following text you will see references to both 'bladed articles' and 'bladed products', which are the terms used in different pieces of legislation. They have slightly different meanings, which are explained below.

Criminal Justice Act 1988

It is an offence for any person to sell the following bladed articles to someone under the age of 18:

- Knife, knife blade or razor blade
- Axe
- Other article that has a blade or is sharply pointed, and is made or adapted for use for causing injury to the person

The Act does not interpret these categories any further, but it is expected that they include:

- Any kitchen knife
- Cutlery and bread knives
- Butchers knives, including meat cleavers
- Hobby knives and knives for trade use
- Utility and survival knives
- Trade tools, including those used for gardening and farming that fit the description of a knife
- Cut-throat razors
- Machetes and swords

The prohibition does not apply to:

- Folding pocket knives, if the cutting edge of the blade is less than three inches (7.62 cm)
- Replacement cartridges for safety razors, where less than 2 mm of the blade is exposed

When an age-restricted bladed article is sold remotely (such as online or by phone), the package must be delivered into the hands of someone aged at least 18.

An age-restricted bladed article must not be delivered, nor arrangements made to deliver it, to a locker (for example, the type where the consumer would be given an access code to open the locker and collect

the product). This is because it would not be possible to verify the age of the person collecting the item from a locker.

The following items are not age-restricted:

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

Knives Act 1997

It is 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.

Offensive Weapons Act 2019

Bladed articles / bladed products

'Bladed products' are a specific type of bladed article. They are defined as articles that are, or have, a blade and are capable of causing serious injury to a person, involving cutting that person's skin. They have extra restrictions on sale and delivery.

As bladed products are a type of bladed article, all requirements that apply to bladed articles also apply to bladed products, but not vice versa.

The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 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 aged under the age of 18. This applies to sellers, whether they have their own delivery arm or 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 is not handed to a person aged 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.

See below for more information on defences.

There are some products that are unlikely to fall under the definition of a bladed product and can be delivered to residential premises (though the age of the person they are handed to still needs to be checked):

- Cutlery knives (not sharply pointed steak knives)
- Utility knives with small cutting blades
- Small cheese knives
- Snap off cutters
- Pizza cutters

A delivery company that has an arrangement with a non-UK seller of 'bladed articles'* to deliver them to buyers in the UK, where the sale is made remotely (such as online or by phone), commits an offence if they do not deliver the bladed article into the hands of a person aged 18 or over. If the delivery company has no arrangement, or is unaware that they are delivering bladed articles, they are not committing an offence if the products are delivered to someone under the age of 18.

[*The definition of bladed articles is in the 'Criminal Justice Act 1988' section above.]

A delivery company that has an arrangement with a UK seller of 'bladed products', where the sale is made remotely, commits an offence if they do not deliver the bladed product into the hands of a person aged 18 or over at that premises.

To assist delivery drivers, packages must be clearly marked as containing an age-restricted product, which must only be delivered to somebody aged 18 or over.

Corrosive products

A person commits an offence if they sell a corrosive product to a person under the age of 18.

Corrosive substances (and the types of product in which they may be found)

Name of substance	May be present in
Ammonium hydroxide	Household cleaners, disinfectants, stain treaters
Formic acid	Wart removers, household descalers, food preservatives
Hydrochloric acid	Household cleaners (toilet bowl, bathroom tile and other porcelain cleaners), brick and patio cleaners, limescale removers

Name of substance	May be present in
Hydrofluoric acid	Aluminium wheel cleaners, wire cleaners, rust removers
Nitric acid	Drain cleaners, toilet bowl cleaners, descalers
Phosphoric acid	Bath cleaners, tile cleaners, sink cleaners, toilet bowl cleaners, rust removers
Sodium hydroxide	Drain cleaners, oven cleaners, paint strippers
Sodium hypochlorite	Drain cleaners, toilet bowl cleaners, bleach (low concentration), descalers
Sulfuric acid	Drain cleaners, brick cleaners, car wheel cleaners, acid for car batteries (sold as such)

When a corrosive product is sold remotely, it is an offence to deliver it to a residential address, unless that address is also used as a business. It is also an offence for a seller to deliver, or arrange to deliver, corrosive products to a locker for collection. This is because it would not be possible to verify the age of the person collecting the item from a locker.

A delivery company that has an arrangement with a non-UK seller of corrosive products, where the sale is made remotely, commits an offence if they do not deliver the corrosive product into the hands of a person aged 18 or over. If the delivery company has no arrangement, or is unaware that they are delivering corrosive products, they are not committing an offence if the products are delivered to someone under the age of 18.

To assist delivery drivers, clearly mark packages as containing a corrosive product, which must only be delivered to somebody aged 18 or over.

Defences

To help you with the following defences, it is best practice to keep records of all the checks that you make.

Defences under the Criminal Justice Act 1988

If you are charged with an offence of selling a bladed article to a person under the age of 18, you have the defence that you took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to avoid committing the offence. This is known as the 'due diligence' defence. However, there are some limitations to this defence where the sale was a remote sale. To prove 'due diligence', you must prove, as a minimum, that the following conditions were met:

- You operated a system for checking that the buyer was not under the age of 18 and that the system was likely to prevent such a sale
- When the product was dispatched, it was clearly marked to show that it contained an article with a blade or was sharply pointed and that it must only be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over
- You took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to ensure that the package would be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over
- You did not deliver, or arrange to deliver, the package to a locker

Defences under the Knives Act 1997

If you are charged with an offence under the Knives Act 1997, you have the defence that you did not know or suspect, and had no reasonable grounds for suspecting, that the way in which the knife was marketed (or the marketing material) amounted to an indication or suggestion that the knife was suitable for combat or was likely to stimulate or encourage violent behaviour involving the use of the knife as a weapon. You can also use the due diligence defence.

Defences under the Offensive Weapons Act 2019

If you are charged with an offence of selling a corrosive product to a person under the age of 18, you can use the due diligence defence.

Where a sale is a remote sale, the due diligence defence can only be proved if you meet the following conditions:

- You operated a system for checking that the buyer was not under the age of 18 and that the system was likely to prevent such a sale
- When the product was dispatched, it was clearly marked to show that it contained a corrosive product and that it must only be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over
- You took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to ensure that the package would be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over
- You did not deliver, or arrange to deliver, the package to a locker

If you, as a seller, are charged with an offence of delivering, or arranging to deliver, a bladed product to a residential address, you can use the due diligence defence. To satisfy this defence, you should show that you had procedures in place that were likely to ensure the product would be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over - for example:

- You operate an effective age verification system
- You clearly label packaging with details about the contents and that delivery must be made into the hands of a person aged 18 or over
- You try to ascertain whether the delivery address is a business address (the offence relates to delivery to a residential premises used solely for residential purposes)
- If you use a delivery company, you ensure that they have effective age verification procedures in place

It is also a defence if you can prove that:

- The bladed product was adapted for the buyer to their own specifications, to facilitate its use or for a particular purpose
- You reasonably believed that the buyer bought the bladed product for a sporting purpose or for historical re-enactment

A delivery company charged with failing to deliver a corrosive product or a bladed article (which includes bladed products) into the hands of a person aged 18 or over, can use the due diligence defence.

Keeping within the law

In order to keep within the law and satisfy the legal defences, you are advised to introduce an age verification policy and have effective systems to prevent an underage sale. To ensure these systems stay

effective, they need to be regularly monitored and updated (where necessary) to identify and put right any problems or weaknesses, and to keep pace with any advances in technology.

Key best practice features of an effective system include the following.

Age verification checks

Always ask young people to produce proof of their age. The Chartered Trading Standards Institute, the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs' Council support the UK's national Proof of Age Standards Scheme (PASS), which includes a number of card issuers. You can be confident that a card issued under the scheme and bearing the PASS hologram is an acceptable proof of age.

A passport or photocard driving licence can also be accepted, but make sure that the card matches the person using it and the date of birth shows they are 18 or over. Military identification cards can be used as proof of age, but (as with other forms of identification) make sure the photo matches the person presenting the card and check the date of birth. Be aware that military identification cards can be held by 16 and 17-year-old service people.

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.

Some young people may present false identification cards so it is advisable to also check the look and feel of a card. For example, the PASS hologram should be an integral part of a PASS card and not an add-on.

If the person cannot prove that they are at least the minimum legal age, or if you are in any doubt, refuse the sale.

Please see the Home Office *False ID Guidance* for more information.

Operate a Challenge 21 / Challenge 25 policy

This means that if the person appears to be under the age of 21 / 25, they will be asked to verify that they are 18 or over by showing valid proof of age.

Staff training

Make sure that your staff are properly trained. They need to know which products are age restricted, what the age restriction is and the action they must take if they believe a person under the minimum legal age is attempting to buy. It is important that you can prove your staff have understood what is required of them under the legislation.

This can be done by keeping a record of the training and asking members of staff to sign to say that they have understood it. These records can then be checked and signed on a regular basis by management or the owner.

Maintain a refusals log

It is best practice to record all refusals (date, time, incident, description of potential buyer). Maintaining a refusals log will help to demonstrate that you actively refuse sales and have an effective system in place. It is advisable that the manager / owner checks the log to ensure that all members of staff are using it.

A specimen refusals log is attached.

Some tills have a refusals system built in. If you use a till-based system, ensure that refusals can be retrieved at a later date. Be aware that some refusals are made before a product is scanned.

Till prompts

If you possess an EPoS system, it may be possible to use it to remind staff of age restrictions via a prompt. Alternatively, stickers can be used over certain product barcodes.

Store and product layout

Identify the age-restricted products in your store and consider moving them nearer to the counter, or even behind it. Consider displaying dummy packs so that people have to ask for the products if they want to buy them.

Signage

Consider displaying posters that show age limits and a statement regarding the refusal of such sales. This may deter potential purchasers and act as a reminder to staff.

Closed circuit television (CCTV)

A CCTV system may act as a deterrent and reduce the number of incidents of underage sales. It will also help you to monitor 'blind spots' within your store if it is not possible to change the layout or relocate the products behind, or closer to, the counter.

Online sales

If you sell by distance means, such as online or via a catalogue, you should set up an effective system capable of verifying the age of potential purchasers. Please see 'Online sales of age-restricted products' for more information.

Banned (prohibited) offensive weapons

The Criminal Justice Act 1988 makes it an offence for any person to manufacture, import, sell, hire (including to offer, expose or possess for sale or hire), lend or give to any other person (of any age) offensive weapons that have been prohibited by law. The ban applies to the following weapons.

List of prohibited weapons

Type of weapon	Description
Baton	Straight side-handled or friction-lock truncheon
Belt buckle knife	Buckle that incorporates or conceals a knife
Blowpipe or blow gun	Hollow tube used to blow out hard pellets or darts
Butterfly knife / balisong	Handle that splits down the middle to reveal a blade
Cyclone / spiral knife	Blade with a handle that has a sharp pointed end and one or more cutting edges that each form a helix
Disguised knife	Blade or sharp point hidden inside something resembling everyday object such as a comb, brush, lipstick or phone
Flick / gravity knife (also known as 'automatic knife' or 'switchblade')	Knife where the blade is released from the handle automatically, by gravity, pressing a button or something else
Footclaw	Spiked bar that is worn around the foot
Handclaw	Band with sharp protruding spikes worn around the hand
Hollow kubotan	Sharp spiked cylindrical container
Knuckleduster and any weapon incorporating a knuckleduster	Band worn on one or more fingers designed to cause injury
Kusari / manrikigusari	Length of rope, cord, wire or chain fastened at each end to a hard weight or hand grip
Kusari gama	Length of rope, cord, wire or chain fastened at one end to a sickle
Kyoketsu shoge	Length of rope, cord, wire or chain fastened at one end to a hook-knife
Ninja sword	Blade with a length of between 14 and 24 inches, both primary and secondary straight cutting edges, a blunt spine and either a tanto style point or a reversed tanto style point
Push dagger	Handle of the knife is held within a fist and the blade protrudes between two fingers
Shuriken (also known as 'shaken', 'death star' or 'throwing star')	Hard plate with three or more sharp radiating points designed to be thrown

Type of weapon	Description
Stealth knife	Knife or spike made of a material that cannot be detected by metal detectors and which is not made for domestic use, as food or as a toy
Sword	Curved blade of 50 cm or longer measured on the straight-line distance between its tip and the tip of the handle
Swordstick	Hollow walking stick or cane that contains a blade capable of being used as a sword
Telescopic truncheon	Extends automatically with hand pressure applied to a device on the handle
Zombie knife, zombie killer knife or zombie slayer knife	Blade with a cutting edge, a serrated edge and images and/or words suggesting it is to be used for violence
Zombie-style knives and zombie-style machetes	Plain cutting edge, sharp pointed end and a blade of over 8 inches (20.32 cm) in length (the length of the blade is the straight-line distance from the top of the handle to the tip of the blade). It must also have one or more of the following features: i) A serrated cutting edge (other than a serrated cutting edge of up to 2 inches (5.08 cm) next to the handle) ii) More than one hole in the blade iii) Spikes iv) More than two sharp points in the blade, other than a sharp point where the edges that create the point make an angle of at least 90 degrees (an angle on a curved edge is measured using the tangent of the curve) and a sharp point on the blade's cutting edge near the handle

For information on defences available to anyone charged with an offence, see section 141 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 and the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Offensive Weapons) Order 1988. See links in 'Key legislation' below.

It is essential that you are aware of and comply with the laws covering prohibited offensive weapons.

Other legislation

Sales to the general public of products that contain high concentrations of certain chemicals are restricted in order to reduce the risk that they can be used in the manufacture of explosives or to cause harm. Members of the public must have a valid explosives precursors and poisons (EPP) licence issued by the

Home Office if they want to acquire, possess, use or import these regulated substances.

Under the Poisons Act 1972, a person commits an offence if they supply a regulated substance to a member of the general public without first verifying - by inspecting the licence and the associated form of identification - that they have a valid EPP licence.

Guidance for retailers on licensed transactions of poisons and explosives precursors can be found on the GOV.UK website.

Further information

For a more detailed look at the issues surrounding sales of these products, see 'Knives, bladed items and hazardous materials' in Business Companion's Business in Focus section.

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards services and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law, please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

In this update

Extra information added, making it clear that scissors (and various other products) are not age-restricted.

Last reviewed / updated: March 2026

Key legislation

- Poisons Act 1972
- Criminal Justice Act 1988
- Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Offensive Weapons) Order 1988
- Knives Act 1997
- Offensive Weapons Act 2019

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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