



Independent report

# **Independent end-to-end review of online knife sales (accessible)**

Updated 26 February 2025

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# 1 Foreword

## **Pooja Kanda – mother of Ronan Kanda**

On the 29th of June 2022, my world was shattered when my beloved only son, Ronan, fell victim to a horrific attack in broad daylight. This senseless act of violence was tragically the result of mistaken identity. Ronan suffered devastating injuries: his heart was pierced 17cm deep and his abdomen 20cm deep with a deadly ninja sword. The weapons used in this brutal attack were alarmingly easy to obtain. The perpetrators, Prabjeet Veadhesa and Sukhman Shergil were only 16 years old, they ordered online, the twin set ninja swords and jungle machete from a website and collected it from the post office on the very day of the attack.

The 2023 court trial exposed a series of alarming failures. Prabjeet Veadhesa, the perpetrator, was revealed to be an underage arms dealer who used his mother's bank details and identification to acquire an arsenal of lethal weapons, all within 6 months before killing my son. The trial highlighted the shocking ease with which Veadhesa acquired these dangerous items, with no age verification or questioning at any stage of the process. This lack of oversight extended to the absence of any inquiry into why an individual would require such an array of deadly weapons. The systemic failures in regulating the sale and distribution of these items ultimately culminated in the senseless loss of my son, leaving a family devastated and a community in shock.

I believe stricter regulation of these lethal weapons in our society will create necessary barriers and reduce the glamorisation of tools designed solely to kill or gravely injure. Banning such weapons demonstrates the government's commitment to public safety and is crucial in preventing these arms from falling into the wrong hands, sparing other families the pain we've endured. My son's death should not have been the catalyst for exposing these systemic failures. The Post Office must recognise the critical importance of thorough ID checks. This retailer has not only produced the sword that took my son's life but has also manufactured weapons that have caused suffering to countless others. Sellers, buyers, and distributors must assume greater responsibility for their role in this deadly trade.

After our findings, my daughter wrote to the owner of the website which sold the weapons, whose response was, 'Swords are collectors' items. Our customers buy these to keep at home. Just like people collect stamps.' He blamed the laws and said he wasn't doing anything wrong. My pain meant nothing to him; he was going to continue selling these weapons and help other murderers with easy access to the bladed articles. I was broken but not lost; I was not going to stay quiet, and we directed our fight to bring about stronger laws.

The government and people in positions of power must ensure laws are being adhered to and that strict procedures are in place to prevent more innocent lives being lost at the hands of lethal weapons. We must constantly think of new ways to implement stronger laws and prevent deadly weapons on our streets.

## **Stephen Clayman - NPCC Knife Crime Lead**

The proliferation of and accessibility to knives has become of great concern, particularly when they fall into the hands of children and young adults. Through social media, we see videos of knife fights in the street, not only causing potential serious injury or death, but having an impact on communities too. The dreadful events in Southport in 2024 have left so many of us shocked and appalled and my heart goes out to all those families who have lost loved ones, or who have suffered life changing injuries and are affected by this. Whilst all of this is not an everyday occurrence, it is, nonetheless, disturbing. Over the past 18 months, my national knife crime working group has been uncovering the harsh reality of how easy it has become to obtain these knives from online marketplaces.

As the National Police Chiefs Council lead for knife crime, my portfolio's mission is to understand where policing can add value to tackling the issues relating to knife enabled crime. Policing will not mitigate the issues alone and in many areas the police should take a supportive and not a lead role, as other agencies are far better placed to do so. However, there are some very clear elements that wider law enforcement can lead and develop.

To be clear, understanding and dealing with the complex factors behind why someone chooses to carry a knife and then potentially cause harm to others is essential. However, tackling the supply of knives is one important part of the overall mission. We must continue to focus on reducing the availability and ease at which some knives can be obtained, particularly through online sales. Traditional 'bricks & mortar' shops will often offer better safeguards and a means of testing their effectiveness through mechanisms like test purchasing, but even more can be done here too.

The review highlights two aspects of online sales; the first relates to regular online retailers, who are official businesses and registered as such. Most of these retailers do operate within the parameters of the existing law. There are however serious flaws in the system, particularly with age verification at point of sale and delivery. This can leave sales vulnerable and reaching those underage or those who wish to circumvent the law in other ways by using social media platforms to sell to others.

These 'grey markets' are used by individuals willing to bulk buy knives, prohibited or otherwise and sell indiscriminately across their social media accounts and peer networks. Police have already taken action against a number of them, but the law needs to be stronger here. Our goal must be to reduce their presence on these platforms in the first place and look at how effective existing legislation is to tackle this, certainly in light of the Online Safety Act (OSA). The review team has had the opportunity to engage directly with social media and technology platforms and have got a sense of the way they operate. They have an over-reliance on their global policies to operate here, which is not sufficient. The OSA will ensure that they must focus more on protecting harmful content from UK users, but there is further work necessary with this sector and there are loopholes here in respect of knife sales.

The review ultimately makes a series of recommendations, some of which can be tackled immediately, like strengthening age verification through a move to buyer identification at sale and delivery. Other aspects, such as regulating the knife sales industry and grey markets needs change too, but some of this will take longer given the consultation required to make the changes. It may be possible to deliver some of these recommendations incrementally, concentrating with online retailing first, before turning to the more traditional 'bricks & mortar' retailers.

I have no doubt that the recommendations, if carried out, will very quickly make a difference, especially to the UK market. There is, however, a risk that overseas markets will become more dominant, so extra vigilance will be required moving forward to monitor how knives (including prohibited weapons) are imported. This will require more detailed work with government, industry and partners to further examine the complex processes that need to be understood better if we are to tackle effectively.

Ultimately, we cannot stand by and do nothing.

Commander Stephen Clayman

NPCC Knife Crime Lead

# 2 Executive summary

## 2.1 Introduction

Between 2020 and 2024 the number of violent and sexual offences involving a knife recorded by police forces in England and Wales has increased. New and more stringent legislation has limited the availability of larger and more dangerous knives. However, advancements in technology, transport and globalisation have opened the door to new knife markets, instantly available to people through the internet. In response to this growing threat, the Home Office commissioned an independent end-to-end review of online knife sales to look at the sale and delivery process crucial to individuals obtaining knives online.

This report aims to deliver a holistic view of the process of online sales within the UK and from abroad, taking views from key stakeholders across each area highlighting best practice and issuing recommendations on improvements. The extent of the review covers the following:<sup>[footnote 1]</sup>

1. An understanding of the different ways a knife is sold online and delivered within England and Wales. This will cover companies based in the UK and imported by companies based outside the UK.
2. The processes followed as part of the online sales process, from the point of sale through to the actual delivery or supply of the knife.
3. Whether law enforcement has effective legislation and whether legislation is applied correctly.
4. The effectiveness of measures currently used by businesses and organisations to prevent the sale and delivery of knives online to under 18s and the sale of prohibited weapons.
5. What gaps and deficiencies exist in current processes and procedures used by online sellers, online marketplaces and companies, delivery companies, enforcement agencies and within existing knife legislation.
6. Examples of best practice are being used by online sellers and delivery companies to prevent the sale and delivery of knives to under-18s and the sale of prohibited weapons.
7. What recommendations should be made to strengthen processes and legislation relating to the online sale and delivery of knives to more effectively prevent the sale and delivery of knives to under-18s and the sale of knives listed as prohibited offensive weapons.

Throughout this review, the voices of victims and their families affected by knife crime is uppermost in our thoughts. Their experiences offer the true value of why this review is necessary and tackling the availability of knives is increasingly important. The recommendations to follow in this report are made with these victims and families at the forefront, ensuring that each one is balanced to increase public safety and ensure fewer people have to experience the grief and injustice that so many families already feel.

## **2.2 Methodology**

Both qualitative and quantitative analysis has been used throughout this report. In order to maximise the reach, three main methods of data collection were used, as outlined in Figure 1.

### **Figure 1. Research Methodology and Sample Groups**

#### **Online surveys**

Online Surveys sent to:

- Law enforcement
- Crown Prosecution Service
- Voluntary sector
- Border Force
- Carrier/Courier services
- Retailers

Surveys ran during the months of October 2024 and January 2025.

The surveys consisted of a mixture of closed questions and open-ended questions designed to gather examples of good practice and more detailed viewpoints.

#### **Consultations**

Between October 2024 and January 2025, interviews & consultations were held with various stakeholder groups across the online sales network including:

- Online marketplaces, social media and search engines companies
- Senior UKBF representatives
- National Trading Standards
- Ofcom

The data from these was analysed and anonymised in many cases for inclusion in this report.

### **Quantitative analysis**

Quantitative analysis was carried out using published data from various sources including:

- ONS - published crime data
- MoJ - Outcome and sentencing data

Trading standards produced data examining the failure rate of online retailers against age verification processes.

The survey participants were not randomly selected and may not reflect the views of those who did not participate. The qualitative findings presented are solely the perceptions of participants; they may not reflect wider experiences of all individuals working in these organisations. All data is likely to be affected by personal biases of the participants. Due to the time constraints involved, Freedom of Information Requests were not used throughout this process.

## **2.3 Key findings**

### **Knife use and prevalence in crime**

Knife crime as recorded by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) has been rising between 2020 and 2024.<sup>[footnote 2]</sup> This increase is recorded following the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 which prevented many from engaging in activity outside of their home. The rise recorded has almost reached pre-pandemic levels, however hospital visits as a result of knife injuries haven't risen at the same rate. Knife crime is recorded in two main ways - selected violent and sexual offences involving a knife and knife possession offences, neither of which record the type of knife involved. This is a gap which leaves the prevalence of types of knives involved in crime uncertain and relies on force level data obtained through freedom of information requests. There is no obligation to record this data and as such, many forces may not have this data available. In a large number of cases, the type of knife may remain unidentified, but it is hard to quantify this without the standardised collection of this information.

Similarly, offences regarding the advertisement and marketing of knives are no longer recorded separately, but the historical data suggests the use of this legislation was sparse. More work is required to determine why this may have been the case, but this report details a dearth of trained investigators able to identify these offences or CPS prosecutors with the knowledge to progress them through the justice system.

## **Online knife retailers, sellers, platforms and methodology**

Knives are sold through various methods online, accessible through a variety of different means. There are two categories of seller that are featured throughout this report; retailers and peer-to-peer sellers. Retailers usually host online shops<sup>[footnote 3]</sup> with the ability to buy knives through their own platform, offering the chance to view and purchase knives using their own implemented systems and processes. Peer-to-peer includes what is described in this report as 'grey market' sellers, whose activity may be legal or illegal, but often involves the reselling of knives via social media and sales platforms. This leads to the opportunity for children to obtain knives without any form of age verification or screening at all.

The 'grey market' offers the possibility of anonymising the purchase of knives and the case studies suggest they facilitate both legal and illegal sales (contrary to Section 1 Knives Act 1997 and Section 141 Criminal Justice Act 1998).

Knives used in violent offences can be traced back to seller categories of both types, but the grey market often fails to offer the accountability required of retailers operating as registered businesses. The social media platforms that the 'grey market' sellers operate on not only give them a level of anonymity, but also allow the possibility of inadvertent advertising to children based on the algorithm used to direct content. The thin and often blurry line between legal and illegal allows sellers to continue to operate online, even following reports to hosts and any action taken against them.

Over a period of time, policing has identified at least fifteen grey market sellers, who it is estimated between them, have sold circa 2,000 weapons. This has been done effectively under the radar and with no effort to check who they are sold to. The sale of knives is not a regulated sector and unlike firearms or alcohol, knives can be sold by anyone, anywhere, provided they are compliant with the Criminal Justice Act 1988, the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA) and the Knives Act 1997. Many marketplaces have banned the sale of knives, however the use of terms such as 'cosplay' or 'tool' disguise knife sales which allow sellers to continue selling knives despite the platform's policy. It is recognised that no system is infallible, but few marketplaces have systems in place that allow for these items to be distinguished from other sales.

Although many knife sellers in the UK abide by the current legislation in place, this becomes more challenging with international retailers who can operate with the appearance of being based in the UK. Some retailers were of the opinion that problems with knife sales are caused by insufficient regulations applying to overseas sellers, but it is acknowledged that the UK does have more restrictions on import than many other countries. Many cited online marketplaces based abroad as a major problem with the availability of knives in the UK.

## **Age verification – point of sale**

Section 141A of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 prohibits the sale of many knives and sharp instruments, and prohibited weapons, to under 18s. Specific defences can be used by sellers if knives are sold to under 18s which include suitable age verification systems, the use of suitable packaging and the provision that it will not be delivered to a locker. <sup>[footnote 4]</sup>

In proving that the purchaser is over 18, there is no set standard for the seller and the legislation relies on the term 'likely' to prevent purchases to anyone under 18. The term 'likely' is not defined in law but can be taken to suggest 60-75% of the cases would be true (Fore, J. 2019). In 2019/20, UK Trading Standards conducted a comprehensive test purchase operation where only 3% of the transactions failed an age verification process, but only through the delivery terms and conditions. The limitations on the testing meant that some methods of using false identification and accounts that have a previous transaction where identification was verified remains untested. However, anecdotal cases point towards issues in this area. There are also challenges with RIPA/IPA and the extent that Trading Standards are inhibited by these regulations.

There is no UK standard in age verification and retailers do not have to prove a buyer's identity before agreeing to a sale. Best practice in this area identified systems of 'buyer verification' rather than age verification which means confirming the identity of the buyer through the use of identity documents prior to agreeing a sale. These systems are not beyond abuse but offer a greater level of protection to the seller against underage buyers than other versions of age verification.

### **Age verification – delivery**

The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA) introduced strict guidance requiring all packages containing a bladed article must be clearly marked as well as age verification at the point of delivery. The onus in these situations is on the seller, with a defence available if they took all reasonable precautions to ensure that the item is not being delivered to a person under that age of 18. Age verification on delivery could not be robustly tested, but examples of practice prohibited under the act are available from across a number of courier companies. This includes some contributors to the review reporting deliveries to both lockers and residential premises. Issues identified by couriers are things such as identification of items based on customer declarations or packaging denoting that the package contains a knife. Retailers face an additional cost when requiring age verification and as such retailers packaging and shipping knives paying for this service would have a defence under the act. The 'grey market' rarely use shipping that complies with the OWA and relies on face to face, unmarked shipping and locker boxes to complete their sales.

Many couriers stated that trust was an important part of identifying whether a knife is present for a particular delivery. The processes across the couriers are not standardised and data around the misuse of courier services is not shared in as much detail in order to identify any offenders. Like knife

retailers, couriers are not regulated and an individual could start a courier service with no resources or systems in place. The lack of governance around this makes deliveries from those using these companies harder to detect.

There are some systems in place for high value items, with retailers sometimes choosing to use couriers that allow for a pin system, in which a pin code is needed to complete delivery, but these are not currently widely used for knife deliveries. Ideas have been put forward from couriers for similar systems that could be used for ID verification, but it is unknown whether this could fulfil the requirements of the OWA without further exploration.

Ultimately, there is a clear need to join up the verified person buying the knife with that person receiving it too. There will clearly be some logistics to work out, but there is a requirement to stop the current flaws in the process.

### **Sale and delivery from outside the UK**

International marketplaces and retailers should follow the same process as retailers and marketplaces in the UK. However, many of the laws in the UK differ from other countries where knife sellers are located. This presents difficulties in enforcing the current law against international retailers. Equivalent laws need to be available in the country where the offence is committed in order to transfer a prosecution to their jurisdiction. It is therefore important when considering regulating online sales to also look at the way goods enter the country and restrictions that could apply in that area.

The primary difference in the sales process is how the knives enter the UK through the borders. Border Force have responsibility for ensuring that prohibited articles do not enter the country, however the volume of packages entering the country is extremely large and the scanning capacity is limited. Therefore, it is not certain that all prohibited weapons can be stopped at the border and a number will come into the UK for onwards distribution and supply. When prohibited bladed articles are found, Border Force notify the relevant police force area of the seizure. The police response is not standardised from force-to-force and the intelligence gained is not always prioritised for action.

This is an area that requires more examination as it is complex, involving a number of agencies and stakeholders. However, as an internal market becomes more regulated, there is a need to watch those who operate outside of the UK. The dark web does not currently feature extensively in terms of knife sales, but again will need constant vigilance over time to react should this change.

### **Social media and its role in online sales**

The grey market is enabled by the access to videos and posts on social media which display and advertise knives for sale online. Sellers do not

always overtly label themselves as retailers and use language which is designed to only hint at sales activity. The adverts themselves are often pointed towards larger, more attractive knives and the language used can sometimes contravene s.1 Knives Act 1997. Social media companies do have the ability to scan and remove illegal posts and accounts, sometimes placing positive messaging in its place. This is mainly used for drug sales but there is no evidence of this being used where there is harmful content such as knife display violence, or knife sales.

Many social media platforms do not authorise sales on their platforms unless through specific marketplaces available on their applications. In the main, knife sales are prohibited, but the same issues exist in these spaces as with online marketplaces. When looking at the grey market, typically the sellers do not use marketplaces, but advertise through social media posts and will often move the buyer to another peer-to-peer platform, which is encrypted and unmonitored. Although some platforms acknowledge local legislative restrictions on particular knives, many of the intervention strategies appear to be based on flagging to remove individual pieces of content manually rather than building this in for automated detection and removal. This overlaps with the issue of regulation in that the focus is on prohibited activity and systemic issues, but global policies appear to present a challenge to them when applying UK legislation.

### **Regulation of online content**

Ofcom are the regulator of online services and have provisions enabled by the Online Safety Act 2023 to take action against platforms for failing to remove of specified harmful and illegal content as well as define the standards that social media platforms must adhere to. The onus through the act is on platforms conforming to a standard of self-monitoring and regulation, which in turn can offer Ofcom the opportunity to fine or issue penalties. Ofcom remain committed to combating knife crime online, their supervision team will engage with the largest and highest risk services to proactively address compliance concerns. Ofcom's role in this area is to drive systemic change rather than manage individual complaints or specific content. This works towards ensuring that platforms have robust governance systems to manage the risk of illegal content or the glamorisation of prohibited knives. Ofcom can test and recommend changes to the algorithms. However, in order to recognise where changes are needed, specific systemic issues need to be identified.

Monitoring and enforcement is inconsistent across platforms and police force areas, which has identified gaps in skills, training and equipment within law enforcement. Law enforcement does not currently have the capability to consistently monitor and refer harmful content to the platforms and subsequently make Ofcom aware of the systemic issues that exist. Many platforms proactively target certain types of harmful or illegal content, but posts relating to the sale of knives is often reactive. Platforms often operate under global policies which do not recognise UK legislation relating to knives. The result of this is the lack of opportunities to explore whether

platforms are adhering to UK legislation and as such, particularly for knife sales, content removal or investigation is challenging. Community reporting of illegal or harmful content is equally difficult, with platforms using this system relying on a user's judgement that content is illegal or harmful, when many of these posts are designed to attract more users to subscribing.

### **Regulation of online sales**

Online sales regulations are currently enforced by Trading Standards and law enforcement. However, there are currently no requirements for licensing or registration to sell or own knives in the UK. There is legislation introduced under the OWA 2019 which prohibits the sale of certain knives and restricts the way that knives are marketed, but UK retailers operating outside of the grey market are generally selling knives lawfully. The challenge lies in the identification of retailers and the obligations they hold when selling knives. If a retailer is operating lawfully, there is no requirement for law enforcement to be informed as to where knives are being sold, particularly when sold in volume or with regularity to individuals. This has created opportunities for the grey market sellers to buy knives in bulk and resell them, potentially ending up in incidents of violence, without detection. Lessons learned from firearms licensing shows that the regulation of the weapons markets reduces the availability and use of weapons in incidents, but it comes at significant cost to law enforcement.

The introduction of a registration system for knife retailers is a measure that could deliver immediate benefits. From a law enforcement perspective, those involved in firearms licencing are open to the registration of retailers as a potential option to regulate sales, but do warn of significant difficulties in licensing individual knife holders if that was ever considered. Unlike firearms, knives have uses in daily life as either trade or household tools and therefore implementing licenses for individuals would be prohibitive with legal definitions of knives being particularly difficult. Other challenges include volume, cost and resources, with licensing teams operating at a net loss across the country. These concerns are shared by this review team and it is not making that specific recommendation. However, at this time though, there are no checks conducted on knife sellers in the same way as firearms dealers to ensure they are appropriate to be involved in the distribution of these items.

Knife retailers have expressed concern around regulation and have pointed to importation as the biggest risk in knife supply. However, case studies have shown UK retailers being the source of knives involved in violent offences. A risk in this area will be businesses moving abroad and as such registration of knife dealers with subsequent offences for selling knives without registration may need to be accompanied by regulations covering the importation of knives. Some retailers would be in favour of importation licenses to that extent.

### **Traditional shop front (bricks & mortar) retailers**

Whilst it's recognised that this review is focussed on the online sale of knives, when looking at regulating the overall market, it may be necessary to extend some of this to those traditional retailers based in fixed locations on local high streets and beyond. Many are already signed up to responsible retailer guidelines, but these may need to go further so that both online and high street retailers are moving in the same direction. The public will want confidence that if someone walks into a hardware store, or small business, that they will not be able to buy a relevant knife repeatedly over a period of time, without it being noticed and potentially reported. Given the complexity and volume of these shops, further consultation will be necessary to explore the impact and agree implementation timelines if this was agreed.

### **A prohibited person**

The review has highlighted a need to look at the concept of a prohibited person, both in terms of selling and buying knives. There is already evidence of a minority of owners of registered online retailers having previous convictions for violent offences and are wholly inappropriate to be selling knives to others. This is certainly something that works well where firearms are concerned and is a natural recommendation to make.

There is then the question about those either selling knives through a grey market or purchasing for their own use. Again, existing firearms legislation is helpful from a conceptual point of view. Having more robust action against those that have a propensity for violence and/or found in possession of knives is crucial. They (or anyone on their behalf) should not be able to purchase a relevant<sup>[footnote 5]</sup> knife online and an overall registration requirement, along with border notifications would aid law enforcement in both identifying risk and safeguarding individuals.

### **Legislation and sentencing**

The legislative options open to law enforcement and Trading Standards includes prosecution of sellers of prohibited weapons, sellers marketing or indicating the knives could be used for combat and the sale to under 18s. Also within the legislation is guidance on how knives should be delivered and age verified on delivery. The sales and marketing offences that can be used are not commonly identified in policing and is an area where officers may not come across it in their day-to-day business. As such, the legislation is rarely used and attempts to use it can encounter barriers at the prosecution stage, with those CPS prosecutors contacted never having dealt with a relevant offence. The separation of offence and power to obtain a warrant under s.141 and s.142 CJA 1988 has caused some confusion in courts with warrants sometimes refused on the grounds of s.141 being a summary only offence (low gravity).

The seriousness of the offence as guided by sentencing has an effect on the police response with possession of a prohibited weapon reaching up to 4 years imprisonment, whilst the supply of prohibited weapons is a summary only offence, with up to 12 months imprisonment. This disparity is

at odds with other legislation such as drugs where the illegal supply is treated more seriously than possession offences. Difficulties are faced by law enforcement when obtaining data from tech and communications companies in relation to the specified offences above. The majority of these platforms are based abroad and so require Crime Overseas Production Orders (COPO) or Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) applications, which in the main are only available for serious crime and not available for knife offences.

### **Knife possession and perception**

There could be a number of reasons for the increase in knife incidents as recorded by the ONS including accounts from the voluntary sector which point towards the visibility of knives in the public eye. The reality of knife crime may not change, but the images and videos accessible to the public constantly do. The algorithms on social media platforms adjust content to the user, and so if a young person starts watching videos containing knives it may offer more content of the same type. The use of larger more 'especially' dangerous knives may cause people who see these images to feel less safe and as such carry a knife themselves. This in turn could mean young people end up viewing and coming into contact with grey market seller accounts or going directly to a retailer and try and circumvent the age restrictions.

### **Marketing and communications**

Search engines and social media platforms often work on monetisation or views to boost posts or websites into the view of the public. This has an adverse effect on young people in that specific adverts or search results may mean that websites selling dangerous knives become accessible. The algorithms within these platforms are designed to tailor content towards the user and therefore searching or viewing content about knives or featuring knives may lead to advertisements for knife retailers being shown to under 18s. Unlike gambling or other regulated industries, there are not enough warnings on the knife adverts despite knives only being available to those over the age of 18. The lack of any warning may mean that websites are visited more often than they otherwise would have.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that much more can be done to reduce harm by all involved in the end-to-end process of importation, sale and delivery of knives, including greater collaboration between policing, UKBF, Trading Standards, private sector stakeholders and others. Information and intelligence is not shared efficiently and there is an inconsistent response to the receipt of intelligence across the board.

In relation to advertising, tech companies ensure that algorithms are in place to deal with other illegal content, but the same focus is not placed with knives. This is an area in which a line cannot be clearly drawn between what is legal and illegal content at present. More focus is required to ensure children are not subject to online content that either advertises or displays

knives, particularly when glamorised. However, a systems change across the board is required to reprioritise targeting the availability of knives online and ensure that where they are available, the right tools and intelligence capabilities are given to authorities in the UK to respond to the threat of knife crime. This should include a more effective law enforcement function that sits nationally and coordinates between all relevant enforcement agencies, stakeholders (including regulators) and tech companies.

Overall, this report highlights the need to urgently review the requirements on knife sellers, but this cannot be addressed in isolation. The review has identified a lack of governance and regulation around the sale of knives and knife sellers in general, whether online or otherwise. This raises concerns about the potential for prohibited or particularly dangerous items to be purchased, as well as the risk of such items being obtained by individuals who may use them for any criminality. Many in law enforcement believe that regulating knife sellers is achievable. However, stronger regulation on the UK market alone may push sellers abroad and as such importation regulations for knives may need to be addressed in tandem. The issue of age verification remains a key vulnerability as it is not done to a minimum standard with both retailers and carriers<sup>[footnote 6]</sup> unable to provide complete confidence in their operating conditions. The lack of minimum standards and poor compliance has led to knives becoming available to under 18s. Where age verification is used, ID is not required in legislation and therefore has left systems open to abuse. This must be tackled now through a standardised and more robust approach.

## **3 Summary of recommendations and further areas to explore**

The recommendations are numbered relating to the order that they appear in the report. The numbering does not represent any priority in the importance of any recommendation over another.

### **1. Data recording**

Improved data recording across Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice including:

- a. The types of knives used in offences.
- b. The number of recorded offences for sales, marketing and prohibited weapon offences.

c. The criminal justice outcomes for sales, marketing and prohibited weapon offences.

## **2. Age verification**

Age verification at point of sale and point of delivery should change to buyer verification, requiring the provision of identification documents and a necessity for confirmation that the receiver is connected to the buyer.

Further exploration with couriers and retailers around delivery tracking and verification.

## **3. Couriers**

a. All packages to be clearly labelled as containing a bladed item.

b. Age/identification verification to be robustly employed at point of delivery and collection.

### **Further areas to explore**

c. UK couriers to agree to data sharing agreement with UK Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA)

d. Consider implementation of verification PIN reference number to ensure purchaser and recipient are linked. (similar to fast-food order applications)

e. Legal review into s38 and 39 Offensive Weapons Act to ensure implementations across UKBF and courier networks. (Prohibition on delivering to a residential address)

## **4. Social media and technology platforms**

Provisions for the removal of knife related content on law enforcement. Recommended provisions may be:

a. The requirement for social media platforms to remove of prohibited material within 48 hours of police notification.

b. Requires social media companies to provide comprehensive information regarding individuals and companies unlawfully offering to supply weapons

and knives online.

c. Greater awareness for UK LEA to refer and request removal of offending content.

**Further areas to explore**

d. Social media companies must operate a UK policy, taking into account the specific laws relevant to the UK.

e. Search engines to ensure prohibited articles are not promoted or available to UK customers.

## **5. Knife retailer registration (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland)**

Set up a registration scheme for online knife retailers. It may be helpful to further explore increasing the safeguards in place for offline stores in future.

**Conditions for the registration may include:**

a. Mandatory reporting of suspicious or bulk purchases.

b. Details of buyer to be recorded, retained and made available to UK law enforcement upon request.

c. All marketing material to display clear age verification livery.

d. Registrants will agree to Police and Trading Standards inspection and test purchasing.

e. New criminal offences of selling, offering to sell and marketing knives without registration (triable either way)

f. Unregistered selling of knives is treated more seriously than possession offences.

g. Retailers will be prohibited from the sale of 'mystery boxes' 'mystery knives' and 'reduced priced add-ons'.

h. Registered retailer must not be a prohibited person (to be defined).

i. People and premises will be subject to checks for appropriateness to store and sell knives.

j. Extends to any business selling relevant bladed items, including traditional 'bricks & mortar' retailers

## **6. Creation of a prohibited person**

### **Potential options that could apply:**

- a. A prohibited person would not be able to apply to be a registered knife seller.
- b. The ownership of certain types of knives, or knives believed to be for the purpose of use in violence would be prohibited (an offence would be created)
- c. Police may have additional powers in relation to the person or known premises they occupy.
- d. A prohibited person should not be able to purchase certain types of knives and it is an offence to purchase knives on behalf of a prohibited person.

## **7. Importation**

- a. Import licensing scheme to prohibit unlicensed importation of knives and prohibited weapons.
- b. Review the knife import tax levy to ensure knives are identifiable.

### **Further areas to explore**

- c. Standardise entry routes into the UK for bladed items, restricting use of less intrusive methods.
- d. Training and awareness for UKBF in the knowledge and understanding around prohibited knives.
- e. Use of cease and desist letters to overseas retailers.

## **8. Policing, Trading Standards and Ofcom**

- a. Creation of a central (national) function to allow for information and greater collaboration amongst key stakeholders.
- b. Increase law enforcement capability to identify prohibited online sales activity

- c. Increase capability to conduct random test purchase operations.
- d. Upskilling of law enforcement to disrupt and prosecute grey market activity.
- e. Review of current information sharing amongst UKBF, Trading Standards and UK Law Enforcement.
- f. Improve data recording for knife retail specific offences and the types of knives used.
- g. Adjust the sentencing guidelines of offences related to online sales making all offences triable either way.
- h. Work with Ofcom to consider future OSA code changes.

## 4 Introduction

This chapter provides more detailed background information to the independent end-to-end review of online knife sales. It details the methods of data collection and terms used throughout the report in order for readers to fully engage with the content.

### 4.1 Background

Between April 2013 and June 2024, the number of selected offences<sup>[footnote]</sup> involving a knife has risen from 26,501 offences over the year to 50,748 offences (ONS, 2024). A drop in offences was seen during the period in which Coronavirus restricted the movement of individuals however, rates of offences have returned roughly to pre pandemic levels. Similarly, possession of bladed and pointed article offences have also been rising steadily since 2009. The recovery of weapons leading to possession offences is largely down to police activity, but the number of stop and searches is significantly lower than 2010 (gov.uk, 2024). Although an absolute causation cannot be drawn from the comparison between the data sets, it could be suggested that there are more bladed articles and therefore it becomes easier to find them.

It has been previously recognised that there was insufficient governance over the sale and delivery of weapons, particularly online which brought forward the introduction of legislative provisions under the OWA 2019. The provisions ensuring age verification at the point of sale and point of delivery made steps towards addressing sales to under 18s, however it is

recognised by police and government that the criminal market and under 18s still have access to not only knives, but more specifically large knives and machetes.

The growth of social media, particularly over the last 10 years shows the emergence of new photo and video services, rising rapidly in popularity. Snapchat (launched in 2011), Instagram (launched in 2010) and TikTok (launched in 2016) now have over now have over 4.2billion users combined (statista.com, 2024) with TikTok showing the fastest growth ever in a social media platform. The opportunities for criminal and harmful activity on these services therefore have grown with usage and the nature of these services presenting challenges in accurately determining how much illegal or harmful content there is.

The government has taken steps to address content online through the Online Safety Act 2023, however through the government's Safer Streets Mission a knife crime action plan has been launched which recognises that knife crime over the last decade has claimed too many young lives. The commitment includes holding tech companies more to account, prohibition of further weapons and strengthening rules to prevent online sales.

In order to help achieve this, an independent end-to-end review of online knife sales was commissioned. Commander Stephen Clayman, the NPCC lead for knife crime was appointed in 2024 to lead this review which was given a three-month timeframe, with findings and recommendations to be completed by the end of January 2025.

A terms of reference<sup>[footnote 8]</sup> was outlined by the Minister of State for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP which defined the following key objectives –

To gain an understanding of:

1. The different ways knives are sold online and delivered within England and Wales by companies based in the UK and imported by companies based outside the UK.
2. The processes followed as part of the online sales process, from the point of sale through to the actual delivery or supply of the knife.
3. How law enforcement applies the law in this area.
4. The effectiveness of measures currently used by sellers based within the UK, sellers which are based outside the UK and import knives in and delivery companies to prevent the sale and delivery of knives online to under-18s and the sale of knives listed as prohibited offensive weapons.
5. What gaps and deficiencies exist in current processes and procedures used by online sellers, online marketplaces and companies, delivery companies, enforcement agencies and within existing knife legislation.

6. What examples of best practice are being used by online sellers and delivery companies to prevent the sale and delivery of knives to under-18s and the sale of knives listed as prohibited offensive weapons.
7. What law enforcement can do to improve the way that it enforces the law on the online sales of knives?

This report contains the research and findings gathered throughout the review which are used to conclude in recommendations provided to His Majesty's Government (HMG).

## **4.2 Aims**

The overall aim of this review is to conduct a critical analysis of the online sales process, from knife seller to knife buyer, looking at retailers, enablers, authorities and systems that allow this process to happen. To address this, both qualitative and quantitative reviews have taken place to explore the views and data provided by participants in this process. These include:

1. Sales platforms: An analysis of the different types of platforms where knives are sold, including mainstream e-commerce sites, specialised knife retailers, private websites, social media, and informal marketplaces.
2. Sales processes: A detailed examination of how knives are marketed, sold, and shipped. This includes the methods used for age verification, customer identification, and payment processing, as well as how legal compliance is monitored throughout the process.
3. Delivery mechanisms: The review explores the role of delivery companies in ensuring that knives are delivered in accordance with the law, particularly with respect to age verification at the point of delivery.
4. Enforcement and regulation: An evaluation of how law enforcement agencies, including the police, Border Force, Trading Standards, and the Crown Prosecution Service, apply current laws to monitor, investigate, and prosecute illegal knife sales online. This section also considers the challenges faced in tracking online sales, particularly those originating from international sellers.

The report provides the findings of this research and gives recommendations to reduce the availability of knives to those intent on using them in crime.

## **4.3 Terms used throughout the report**

This section is to clarify the agreed terms used throughout the report.

In this report there will be references to four different types of online sales platforms:

1. Knife retailers: Sellers who operate on the open or clear web with a virtual store, and (in the UK) will be registered as a company and pay taxes. Sales are usually hosted and transacted through an independent website managed by the retailer.
2. Overseas knife retailers: As above and based outside the UK. These can also include what are known as drop-shipping websites.
3. Online marketplaces: An online marketplace is a type of e-commerce website where product or service information is provided by multiple third parties. (Wikipedia, 2024) This allows multiple independent retailers to operate through a single portal. For example eBay, Gumtree and Facebook Marketplace.
4. Grey market: This is a term used throughout this report to describe knife sellers who operate outside of the traditional knife retailer or online marketplace model. Sellers are usually private individuals and not a registered businesses, who advertise and transact over social media or sell through their own personal network.

There will also be references to specific knives, either defined by law or otherwise widely associated by certain terms. These terms are defined in this section, but it should be observed that when researching knives, particularly with knife retailers' terms may vary depending on interpretation:

1. Prohibited weapons: For the purposes of this report, prohibited weapons will be limited to knives and bladed articles as defined under Section 141 Criminal Justice Act, revised under Section 47 Offensive Weapons Act 2019. The legislation prohibits the manufacture, sale, hiring, exposing for sale, lending or possession in private of any defined weapon.
2. Machete: A broad heavy knife typically used as an agricultural implement in a similar way to an axe or a scythe.
3. Hunting knife: Used traditionally in hunting or to prepare game after a hunt. Usually has specific features such as fixed blade with a single sharpened edge on the blade. It may have a curved portion of the blade designed to skin game and also a straight cutting edge. Variants may include survival knives that also have a serrated edge for sawing.
4. Kitchen knife – These are knives that come in a large range of shapes and sizes. They can have either blunt or sharp tips depending on their intended use in the kitchen

## **4.4 Report structure**

This report is structured thematically giving information under the headings of the key themes of the review.

The report begins by introducing some of the lived experiences of people where the law hasn't provided safeguards against serious crime, including the death of loved ones. This includes what charities and voluntary organisations feel about the online sale of knives. It is followed by a summary of the methodology and a chapter detailing how legislation interacts with online sales, as well as how law enforcement agencies approach online sales and delivery. The following chapter will explore the detail behind the processes and enablers of online knife sales. The various markets through which knives can be purchased online will be detailed in separate sub-headings with stakeholders in these areas given an opportunity to express their opinion.

Chapter 7 of this report focusses on the UK as a whole and explores whether collaboration takes place between the stakeholders in each area, whether data is shared and if so, what happens with that data. It will also look at some of the mechanisms that exist with other threats such as County Lines and Money Laundering. Finally, Chapter 8 will offer recommendations that are written to reflect improvements that can be made on various aspects detailed throughout the report.

## **5 The effects of online sales and knife crime**

Where knives are used for violence on our streets, families and communities are left devastated. The risk posed by every knife in the wrong hands is why this review was commissioned, and it is integral to gain an understanding of how these dangerous weapons enter the market, how they are sold and who is buying them. As part of an evidence based approach, this review utilises detailed analysis to uncover what the factors leading to knife enabled offences are. This forms only a small part of a problem solving approach to prevent knives being used in violence. To understand why recommendations may be needed to tighten the policies, collaboration and legislation around online sales, it is important to include some experiences of victims, their families and the investigators in these cases.

Each one of the accounts below has been considered alongside the wider review to provide context to the findings and recommendations. The voices

within this section have been drawn through consultation with people affected by knife crime and where it is known that the knife was purchased online.

## **Victor Lee**

Victor Lee, a 17-year-old from Ealing, was tragically murdered on 25 June 2023 near the Grand Union Canal in west London. He had developed an interest in buying weapons online, including knives and crossbows, which he intended to sell for profit. To facilitate these purchases, Victor altered the date of birth on a non-UK passport to appear older. He arranged sales through social media platforms, notably Snapchat which utilised the messaging facility to communicate with prospective buyers to arrange the transactions and share images of available weapons.

Victor was believed to have purchased the knives and crossbows from a number of different sources including online retailers based in the UK and internationally as traditional shops. His primary method of payment was using a PayPal account. Notably he'd not only falsified his online ID submissions to knife retailers but also on his PayPal account to appear over the age of 18.

On the day of his death, Victor met 18-year-old Elijah Gokool-Mely to sell him knives. Earlier that day, Victor had sold a crossbow to Gokool-Mely but during their second meeting, Gokool-Mely attacked Victor, stabbing him twice in the back and once in the chest, before pushing him into the canal. Despite efforts by nearby residents to rescue him, Victor succumbed to his injuries at the scene.

Analysis of Victor's mobile phone revealed the conversation on Snapchat in the hours leading up to his death and provided insight into a grey market sales operation run by him. Ultimately, once the weapons were in his possession, there was no legislative barrier preventing him from selling them, provided he had age verification processes in place.

The case underscores the dangers associated with the online sale of weapons and the use of social media platforms for such transactions. Victor's ability to purchase weapons online by simply altering his date of birth, highlights a fragility in age verification processes and at some point these knives and weapons would have been delivered and received by Victor or in some way by a person that could have passed them on. Additionally, arranging sales through social media exposed him to potential risks. The weapons were not always shipped through the post and in this case the weapons were handed over in person.

Detective Chief Inspector Brian Howie commented on the tragedy, stating, "It will forever be a source of regret to me that this vulnerable but independent young man was able to buy weapons online simply by altering the date of birth in his passport." He further emphasised that Victor's use of Snapchat to arrange the sale ultimately "sparked the events which cost him his life."

## **Kyron Lee**

Kyron Lee, aged 21 from Slough, was murdered in Waterman Court, Cippenham, Slough on the evening of 2 October 2022. He was cycling along Earls Lane with a friend when he was struck by a VW Golf which was travelling in the opposite direction and intentionally drove at him. Kyron managed to get up and run off. He was chased by four masked males, all of whom were carrying machetes and long knives. They chased him down and attacked him causing a number of stab wounds. He was fatally injured having been stabbed in the right thigh from front to back, transecting the right femoral artery. The offenders made good their escape in the vehicle and left him to die alone.

A large scale investigation identified all those responsible. Fras Seedahmed (17), the driver, Mohamed Elgamri (18), who inflicted the fatal stab wound, Khalid Nur (20), Elias Almallah (20) and Yahqub Mussa (21) were all convicted on his murder and received life sentences. Mohamed Abdulle, who helped prepared the offenders before they set off, was convicted of conspiracy to GBH with intent.

Kyron and the offenders were part of two groups whose animosity for one another had existed for a number of years. In the months and year before the fatal attack, there has been a number of knife enabled stabbings between the two groups. This sadly culminated in the death of Kyron. The reasons why the group sought Kyron on the day have never really become clear. However, from the levels of preparation they took before the murder, it was clear that they were seeking out members of the other group and came across Kyron.

An analysis of mobile telephone and financial records showed that the group had previously attempted to purchase weapons from an online knife retailer called Knife Warehouse:

- The previous December that Mohammed Abdulle attempted three times to purchase knives from the company. However, these transactions failed for unknown reasons. Successful transactions were made and it is thought that the knives were distributed throughout.

- Screenshots of a large number of machetes from this website were found on Khalid Nur's mobile phone. Further analysis showed that Nur attempted to have items sent to Mohamed Elgamri at an address unrelated to any of the group. Only one knife was ever recovered and this was forensically linked to Nur. Interestingly this was an identical match for a knife sold on the website.
- Furthermore, the investigation team recovered a video of Fras Seedahmed brandishing a knife in the company of associates. Again this closely resembled a knife for sale on that website.

Detective Chief Inspector Roddy stated, "Although there was no evidence to show that any of these transactions were successful or that this company supplied the weapons used in this murder, it is clear that these companies help enable such tragedies. Robust identification processes are all very well but it is the purpose behind the purchase which is critical. These items may well be advertised for recreational activities, but it would be disingenuous to suggest that this is the intention behind every purchase. The intention here was quite clearly to take another man's life. The ease by which such dangerous weapons can be secured is alarming. Without more robust checks and balances, such tragedies will continue to happen."

## **6 Methodology**

The findings in this report come from a mixed method approach of data collection using both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

- Online surveys with larger groups of contributors.
- Consultations and interviews with regulatory bodies, tech companies and other contributors where their role in the online sales process is significant or particularly specialised.
- Analysis of relevant crime statistics and criminal justice data.

### **6.1 Online surveys with larger groups of contributors**

Online surveys were published and sent to a number different groups identified by the review team as having a significant contribution or expert knowledge that would guide the findings and recommendations in this report. The aim was to explore for each contributor, whether they played a part in online knife sales, how significant their role is and the approaches that can be taken to ensure a safer process. All of the surveys in this process were voluntary and anonymised, unless the contributors specifically

contacted the review team to endorse the use of their details and submission.

When conducting the surveys it was not possible to achieve a consensus of the entire population of each stakeholder group. Instead, to maximise participation the survey was sent either through relevant contacts that could assist in the wider distribution or to all known respondents. It is acknowledged that there is a wider public view that was not consulted during this review, however the focus on the review was to gain expert knowledge and consult the stakeholders enabling or facilitating online sales.

The surveys and sampling approaches as part of this review were:

- Online Knife Retailers – These surveys were sent directly to all online knife retailers that were previously invited to a ministerial round table. The survey was also published online for knife retailers<sup>[footnote 9]</sup> to engage with if they had not been part of the initial round table;
- Law Enforcement – Surveys were sent through the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) chief constables for force engagement. A separate survey was issued to points of contact for the receipt of notifications of prohibited weapons from Border Force;
- Border Force – There are six Border Force regions and surveys were issued to each of these regions through a senior Border Force contact;
- Crown Prosecution Service – CPS employees involved in the prosecution of knife offenders and online sellers, sent through a CPS point of contact and distributed internally;
- Voluntary Sector<sup>[footnote 10]</sup> – Charities and volunteer groups who support young people involved in or the victims of knife crime. Sent out through the Home Office voluntary sector lead;
- Firearms Licensing – Police firearms licensing leads who manage the regulation and licensing of retailers of firearms and licensed individuals. Survey distributed through the NPCC firearms licensing working group;
- Carriers – Courier/delivery companies. Distributed through the Institute of Couriers to all contacts;

Due to the rapid nature of the review, most surveys were open for a minimum period of three weeks between the months of October and December 2024. The questions were designed to ask mostly closed questions with a small number of open-ended questions to gather more detailed thoughts.<sup>[footnote 11]</sup> Surveys sent to each group were different in order to draw on the specific knowledge and experience of that group.<sup>[footnote 12]</sup>

All surveys were reviewed and considered as part of the consultation. The below table shows the number of respondents to each survey.

**Table 1: Responses by participants per survey group**

<b>Survey Group</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Online Knife Retailers	57
Law Enforcement	37
Law Enforcement – Response to Border Force notifications	14
Couriers	55
Border Force	17
Crown Prosecution Service	18
Voluntary Sector	8
Firearms Licensing	36

The surveys were sent out to a wide section of the participant groups, however the results must be treated with caution as they will not be representative of everyone in that category. It must also be noted that some of the surveys asked for qualitative data. Due to the volume of this data, it is not possible to include every perspective within this review, but instead gives a broader sense of the types of responses with key highlights.

## **6.2 Consultations with areas where the participant’s role in the online sales process is significant or particularly specialised.**

Some of the respondents to this review singularly or through a small group hold a significant role in the chain of online sales. Where this was the case, it was possible to hold a series of smaller consultations to gain an in-depth response. These were semi structured, with the outline objective and questions similar for each participant in the relevant group.

Where possible a briefing document was provided ahead of time in order to gain expert knowledge from within the organisations and provide a fuller response. All consultations, interviews and focus groups took place between the months of November 2024 and January 2025. Table 2 shows the groups that took part in the consultation aspect of the review.

**Table 2: Participant groups of the research conducted through consultation**

## **Participant**

- Tech sector (social media platforms & search engines)
- E-commerce
- HMRC
- UK Border Force
- Voluntary sector
- Department of Business and Trade
- Firearms licensing
- Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC) and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC)
- Ofcom
- National Trading Standards
- Homeland Security Group
- Home Office
- Larger retail marketplaces (importers and retailers)

To provide anonymity, unless agreed with the participants in writing, they are named in groups rather than by organisation. All those who engaged will be listed in the appendices. Although the questions were broadly the same for participants in the same group, as with the survey questions, the questions were changed to suit the expertise and experience of the participant group, therefore the topics of the responses will differ from group to group.

All responses were then collated and analysed by the review team to pick out key areas to include in the review. Internal quality assurance was carried out to ensure the responses to be included were relevant to the review.

Language will be generalised to denote the consensus between the groups of stakeholders. The terms 'many', 'some' and 'few' will be used in the context of –

1. Many – The view was widespread between the groups of participants.
2. Some – There were more than a small number of participants that gave this response but not enough to use the term 'many'.
3. Few – There were a small number of participants that gave the response.

Where a particular finding is attributed to one organisation, the report will make clear that this is the case, however the organisation will not be named unless previously agreed. In most cases the findings of the surveys and

consultations will be combined as many will be based on the same questions.

## **6.3 Analysis of national crime data, criminal justice data and other data sources**

To identify the key trends in knife crime, how it affects communities and the effectiveness of legislation, data was taken from reports published to the general public online. The analysis will present data that will indicate whether it is possible to ascertain the scale of knives purchased online and if not, what data is required to do so.

### **Quantitative analysis of data**

Data was taken from tables published online from the following sources:

- Office of National Statistics (ONS) crime and justice tables. Crime in England and Wales: year ending June 2024. (ONS, 2024)
- ONS Homicide in England and Wales: year ending March 2023 (ONS, 2023)
- Ministry of Justice (MoJ): Knife and Offensive Weapon Sentencing Statistics (MoJ, 2024)

Published data and the quantitative analysis from them provides a key insight into where particular issues exist in knife crime. The cross analysis with MoJ data provides an insight into the effectiveness of the police response and can contribute to area-based analysis. It could also indicate whether police are using the legislative provisions available to them to prosecute knife sellers and other knife offenders. The time periods used in this report are limited and only include the time periods present in the published data.

## **6.4 Ethics**

Whilst undertaking the review, the following ethical principles were taken:

1. Participation: participation in the review was completely voluntary and withdrawal at any stage up to analysis was possible for any of the participants.
2. Consent: information regarding the review, report and data handling was given to all participants. Following this consent was gathered either

through participation in consultations, or agreeing to the terms listed at the start of the survey.

3. Anonymity: participants in the review have been assured that their responses are anonymous unless particularly stipulated and pre-agreed in writing. Analysis was conducted at a level in which the participant would remain anonymous and the findings were presented as a more generalised view. Pre-warning was given to those completing the survey to keep responses limited, to ensure that no information that could lead to identification of the individual is included. Some surveys included a question to gather the email address of the participant. It was clear in these cases that this was voluntary and would be for the purposes of follow up questions from the review team.

## **6.5 Limitations and caveats of the review**

Due to the timescales involved in the rapid review, it has not been possible to extend the consultations and surveys wider than has been conducted. Therefore, it must be noted when reading this review, the participant base is limited and may not be representative of the entire group.

Although knife crime affects all forces, some will be affected more than others, which was taken into account when assessing the results of surveys. The qualitative findings across all surveys are only representative of the individual participant and anyone that they have had consultation with in preparation to answer the survey. As such, some individuals within organisations that participated may not share the views and opinions put forward. Despite this, the qualitative analysis provided rich insight into the effect of online knife sales on the participating organisations and the specific roles they can play in order to combat illegal or harmful sales.

The views of the individuals that have taken part in the qualitative and quantitative questioning may not have expressed the findings published in national data sources. This can be attributed to the feelings and lived experience of the participant. It does not imply that this is any less reliable than published data and may give a more localised view than the larger area or national data that has been used.

When conducting quantitative analysis on published data sources, there are some occasions where the data is incomplete or may appear out of date. These can be put down to changes in recording practice or periodic reviews of certain crime types which means the publishing of data is less regular. Where data sources have been grouped together, it has only been done so where a like for like comparison can be made or the trend is comparable from the data. Due to different data collection requirements across different government organisations it has not always been possible to make a direct

comparison and some offences or areas within the data may be collecting similar, but not exact matches<sup>[footnote 13]</sup>.

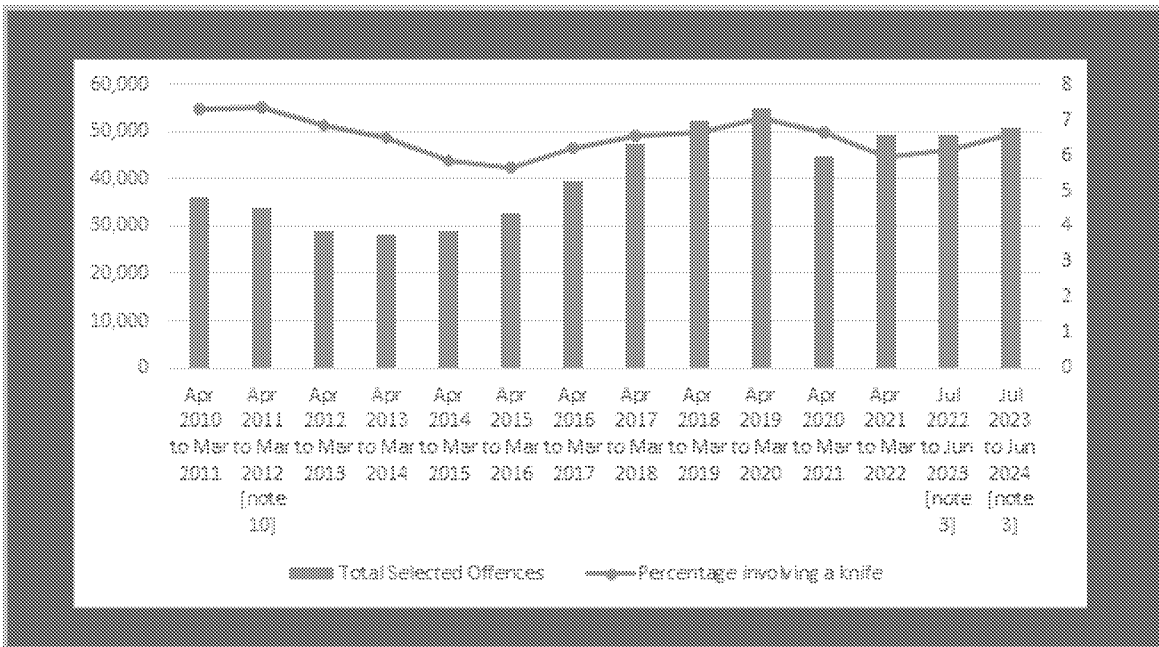
This report does not attempt to create a comprehensive analysis of research in all cases of online sales or government action and should be contextualised within the wider evidence base. This report should be read with the recommendations which derive from the findings in this report.

## 7 Knives and the law

### 7.1 Reporting and recording offences of knife enabled crime

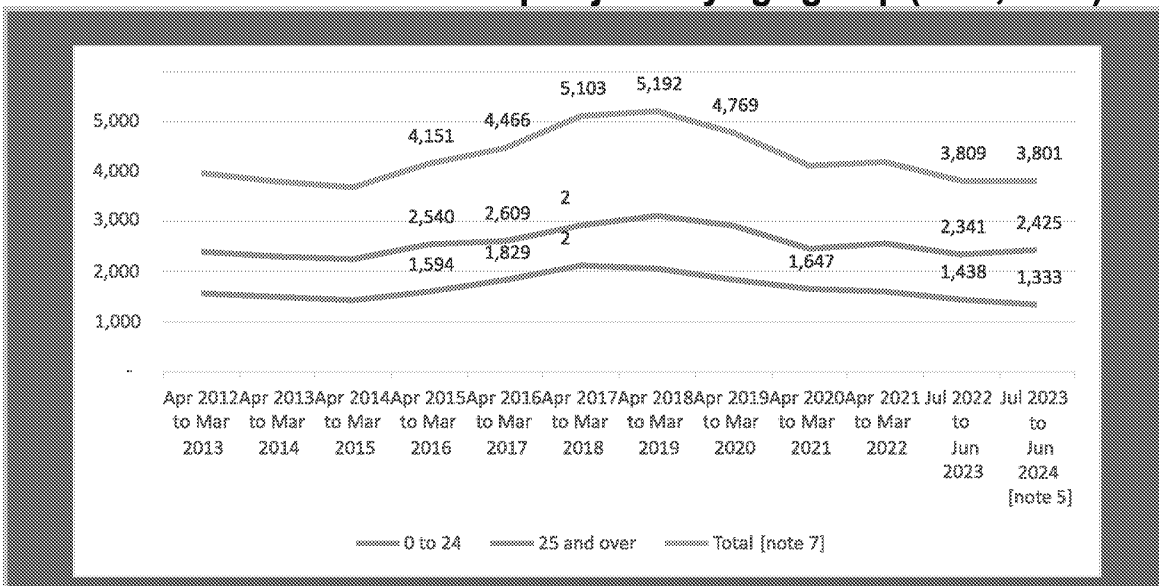
The recording of knife crime and knife enabled offences is the responsibility of law enforcement and the offences included go well beyond what appears on the ONS and other data sources<sup>[footnote 14]</sup> In order to understand the public perception of knife crime as informed by media sources, it is important to know that the Annual Data Requirement (ADR) for the collection of Offences involving Knives or Sharp Instruments includes only selected offences with specific sharp or bladed instruments<sup>[footnote 15]</sup>. The number of offences<sup>[footnote 16]</sup> where knives were used is still low in comparison to the total number of selected offences. Despite the percentage of offences involving a knife or sharp instrument remaining stable, the volume of knife offences has risen and stayed at an increased rate since around 2016. The chart below shows the total selected knife crime offences (left axis) against the percentage volume involving a knife (right axis).

**Figure 1: Number of Knife and sharp instrument offences recorded by the police for selected offences, and the total percentages of these selected categories. (ONS, 2024)**



Each knife offence will have a number of potential outcomes, however there is no reporting of criminal justice outcomes specifically against knife enabled offences and reports per offence without breaking down into knife enabled offences and other weapons categories. A representation of serious injuries caused by knives could be drawn from NHS data on hospital admissions. The data suggests that serious injuries caused by knives was on the rise before the Coronavirus pandemic with a high of 5,192 knife injury related hospital admissions between April 2018 and March 2019, however it has settled back to volumes experienced in 2014 following the lift on restrictions at 3,801 admissions between July 2023 and June 2024.

**Figure 2: Number of hospital admissions in NHS hospitals in England and Wales for assault with sharp objects by age group (ONS, 2024)**



This data, for specific offences is separated from knife possession and supply offences which, in most occasions will be generated by law

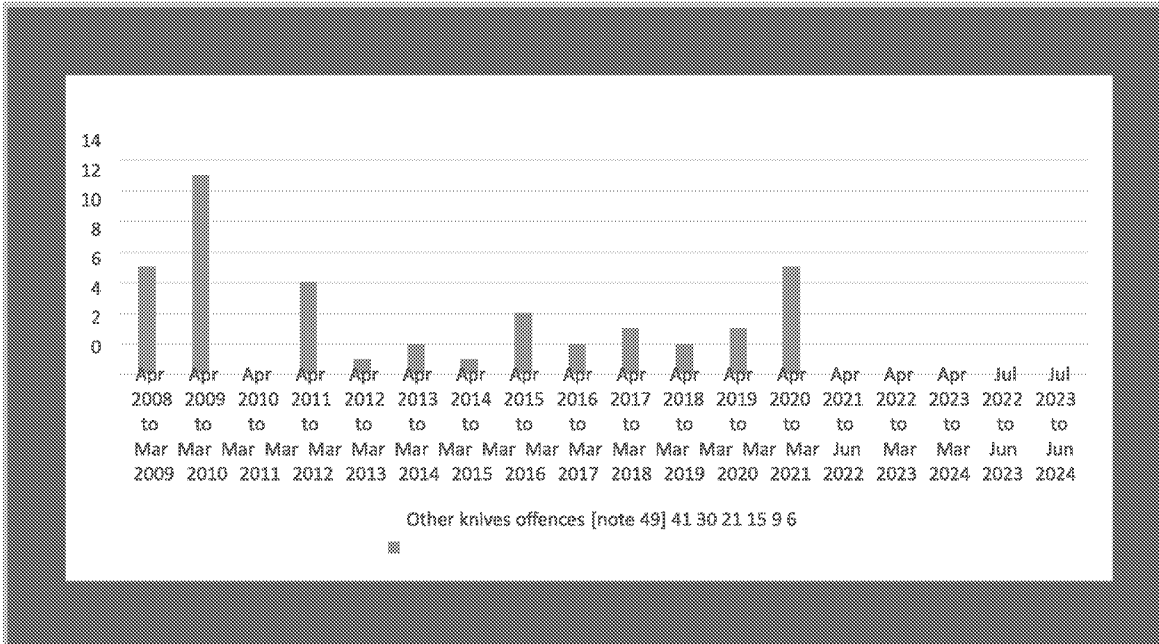
enforcement or partner activity. There are specific offences relating to the possession of knives in public, which work with other offences particularly relevant to the subject of this report.

In terms of the recording of offences particularly relevant to online sales, the primary legislation falls under Section 1 Knives Act 1997 and Section 141 Criminal Justice Act 1988 which covers the unlawful marketing of knives and the manufacture, supply, importation and possession of prohibited weapons. Other knife offences, generally covering marketing offences have not been recorded on the ONS in isolation since 2021, albeit records before then show few offences were recorded by police. From March 2021 these offences were grouped with firearms and other marketing and licensing style offences.

The investigation into the possession of prohibited weapons is recorded on the ONS as a broader category of 'Possession of other weapons'. There is no detail within that category that allows the extrapolation of offences relating to prohibited knives. There has been a rise in the number of crimes recorded under this category since 2021 which may correspond with the enactment of the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 legislation. This legislation however, is much wider than knives alone and encompasses many now prohibited weapons outside of knives and bladed articles.

**Figure 3: Number of other knives offences (ONS, 2024)**

**Other knives offences**



\*No data after 2021 due to a change in reporting methodology.

One category that does record the types of knives used in incidents is homicide. This change was made as a result of discussions around strengthening the provisions against 'Zombie style' knives following the introduction of legislation under the OWA 2019. It was discovered that there

were issues with the classification of knives by police officers, who are not knife experts and deal with many cases where the knife used in incidents was not recovered or reported by a third party. The only clear data set that ensured a more accurate collection of data was homicide and as such the Crimsec7 reporting criteria was changed to include the type of weapon in knife enabled homicides.

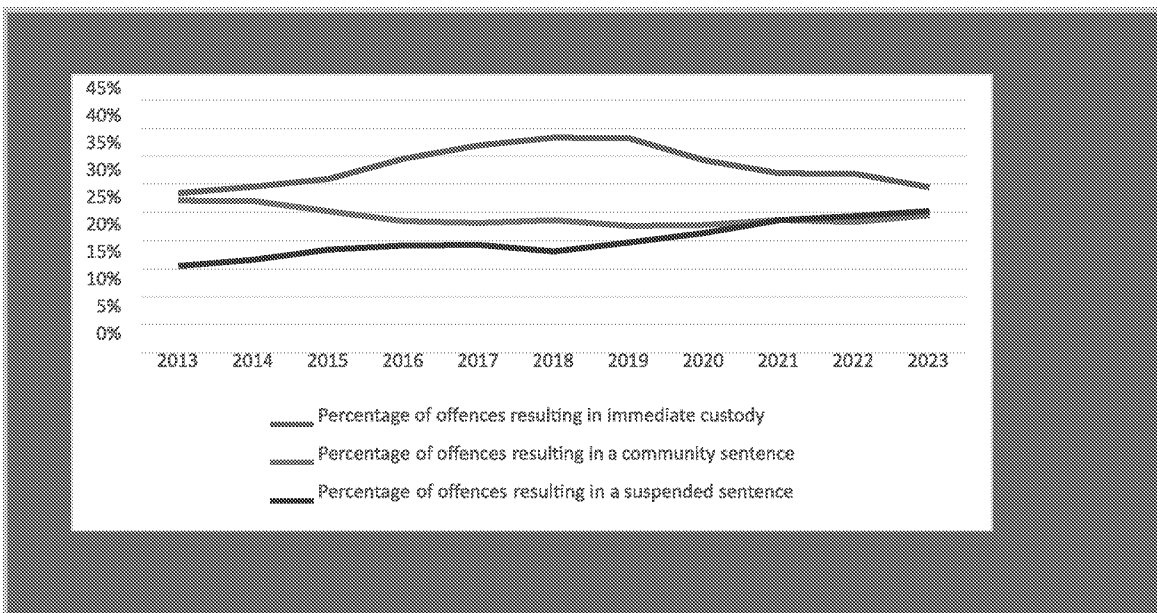
In the latest homicide report (year ending March 2023) there were 590 homicides in total, 244 (41%) of those homicides are recorded with the method of killing as a sharp instrument. Of those where the knife is known (192), 53% of offences were committed with a kitchen knife. This figure takes into account all homicides including domestic homicides where anecdotally the number of knives sourced from the kitchen is higher than other categories. The data for the types of knives however, does not distinguish between the location and categories of offence.

**Figure 4: Knives and sharp implements used in homicides, year ending (ONS, 2024)**

Type of weapon	Percentage
Axe	1
Prohibited weapon, lock knife, machete, zombie knife	22
Kitchen knife	53
Sword	2
Other knife [note 27]	19
Other sharp instrument	3

Without freedom of information requests to each force, the outcomes of investigations into the possession and the use of knives in violence cannot be measured. The Ministry of Justice do publish data containing the disposals in relation to knife and offensive weapons offences (possession and marketing offences). There is no breakdown of individual offences within these categories, however using the broader knife and offensive weapons category shows no real change in the percentage of offences resulting in immediate custodial sentences. Roughly one third of those found guilty of an offence under this category receive an immediate custodial sentence rather than another outcome as detailed below.

**Figure 5: Percentage of knife offences resulting in different criminal justice outcomes.**



\*The remaining offences received no judicial outcome (e.g. Acquitted, no further action)

From the surveys sent out and discussions with the voluntary and charity sector, few believe that tougher sentencing on knife carrying will reduce those offences. Many believe the cause for carrying a knife is for self-protection, so more feel that engagement and prevention is preferable response. Many in this sector believe there should be increased penalties for illegal knife sales which supports a view that more legislative focus should be placed on the suppliers of knives than those carrying them. The forthcoming Crime and Policing Bill will be seeking some aggravated possession offences, which law enforcement does believe is necessary.

Despite a lack of available data relating to the types of knives used in offences, there is research published which points to the reasons why some knives are sourced (hunting, combat and 'zombie style' machetes) over more readily available knives such as kitchen knives. The Knife Crime Problem Solving Guide published by the College of Policing provides guidance on how the types of knives are selected for criminal use through the four 'A's principle (College of Policing, 2021). This research (based on data from the Metropolitan Police) shows how availability, attractiveness, affordability (the associated financial and punitive cost) and accessibility do not evenly influence selection. It suggests that the attractiveness of knives outweigh the other factors when looking at violent crime i.e. the bigger and more frightening the knife looks, the more chance of it being carried and used.

There has not been a focus on diving into the detail around knife enabled data. Best practice can be seen in the collection of data relating to homicide, where the investigation is generally better resourced and more detailed than in other offences. There is still progress to be made in distinguishing the knives used in predominantly street violence and offences

outside of the home. Challenges include identification of knives not recovered and colloquial use of terminology which adds to the complexity of the knife crime picture.

As part of this review, the CPS was approached and asked to complete a survey. Prosecutors from a wide range of regions contributed and many of those said it is very common that cases involve knife crime in their region. Although anecdotal, answers around the knife crime cases they have dealt with gave an insight into some of the issues around data collection. Many of the answers to the types of knives involved in cases were that they did not know the type of knife, although some of the participants frequently see zombie style knives and machetes in their cases. The survey does indicate that the frequency of these knives in cases is more widespread across the regions than kitchen knives. The number of answers where they did not know the type of knife shows a lack of focus into the type of knife used as part of the investigation. In most cases, the evidential threshold is the same no matter the type of knife, so as part of the investigation this information would be irrelevant. It may only be relevant as an aggravating factor as part of sentencing or defences around the carriage of a particular knife.

Many of the CPS respondents feel that regulatory changes are needed to strengthen the position on online knife sales, with mandatory age verification and stricter protocols at the point of sale and delivery, as well as restrictions on the types of knives available online cited as the top priority for change.

There were broader issues identified to enhance the CPS response, focussing on a number of issues.

**Figure 6: Key enhancements recommended through the CPS surveys**  
**Would any of the following knowledge/skills helps in prosecutions related to online knife sales?**

<b>Knowledge/skills</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Understanding online sales and e-commerce platforms	82.4
Digital forensics and online transaction tracing	70.6
Legal issues concerning cross-border transactions	70.6
Collaboration with law enforcement on knife sale investigations	64.7
Nothing further required	17.6

With firearms related crime, the identification of guns is forensically regulated. This ensures extra governance over the identification of seized

guns or guns used in crime through ammunition or casings. Whilst the forensic regulation of knives is not preferable to most forces or experts, there are benefits around the way data collection is structured for firearms:

1. The Crimsec 30 (reporting criteria) set out by ONS includes the collection of the types of guns used in crime. With these criteria police forces are obliged to collect data on the types of weapons used in offences.
2. The National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NABIS) coordinates the collection and dissemination of intelligence to UK forces for firearms crime, including trends, emerging threats, learning and best practice.

The reason the collection of data is important in online knife sales is that action against retailers and importers, and changes in policy or legislation can only strongly be influenced by the collection and presentation of data relating to key issues. There are opportunities to gain more intelligence through both government and other sources, however greater coordination and incentives are required for this to happen.

### **Recommendation**

Improved data recording across Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice – An evidence based problem solving approach can only be achieved by having the right data available as part of the scanning and analysis process. Only by changes in the national data reporting criteria would the obligation be made for those involved in collecting the information. Key data missing for a fuller understanding of the origin of knives and the use of legislation effective against online knife retailers is –

- a. The types of knives used in offences.
- b. The number of recorded offences for sales, marketing and prohibited weapon offences.
- c. The criminal justice outcomes for sales, marketing and prohibited weapon offences.

## **7.2 Legislation guiding the principles of online sales**

Current legislation governing knife sales, including the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Section 141) and the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA), provides a foundation for regulating sales. However, there are concerns amongst the voluntary sector and law enforcement that the provisions do not provide adequate cover or sentencing around the importation, sale and delivery of knives.

The legislation can be broken down into the following areas:

1. Criminal legislation - Laws designed to prevent and enforce against illegal activities surrounding the sale, possession and marketing of knives. These includes statutes like the Offensive Weapons act and the Knives Act.
2. Consumer and business regulation – These laws ensure that businesses operate within legal boundaries when selling and delivering knives, focussing on product descriptions, age restriction compliance and marketing standards.
3. Importation and customs legislation – Legislation aimed at controlling the entry of prohibited knives into the UK. These laws enable HMRC to determine which goods are able to be imported, and UK Border Force to intercept illegal items.
4. Civil law and liability – This type of legislation is focussed on the protection of individuals and holding businesses to account. These generally support the public to bring action against those causing harm through illegal sales or non-compliance.

Neither knife retailers nor knife owners require registration or licensing. Unlike the sale of firearms and alcohol, the sale of knives can be conducted by anyone, whether they are part of a business or are acting as a private individual. Unlike the purchase of knives, there is no age restriction on the selling of knives. Simple principles relate to the sale of knives, with criminal legislation offences offered under the Offensive Weapons Act 2019, Knives Act 1997 and Criminal Justice Act 1988.

Although there are more stringent offences relating to the possession of pointed and bladed articles in public, this report focuses on the offences relating the prohibition, sale and marketing of knives.

- **Offensive Weapons Act 2019:** Prohibits the manufacture, importation, sale and possession (including in private) of certain bladed weapons. Also mandates the age verification at the point of sale and criminalises a failure to adhere to packaging and delivery regulations. (Summary only offences)
- **Knives Act 1997:** The knives act focusses on offences around the unlawful marketing of knives, particularly those that are advertised for combat. It also places restrictions on displays that glamorise knives. (Either way offences)
- **Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Section 141):** Prohibits the manufacture, sale, importation and possession of certain dangerous weapons including some knives. (Summary only offences)
- **Restriction of Offensive Weapons Act 1959 (Section 1):** Makes it an offence to manufacture, import, sell or hire, offer to sell or have in their possession a flick knife or other defined dangerous weapon.

The criminal offences attached to online sales and prohibited weapons assist law enforcement in taking action against those seeking to supply dangerous weapons, particularly in the grey market. They are however limited in their application due to both the scope of the legislation and investigative needs.

**Key issues for law enforcement:**

1. The powers granted to police when investigating summary only offences do not provide a full range of tactics, for instance powers of entry.
2. Investigation of grey market sales often requires the covert investigatory powers authority to operate in specified online spaces. If age verification was to be checked to identify offences, this would require undercover authorities.
3. The types of knives that are prohibited are vast and diverse. An in-depth knowledge is required to correctly identify prohibited weapons. This remains difficult to obtain for multi-disciplinary officers.

This is also reflected in the disparity of sentencing when compared to other offences involving supply. Possession of a prohibited knife by a child in the street can draw sentences up to four years imprisonment whereas the sale of hundreds of knives to children would be met with a maximum sentence of 12 months imprisonment. This is unlike other offences, such as drugs where it is recognised that the suppliers are culpable for the availability and use, therefore drawing higher sentence.

When considering surveys completed by law enforcement, 57% of respondents said they didn't know, didn't investigate or have never encountered a knife involved in a crime that has been purchased online. 51% of respondents also said that they didn't know which online platforms are commonly used for knife purchases. Both of these figures point towards investigation into the availability of knives and their origin as lesser priorities, whilst drug supply always gets dealt with more seriously than simple possession offences.

A key issue for law enforcement with controlling online sales is a lack of overall regulation. Comments suggest the ability to buy knives from abroad and difficulties in policing online, including a lack of intelligence gained from online platforms are particular issues. This suggests that law enforcement would support a greater ability to investigate knife crime online but would require the power to request and obtain data lawfully from both UK and international platforms. Many of respondents said that current legislation is not sufficient, with greater sharing of information key to assisting law enforcement in the investigation of these offences.

Of note, a point which covers both the legislation identifying offences and investigating online is the lack of specific training in-force, related to online knife sales. Only one participant of the survey said there has been specific training delivered and wider than that, only one force is using an online

investigation capability to identify grey market sellers. Given the number of police forces, profile and priorities, this will always be a challenge that could be overcome through better central coordination for online sales and referrals.

Similarly, the CPS survey revealed that 82% of respondents had not dealt with a case that they knew involved knives purchased online. 47% percent of people who responded said there are not effective laws in addressing the sale of knives through online platforms.

The offences under the offensive weapons act do give UKBF specific powers to intercept and seize prohibited weapons at the border. If legislation is complied with, knives should be identifiable as 'age restricted products' and therefore the flow of prohibited weapons into the country should not be possible. Where packages have been intercepted and information passed to law enforcement, there is very little feedback on the result and as such the motivation to find and report these offences can be diminished.

Engagement with courier services throughout this review has identified key issues with legislation requiring the age to be verified on delivery. On many occasions, couriers report that where there is a correctly labelled item, the delivery operative is instructed to carry out the age verification process on delivery. One of the larger delivery companies stated they paused the transit and delivery of knives whilst a system was introduced that was compliant with the conditions under the OWA. However, the issues arise during the identification of knives and bladed articles being shipped through the post. A simple, and relatively low risk method would be to incorrectly label your goods, therefore obfuscating the identity of the knife through packaging. Without an x-ray scan conducted on every package, it is unlikely that knives will be identified if not labelled correctly.

The National Protective Security Authority (NPSA) offers guidance on in-transit mail screening (NPSA, 2023) however it is unclear following consultation and surveys with these companies to what extent they conduct screening. It is certainly the case that the process of screening is not standardised across the sector and the focus remains on terrorism threats.

Trading Standards have a key role in the identification of retailers not meeting the requirements of age verification, primarily through test purchase. Whilst in the physical world, test purchase can be completed by working with young people, as they enter a store to try and buy age restricted products, the online space presents far more challenges when it comes to delivery addresses and ID verification. This is particularly relevant when looking at couriers' obligations as testing these cannot always be easily achieved and there is a reliance on the company's own compliance mechanisms.

Local Authority Trading Standards will advise local businesses on legal responsibilities and have carried out extensive test purchase on premises

and online - very few of businesses tested did not meet the legal requirements. Some areas may provide training and run 'Responsible Retailer Schemes' supported by a central resource, known as the business companion which is available free online. For premises-based work, there is a current issue with traders who hide details of ownership (chains of sub-leases on premises and moving payment machines around internally so that payment traces are complicated) i.e. using a virtual office away from the retail premises or warehouse. One retailer was using a London address whilst operating primarily out of a small coastal town, moving the registered address regularly. This potentially frustrates any law enforcement processes. Tracking these issues in an online space, which include international sellers may be even more complex.

Trading standards have asked for clearer personal liability for Directors. For example, one respondent who had prosecuted the sale of an axe to a 14-year-old, explained that as the legislation includes no offence for consent/connivance of the Director who was culpable in this case, they could only take action against the Limited Company. Adding to this are the issues with time limits on prosecutions caused by their summary only nature. Where an offence has been identified, the time limit for prosecution is just six months.

There are gaps in legislation which allow for the sale of knives. It is important to note that a sale of a knife is not directly associated with the facilitation of a criminal offence. Knives are, in the main, tools which are used for cooking, gardening and many other purposes. The Knives Act 1997 prohibits the marketing of knives where it glamorises them or insinuates that they can be used for combat.

The starting point for knife retailers is that they sell knives complying with this legislation and in a way that markets them for legitimate use.

The challenge for any regulatory body, whether that is Trading Standards, Law Enforcement or Ofcom, is that there is no licensing or registration requirement for knife retailers, making the enforcement of the Knives Act and OWA particularly difficult. There is no legislation covering the unauthorised sale of knives and therefore the opportunity to take action by any law enforcement or supporting agency is limited.

In comparison, when looking at the restrictions on the sale of firearms, the market is regulated and enforcement action can be taken against those who are not compliant with the regulations. It is recognised that the use of firearms is far more limited (sports, hunting and land management) but disparity of regulation around sales could be a factor influencing the availability of knives.

To sell a firearm in the UK, you must be a registered firearms dealer (RFD). To become an RFD, a process is undertaken where an application is submitted to government containing their details, references and health

questionnaire. This is then processed by the local police firearms licensing team, who assess the premises, security and storage facilities as well as the stock managers. Once licensed, they must keep a register of sales which can then be inspected by law enforcement. The licensing process does come at a cost to the licensee or retailer which funds the running of the police firearms licensing departments that are responsible for the inspections and checks during the process and maintenance of those licenses.

None of these provisions are currently available to use in the sale of knives in England and Wales and as recognised, the use of knives is far broader than firearms. If regulations were to be introduced, the types of knives in scope will have to be defined and which parts of other licensing schemes it would be appropriate to adopt. Whilst a definition will be agreed, it should include kitchen knives and all retailers - online in the first instance with a commitment to explore if traditional 'bricks & mortar' shops should also be included in the future. It would also need to address the issue of overseas sales into the UK, as it is currently possible to buy knives from retailers that are not in the UK.

In Scotland there is already a licensing scheme for dealers in knives not designed for domestic use. This puts an onus on the retailer to obtain a license if:

1. They are selling, lending, hiring, giving or offering and exposing articles for sale or hire.
2. The physical premises is in Scotland, or;
3. The place where the order is taken is in Scotland, or;
4. The order is itself taken outside Scotland but the goods are dispatched from within Scotland.

In these cases, the Scottish government is responsible for the issue of the license and it is valid within the particular council area for which it is issued. It requires sales records to be kept for three years and the penalty for selling these knives without a license could be imprisoned for up to two years. There are gaps which exist in the legislation, primarily around the enforcement of the provisions outside of Scotland. Many knife retailers exist across the world and without adequate provisions to prevent the importation of knives, the enforcement of a licensing scheme beyond the borders becomes challenging.

If registration or licensing is more widely used in the UK this would need to be a key consideration of the implementation. Some knife retailers have already suggested in the surveys that they are considering, or already have relocated their business outside the UK but still supply knives to a UK market.

There is already evidence of a minority registered online retailer owners having previous convictions for violent offences. This is considered to be wholly inappropriate when selling knives to others and is certainly something that works well where firearms dealers are concerned and is tried and tested.

An additional aspect is tackling those who sell knives through a grey market or purchase for their own use. Evidence suggests that many are involved in poly-criminality and have ruthless disregard to whom they sell or their involvement in violent offences. The existing firearms legislation is helpful from a conceptual point of view. What is clear is that having more robust action against those that have a propensity for violence and/or found in possession of knives is crucial and remains an important aspect of law enforcement and protecting the public. They (or anyone on their behalf) should not be able to purchase a relevant knife and with recommendations relating to an overall registration requirement, along with more effective border notification response, would aid law enforcement in both identifying risk and safeguarding individuals.

### **7.3 The Online Safety Act**

The Online Safety Act (OSA) passed into law in October 2023 and introduced measures to combat both illegal and harmful content online. One aspect of the act is designed as a tool to enable Ofcom to take action when regulating user to user (U2U) platforms when they facilitate 'in scope' offences. The OSA covers many areas of criminal and harmful activity including offensive weapons, creating a duty for U2U platforms to tackle this material. Service providers are required to complete their illegal harms risk assessments with intention that they will have to take steps to ensure there are effective measures in place later this year.

There are two areas that this crosses over into online sales in the U2U environment. Online marketplaces and social media which, in the main, have issues with sales in the grey market.

Online marketplaces have long been the focus around online knife sales, with some such as EBay banning the sale of knives entirely in the UK on their platform. These platforms act as the intermediaries between buyers and sellers and may be in scope of the act depending on the extent of interaction. More widely, there are age restrictions in place on these platforms at various levels, but the items in scope within the OSA are prohibited knives and knives marketed for combat, contrary to the OWA, Criminal Justice Act and Knives Act offences.<sup>[footnote 17]</sup>

Where the sale of knives is available on these platforms, there is now a duty that has been created for marketplaces caught by the act to go beyond

previous requirements to detect, remove and prevent listings that violate UK law.

In theory, prohibited knives such as zombie style knives and disguised blades, which are outlawed under the OWA should not be appearing on these platforms. In reality, the mislabelling of items and omission of keywords can circumvent any system relying on product listings and descriptions to enforce UK law or platform policy. Examples of this include the labelling of items as props, toys or of materials that are present but do not constitute the makeup of the blade.

The OSA creates additional responsibilities for platforms to have proportionate systems and processes to identify illegal content from information communicated publicly.

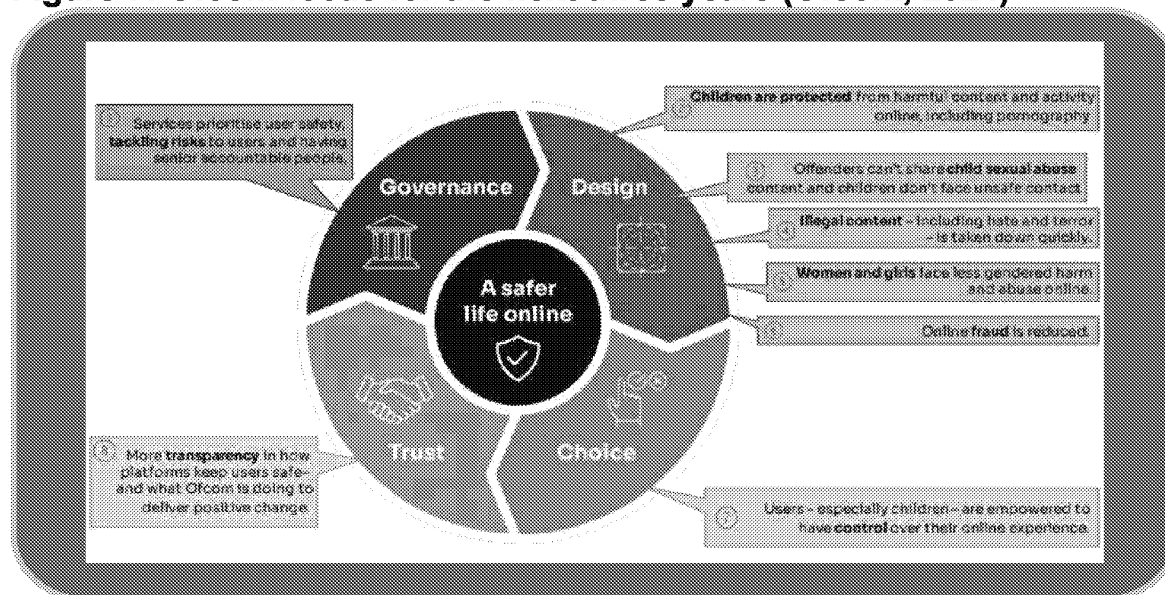
The grey market sellers, who exploit social media to sell knives present a more complex issue. These platforms do not directly cause the sale of knives but create an environment where knives can be sold discreetly without the processes of age verification available. The sellers on these platforms generally do not overtly claim to sell knives but operate with inferred references to sales.

To advertise the knives they may use videos, hashtags or vague captions such as “DM for details” or “get them before they’re gone” to avoid detection. Platforms are obligated under the OSA to tackle illegal content, including the sale of prohibited knives online and therefore remove such posts from their platforms. The technology required to do this needs to become increasingly sophisticated to monitor not only the content of the post including image and text recognition but also an understanding of the context in which the text or image is placed.

The OSA seeks to provide additional tools that incentivise platforms to take action against social media platforms but operates against thematic issues rather than individual posts. When systemic issues are identified and the platform cannot demonstrate a proportionate remedy exists to address it, Ofcom have the power to take action against organisations which, if not dealt with can a fine of up to 10% of their global revenue or £18m. <sup>[footnote 18]</sup> The identification system however, largely relies on a process where individuals or law enforcement flag illegal or harmful content to the platforms and if they do not take action, this can be reported to Ofcom In summary, the OSA focusses on systemic failures rather than individual content, but does offer strong sanctions when compliance is not met.

As part of the review, Ofcom were consulted and provided an input on their approach to enforcement of the OSA and what they are working on to ensure the safety of those in the UK using U2U services. They have published their focus over the next three years with their eight targets for immediate action.

**Figure 7: Ofcom focus for the next three years (Ofcom, 2024)**



Ofcom have been coordinating with online services and prior to the introduction of the illegal harms codes of practice, they already had over twenty of the highest risk services committing to working with Ofcom to allow them to understand, assess and improve their measures. The OSA provides a staged introduction of powers including:

- **Illegal content risk assessments:** between mid-December 2024 to mid-March 2025, services must complete their illegal content risk assessments.
- **Children's access assessments:** between January and April 2025, they must complete their children's access assessments.
- **Children's risk assessments:** it is expected that those services likely to be accessed by children must complete their children's risk assessments between April and July 2025.
- **Age assurance:** highly effective age assurance duties for porn providers will be enforceable once the government commences Part 5 of the Act, which has commenced as of January 2025.
- **Codes:** it is expected that the Illegal Harms and Protection of Children Codes of Practice will be enforceable around March and July 2025 respectively.
- **Transparency:** draft transparency notices to categorised services will start to be issued soon after publishing the categorisation register in the summer of 2025.

Not all of these categories cross over into knife crime and there are gaps in this legislation that allow for the sale of knives on the grey market if the sales are not illegal (contrary to the Knives Act 1997, Criminal Justice Act 1988 or OWA).

In terms of identifying, assessing and dealing with individual posts, users and pieces of content, the OSA is not designed to prioritise the investigation of these offences, rather, as already stated, platforms are incentivised to ensure their systems and processes meet the expectations set by government. Police forces are ill equipped to deal with the identification of these offences, relying on a small number of officers working in force to proactively capture and investigate these offences. The challenge then comes with identifying the user, often the priority for law enforcement.

For any legal provision to work, it must adequately support current legislation and the investigative priorities to identify and prosecute offenders. If one provision inhibits the other, either platforms could be left unchecked of offenders unidentified and continuing to offend.

The OSA has had an impact on platforms with many stating that they are having to make changes to the way they moderate in order to comply with the regulations. The policies for many platforms are global or regional and not specifically nuanced to the countries that they are operating in. For example, a European policy including the UK could have conflict in laws around certain types of knives. One platform suggested that the OSA could put users in a stronger position than they previously were on borderline policy issues that would not be covered under the OSA, however this would depend on the policies within the particular platform.

Some platforms mentioned that there has been an unhelpful approach to legislation with multiple pieces addressing the same issues but offering different financial penalties. More broadly, the lack of alignment in the policies of platforms could be plugged by legislation focussing platforms on particular issues.

Following consultation with a number of online platforms, they advised that in order to provide a safe user experience, they employ a number of tools to detect and remove content that breach policy or the law. This can be anything in between fully automated, AI driven tools to manual checking and verification. These systems can be reviewed by Ofcom to ensure they are providing a proportionate response. The OSA helps to form the legislative guidelines but the tools that exist on the platforms often rely on policy to determine whether the content should be posted. Of the platforms spoken with, they all operate a global policy approach and will nuance bespoke approaches that conform to a particular country's law. Some of this content regulation will therefore require human identification and flagging to the platform rather than built in to the automated content moderation systems.

This is even more complicated in terms of knives due to the nuanced legislation around the particular features making a knife prohibited and through the way that sales can be intimated rather than overtly advertised. The aim of the OSA in part is to encourage platforms identify and restrict illegal activity on their platforms and take proportionate steps to ensure this content does not appear on their platforms.

Issues currently arise with the OSA, when content is not illegal but still harmful in terms of knife sales. There is a fine line between sales and glorification, but a sale of a legal weapon could have no consequences to platform, seller or buyer, but significant consequences to a victim of a crime.

### **Recommendations**

Knife retailer registration (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) – There is currently no registration or notification required in order to become a seller of knives. In order to close legislative loopholes and create an offence of unauthorised selling of knives, a registration scheme should be introduced for any UK business engaged in the sale of knives. Conditions for the registration may include:

1. Mandatory reporting of suspicious or bulk purchases.
2. Details of buyer to be recorded, retained and made available to UK law enforcement upon request.
3. All marketing material to display clear age verification livery.
4. Registrants will agree to Police and Trading Standards inspection and test purchasing.
5. New criminal offences of selling, offering to sell and marketing knives without registration (triable either way)
6. Unregistered selling of knives is treated more seriously than possession offences.
7. Retailers will be prohibited from the sale of 'mystery boxes' 'mystery knives' and 'reduced priced add-ons'.
8. Registered retailer must not be a prohibited person (to be defined).
9. People and premises will be subject to checks for appropriateness to store and sell knives.
10. Extends to any business selling relevant bladed items, including relevant 'bricks and mortar' retailers.

## **8 Online knife sales – methods and regulation**

### **8.1 The scope of online knife sales**

Online sales of knives can come in a number of forms in both the UK and abroad. The importation of knives is not regulated as it is with some other dangerous items such as explosives or firearms.

Throughout this section there will be three types of sales methods introduced:

1. The surface web – online knife retailers – Generally, these consist of retailers that you would find if you used a search engine to find a knife to buy. There are a number of ways that this can be facilitated.
  - a. UK based retailers – These are retailers based in the UK and generally operate by importing wholesale knives into the UK and selling them directly to customers in the UK or abroad. These can be both mass market products or more specialist collectors' items and antiques who may manufacture themselves. <sup>[footnote 19]</sup>
  - b. International retailers – Retailers from outside the UK can sell directly into the UK with limited intervention and import knives on an individual basis.
  - c. Online marketplaces – These are platforms that allow users to host online shops or sell products online either through auctions or direct purchase. They exist both in isolation and on social media platforms. (Examples include EBay and Gumtree)
2. The grey market – These sellers exist outside of the results you would find on a search engine. These are private individuals that resell goods primarily on social media. These sellers do not always operate online or solely online but also occasionally sell knives through their own networks.
3. The antique and collectors' market – Antiques and collectors' items can be sold in a number of different ways. Antiques can be any knives other than flick knives that are over 100 years old. Generally the price points are much higher than knives in the other markets.

When looking into knife sales, there is a lack of data relating to the origin of knives used in crime. Answers to the CPS survey suggest there is a lack of investigation into this aspect of knife crime with one respondent stating:

“I cannot recall a case in all the knife crime cases I have dealt with where I have had information surrounding where the knife has been purchased from”

Many of the respondents claim never dealt with a case involving online knife sales, suggesting that both the origin of the knife and the online sales aspect aren't addressed.

The law enforcement survey featured responses similar to that of the CPS. Some of the responses suggest they don't know, or haven't investigated cases where the knives had been investigated online. A similar number of

responses suggest they see knives sold in online purchases used in crime several times a year intimating there is some investigation in the origin of these knives. Many suggest that this isn't investigated or this detail isn't available. Only a few respondents answered either 'yes' or 'no' to the question "Have you faced obstacles in prosecuting sellers of knives through online platforms", many answered 'not prosecuted' which suggests there are difficulties when investigating these offences.

Although the antique market is not something that contributes largely to knives used in criminal offences, it is worth considering alongside the other markets, as it can create a pool of widely available, dangerous knives that have been manufactured for combat, for example a World War 1 combat knife. Knife sales can occur in many forms and using many payment methods, so in each of the below categories the opportunities will be explored for investigation and loopholes which can be addressed.

## **8.2 The Surface Web – Online Knife Retailers**

Determining the number of online knife retailers that operate in the UK can be difficult, as there is no licence or regulation required to sell knives.

During an online sales investigation that took place in 2023, Volunteer (Special) Constables were tasked with identifying online retailers available in the UK that were selling knives other than kitchen knives, the types of knives that they sold and the price points of those types of knives. During this they identified 60 retailers, most UK based stocking a variety of machetes and lock knives.

Simple searches on the largest search engines of "knife for sale" immediately returns links to websites stocking large and dangerous knives other than kitchen knives as some of their top results. Rather than advising on suitable age policies and UK laws, one search engine made a suggestion of a further search query "Which type of knife is more compact and convenient for carrying around", an activity which is prohibited in the UK but for a small selection of exemptions. This detail can be based on artificial intelligence generating responses based on user input. It may also take into account previous searches or internet history which may point towards certain suggestions over others. More specific searches were conducted on major search engines including particular knife features which returned results recommending sales of prohibited knives.

**Figure 8: Search engine results of the search "knife for sale"**

ProCook  
<https://www.procook.co.uk/> - knives -  
**Essential Kitchen Knives - Save Up to 50% Today - Fast Delivery**  
 (various Range of Kitchen Knives, Chef, Santoku, Filleting & Carving Knives, Luxe Piece  
 Guarantee, Buy Today!)

Western Knife Sets Kitchen Knives Japanese Kitchen Knives Knife Blocks Water | >

BA Blades  
<https://www.blades.co.uk/>  
**Blades.co.uk - Your trusted specialist retailer of knives & tools**  
 Blades.co.uk is your trusted specialist retailer of knives, tool pens and other blades articles ...  
 Shop by Brand About Us  
 Blog

Knifeworldhouse  
<https://www.knifeworldhouse.co.uk/>  
**Knifeworldhouse | Hunting Knives | Pocket Knives | Swords**  
 UK legal pocket knives, hunting knives, folding knives, axes and more at unbeatable prices ...  
 Hunting Knives Pocket & Lock Knives Age Restrictions About Us Knives UK 00 >

Videos of Knife For Sale:  
[bing.com](https://www.bing.com/videos) + videos



Best Knife Brand? Benchmade, Buck, Zero Tolerance,  
 Benchmade, Cold Steel, Norelco, SOG, CRKT, Ontario  
 3.5K views · 5 Feb 2020  
 YouTube · Project Fame



A knife is a hand or weapon with a cutting edge or blades, usually attached to a handle or hilt. One of the earliest tools used by humans, knives appeared at least 2.5 million years ago in the ...  
 Wikipedia

Which type of knife is more compact and convenient for carrying around?

- A. Fixed blade knife
- B. Folding knife
- C. Swiss Army knife
- D. EDC knife

In consultation, major search engines stated that they operate a policy to make them compliant with provisions under UK legislation. This includes restrictions around certain weapons and the marketing of knives for combat.

In fact, it is as simple to buy a knife online as it is many other items, requiring the retailers to age verify purchasers and ensure age verification on delivery, but the wording of the legislation is not prescriptive in terms of this process and there are no minimum standards. It is therefore possible to buy a knife in minutes with limited assurance given that the buyer is genuinely over 18 or it is not being bought for facilitation of a crime.

Online research identified over 25 online retailers that appear to be based in China or the United States of America that suggest they ship to the UK. Whilst the UK has strong knife legislation; this differs to other parts of the world where the range of legal and available knives is much wider. As a result, overseas territories appear less likely to restrict exports into the UK on the basis that the package is not dangerous (such as explosive material). The niche UK legislation regarding bladed items is likely not well known to overseas sellers but equally, evidence was found that some retailers will intentionally circumvent and mislabel items entering the UK to prevent intervention.

Figure 10 indicates the retailer has no concerns with customs and figure 11 shows an international retailer showing availability to ship to the UK and how it circumvents detection on the UK border.

In this case it refers to a 'fruit knife' but this could easily be amended to 'cosplay' or 'tool'. This is covered in greater detail in the importation section

of this report.

**Figure 9: Screenshot of website indicating “no worries for customs” (this website sells items prohibited in the UK)**



**Figure 10: Screenshot of shipping policy for one overseas based website openly stating they will mislabel items**



In January 2025 a package from China was seized by UK Border Force containing prohibited CS spray. Within the package was a note directing the buyer to a number of other overseas weapons websites.

### **Figure 11: Note to buyer intercepted in a package containing CS spray**

My bro,  
Cheers,Discovery our site you may interest in:  
<https://edcweapon.co.uk> EDC TOOL  
<https://defensesweapon.com> brass knuckle baion stun gun  
<https://luckywithme.com> Lucky with me,purchase Lucky jewelry  
<https://bitchcheap.com> all bitch cheap goods  
<https://fiomeknife.com> benchmade microtech Knives

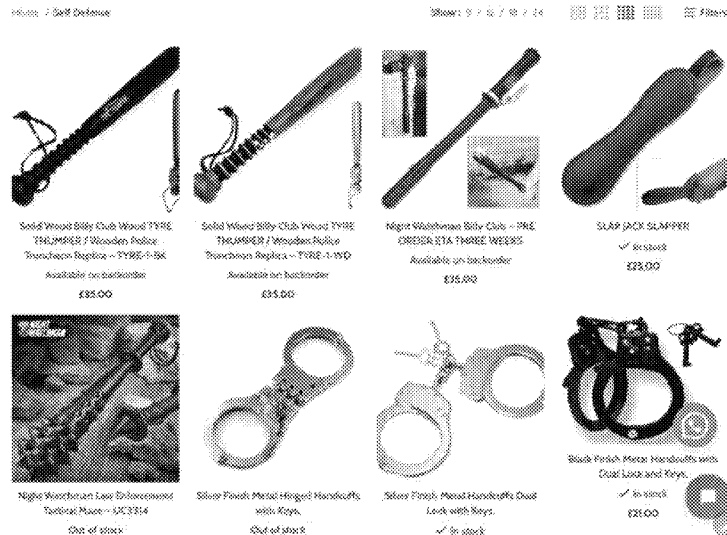
This indicates that there is cross advertisement of retailers engaged in the sale of prohibited weapons from abroad to a UK market.

## **8.3 Online retailers – direct sales and online marketplaces**

Focussing on the direct sale of knives, these are not retailers that generally use other platforms such as online marketplaces to sell knives, but operate by running their own web based shop fronts. It is rare to find any listings that contravene UK legislation in terms of the Knives Act marketing offences with many choosing to omit words associated with combat from their websites.

Some websites do still exist using words such as “weapon” and “self-defence”. Although not all of the products are knives under these categories, these websites market items built specifically for combat, many of these could not be carried legally in public as would be classed as ‘made’ offensive weapons. It is clear (in figure 13) that many of these are not specific martial arts tools.

### **Figure 12: Product listings offering self defence tools**



The Knives Act 1997 prohibits marketing knives for combat and therefore it is questionable whether it would be lawful to market any knife or other item as a weapon. The definition of weapon is given as “an object such as a knife, gun, bomb, etc. that is used for fighting or attacking somebody” (oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, 2025). It could be considered in this context that any knife listed by a retailer marketing themselves as a weapons retailer could be in contravention of the legislation.

Section 1 of the Knives Act is a challenging piece of legislation requiring detailed knowledge in some cases. The absence of detailed case law assists in creating difficulties in understanding how to correctly use it. CPS have alluded to the need for a subject matter expert on the subject.

It is rare to find UK retailers that stock prohibited knives. The changing legislation has forced companies to review their policies and some websites have deliberately labelled knives that have now become illegal under changes to legislation in September 2024 as unavailable. It is more common however, to find prohibited items listed on websites who operate overseas but purport to be UK businesses. An example of this was discovered during a BBC investigation into the sale of prohibited knives.

**Figure 13: BBC Investigation into Zombie knives (bbc.co.uk, 2024)**

## Zombie knives still for sale online despite ban, BBC finds



BBC's Money's Dan Johnson holding one of the purchased knives

Dan Johnson & Sophie Woodcock

BBC News

When looking at the price points of the knives, there were two categories considered.

1. The lowest price identified for a knife that would be illegal in public.
2. The lowest price identified for a machete with a 10inch blade or above.

Within both of these categories there were a small number of websites selling premium items listed over £100 and in the case of category one, one lowest priced knife was £500. This results in the mean average of both of these categories is £30, with only one pence difference between the two.

The lowest price a machete of over 10 inches could be purchased for was £7.13 with most ranging between £20-£40. Some knife sellers also offer bonus boxes and extra knives with bulk purchases. Often these are surprise items which could come from anything in stock but generally may be returned items or end of line stock.

### Figure 14: Mystery knife box promotion

## £10 Mystery Knife Box – Lucky Dip

Home / Special Offers / £10 Mystery Knife Box – Lucky Dip



★★★★★

(81 customer reviews)

If you like surprises then grab a mystery box from

£10.00

Out of stock

Join Waiting List

SKU: 10MB Categories: Best Sellers, Pocket & Lock Knives, Special Offers Tags: lock knife, lucky dip, mystery box, pocket knife, pocket knives UK

Figure 15: Advertisement for bonus knife for £0.01



Despite a wide cohort of retailers, the manufacture pool is somewhat smaller. As previously referenced, the ‘four A’s’ point to attractiveness being the overarching factor on knife possession for criminality, with certain sizes and shapes of knives more desirable. It also appears certain brands are better known and therefore sought after, with some knife manufacturers mentioned in UK music, referencing them along-side violent lyrics. One

such manufacturer is Anglo Arms which is mentioned in several music tracks:

**Block 6 x Fumez the Engineer - Plugged in Freestyle:**

“Swingin’ my Anglo Arms (Shoo)  
Free A6, yeah, he’s readin’ the Psalms  
I can never die in the ends like Chop  
New flavour, fling it in pot  
Paigons run from the gang, get dropped”

**Yanko – The Race:**

“Do it like Stainez and Krilla did, pedals and rambos, wetting up skeletons (Free ‘em)  
Swing my Anglo Arms with elegance, laugh and grin when his family bury him (Haha)  
Leave your lung and your rib cage separate, any 6 boy mans callously wetting him (Dip it)”

Although this specific manufacturer is mentioned, it could be any number of knife brands across the UK in its place. These brands are sold across retailers in the UK and abroad and it is the factor of how scary or threatening the knife looks which often leads to its purchase and just not the manufacturer involved.

The priorities of the buyer would significantly differ between those that wish to threaten or use violence and those that have legitimate agricultural or working needs. Price point is a factor, however with tools, ease of use, durability and comfort would far outweigh aesthetics, and you would expect the quality and durability of the material would push the price point up. For domestic use it could be argued that there are safer tools available for clearing and chopping, which is the primary use of larger, machete type knives.

As part of this review, surveys were available for knife retailers in the UK and abroad. 57 businesses responded to the survey with many of them having been in business for over 10 years and selling exclusively online. Of those that responded, many stocked kitchen knives but others included a mixture of hunting knives, utility knives, swords, machetes and other knives. Some of these stated that they dealt solely in antiques.

Few of the retailers stated they did not have a policy in place to prevent illegal or restricted knives, with some of the best policies involving a panel to assess the legality of knives before they list for sale, reverting to the relevant authority where an answer cannot be determined.

Online marketplaces can also act as sellers and platforms to host knives for sale. During this review a number of online marketplaces both UK based and overseas were consulted to examine their approach to knife sales. It is important to note that the sale of knives on the majority of these platforms is prohibited and usually requires workarounds to avoid automated and manual oversight.

Some platforms register more success than others with very effective filtering almost eliminating knife sales. Image recognition software is common across the platforms, but where it is accompanied by a questionable description, commonly 'cosplay' or materials describing the handle of the knife (such as foam), the removal of these items is less effective where keywords are used alone. These descriptors could be employed as a tactic to attempt to evade any detection and removal of items.

One platform where it is rare to find items contravening policy or legislation is EBay. They run multiple gateways to their service each employing a policy bespoke to the country of use. Despite having 2.1 billion items listed at any one time, the chances of someone from the UK seeing a listing on the UK website containing a knife is low, with preventative measures also in place to stop orders of knives being placed on international EBay websites. There is an automatic item removal algorithm built in with manual validation for borderline items that resulted in the blocking of 500,000 knives being listed in 2023. All platforms will admit that no system is infallible but EBay take measures to specifically prohibit the sale of knives to UK users. Two methods commonly employed by their service is making listings hidden from individuals in the UK and by prohibiting the shipping of knives to UK addresses.

Amongst all of these organisations, it is recognised that the algorithms and AI used is part of their intellectual property which makes sharing best practice more difficult. Although this is the case, the view amongst many platforms is that there would be a willingness to engage with other organisations more regularly if law enforcement acted as the central mechanism to this relationship. Examples of this can be seen in other areas such as the Joint Fraud Taskforce.

## **8.4 The 'Grey Market' of Knife Sales**

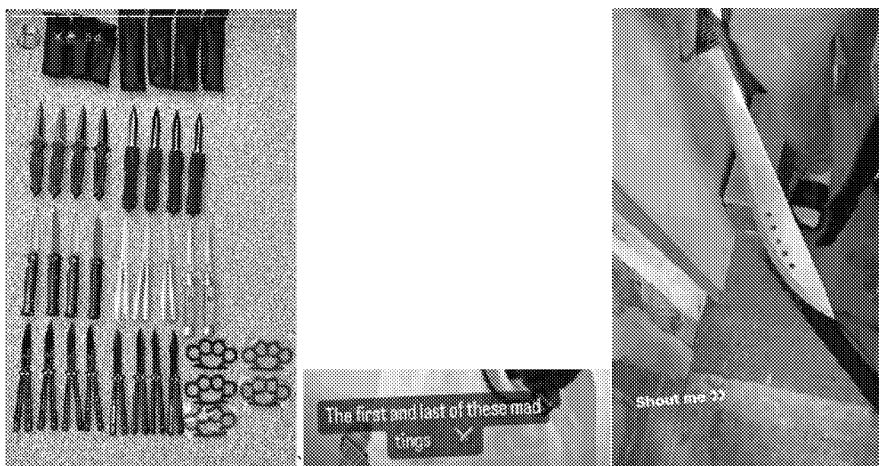
The grey market can simply be described as knives sold by individuals outside of a business setting which treads the grey line between legal and illegal sales. These are often on social media but can be face-to-face or within an individual's network. Investigations into these sellers reveal that the knives often originate from online knife retailers and resold for double or triple their online value. This review has focussed on the online grey market,

although it must be kept in mind that the issues with bulk knife purchases are relevant for both the online and offline grey markets.<sup>[footnote 20]</sup>

Many grey market sales are currently not illegal, due to the fact that there is no license or registration needed to sell knives. The OWA states that there should be a system in place for age verification on sale and for delivery, however the discovery of these sellers requires reports to be made to police by individuals active in the communities or exposed to the algorithms on social media which would enable them to see the content. A seller may operate on the grey market so that they could circumvent legislation applicable to traditional online retailers, preventing checks on age verification systems, business practices or tax. The principle of selling knives on social media goes against most policies in place for the social media platforms. Many of them do not allow for marketing outside of paid adverts or through specific marketplaces, so the content of the posts are often designed to avoid detection. To achieve this in placing posts online and to stop them being removed, direct references to sales are not made and the users disguise their identity.

As recognised in the case study regarding the prosecution of Zaif Sayed, cross pollination is a key factor in attracting potential buyers. Sayed bought paid advertisement on a more mainstream social media channel, directing people onto another platform and into his own group, which acted as his own personal marketplace to sell knives and other weapons.

**Figure 16: Example of social media grey market advertisements (prohibited weapons)**



Sales are often facilitated using personal messages, with the content of the posts designed to invoke users that want knives to contact the seller. The buyer and seller remain personally unidentified and posts or delivers the items on the UK mail network thus evading any audit trail. Many will know that social media platforms do not always verify identity on the creation of accounts and a visible pseudonym can be used instead of a real name. There is a pattern seen with these sellers in that evading detection sees the orders and sales escalate in volume. Investigations show that initial orders from knife retailers begin small and slow, but as sales remain undetected, the purchases become larger and more frequent, sometimes with large numbers of knives ordered through single transactions.

**Figure 17: Invoice regarding a sale of multiple knives in one transaction**

Qty	Products
4	Survivor Black Survival Kukri Knife
3	15" Fantasy Hunting Knife
2	Golan GOL-101BK 12.5" Monster Stiletto Lock Knife - Black
2	Golan GOL-101WD 12.5" Monster Stiletto Lock Knife - Pakkawood Handle
3	Golan GOL-SW-01BL Two Tone Blue Black Machete

Even though there may be large volumes of knives being requested from crime hotspots, there is no obligation on a seller to report any level of suspicious sales. This is at odds with legislation covering chemicals and financial transactions (Suspicious Activity Reports or SARs) where there is strict governance over the reporting of intelligence where transactions appear suspicious in a sale of multiple knives in one transaction.

On 15 MAY 2021, a 34 second video marketing knives was posted on Snapchat by the account @SHANKEMPIRE4. It consists of a 34 second video in which a number of hunting knives and a boxed crossbow are shown lying on a bed. The display name @SHANKEMPIRE4 is next to a plug emoji, "plug" being a slang term for a supplier of any sort. @SHANKEMPIRE4's profile used the display name "SHANK EMPIRE

The 1st [crown emoji][crossed swords emoji]. The bio reads “Don’t lack [red cross emoji]”.

On 3rd August 2021, a warrant was executed at the home address of Joshua Cope. In Cope’s bedroom, a total of 99 knives were found, ranging from small penknives to large machetes.

His bank accounts showed that over a ten month period, the account received credits to the value of £20,184.98 and made outgoing debits to the value of £20,193.49. The statement also showed Cope receiving a number of small credits paid directly into his account by individuals via bank transfer.

Another bank account showed that between over five months, he made total outgoing in this period of £13,968.92, and received total deposits to the value of £14,118.92. Cope was making many of these payments to a number of known legitimate sellers of knives.

In total, Cope is known to have purchased 563 knives and swords at the cost of £5930.27. It can be inferred that Cope had sold the 464 not found in his home and potentially many others that police couldn’t prove.

Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok remain the primary mainstream social media platforms that reach a wider network than more niche and private platforms such as Telegram and Discord. The latter platforms generally consist of smaller private groups but can accommodate groups in excess of 1000 users. Many of these people are invited into through their association with others or directed to join via more mainstream social media posts.

Investigation into the seller accounts on all platforms is particularly challenging and inhibited by regulations under the Investigatory Powers Act. Trading standards can only test purchase where there is no direct and private contact with the seller without using undercover assets requiring further authorisation. This makes it very difficult to test purchase from websites like Facebook marketplace and Ebay, where a personal relationship needs to be established. For this reason, National Trading Standards has an eCrime Team that provides a central resource working with online platforms and enforcing against online companies in breach of the law. Activities include website takedowns, but this is done with under voluntary arrangements.

Similarly, police require the same authorisation to operate against these sellers, however the specific sentencing guidelines place the OWA and Knives Act offences in a bracket, within which it is difficult to class them as serious crime. It is likely there are far more knives used in crime that have come from grey market sellers than currently identified. Police and CPS

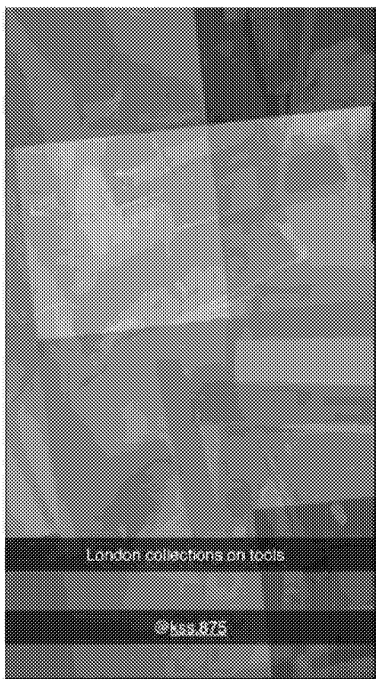
surveys reveal very few investigations into the origin of knives recovered or used in crime and it is rare if recovered following a violent offence. The primary issue with sellers operating on the grey market is that in many cases there are not always readily identifiable offences.

There is little capability or capacity to investigate these offenders and this method of knife selling without a national trained internet investigation capability. Currently this does not exist within law enforcement, Ofcom or Trading Standards, with different regions within Law Enforcement mounting their own bespoke approach where they have found an issue.

### **Case Study: Prosecution of Kaif Saiyed**

Kaif Saiyed ran a grey market sales business with named “Weapons R Us”, selling knives and other items primarily through both Snapchat and Telegram channels<sup>21</sup>. Users were directed to the channels through posts on the local news and community social media networks, paying these channels for advertising space to attract prospective buyers. The adverts placed on these networks were not overt selling platforms but filtered and specifically worded to obscure them from wider scrutiny (as seen in figure 15). The term tools is used with a faint image of knives in the background, largely undetectable for most viewing the post quickly.

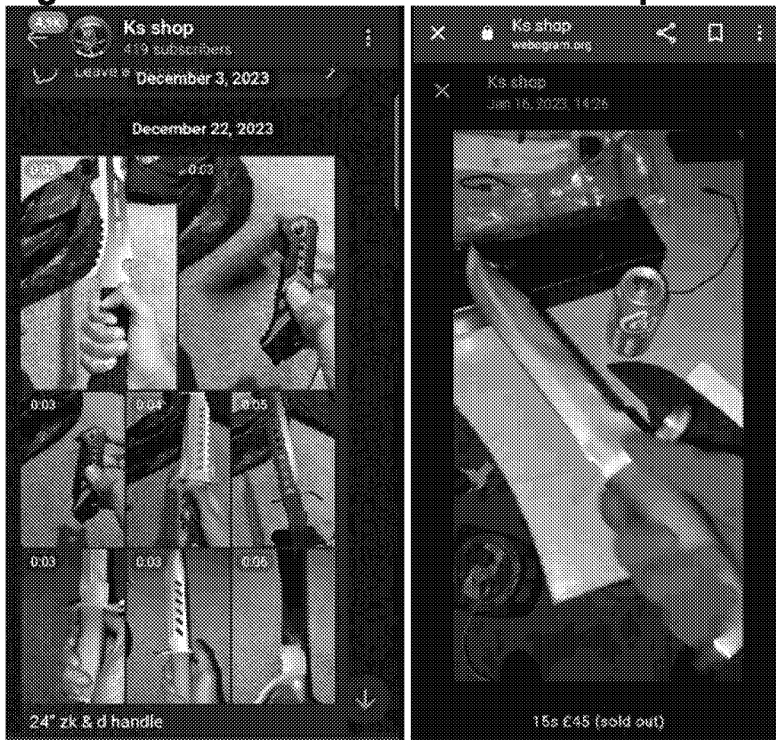
**Figure 18: Advert placed by Saiyed on wider social network group**



Saiyed was ordering the knives from a large UK based knife retailer and reselling the items at inflated cost. Examples of the adverts he was placing are shown in figure 16. In one transaction Saiyed ordered 30 knives from the retailer, using details belonging to another. His sales offered collection from an area of London. Knives were marketed for

approximately three times the retail price and all contact would have been made through the use of private messages.

**Figure 19: Knives for sale on the “Weapons R Us” channel.**



Police action was taken in February 2024 when a warrant was executed at the home address and one other address. Sayed was arrested. No knives or other weapons believed to be intended to be sold were present at the scene, however during the search a parcel arrived for Sayed containing eleven new knives from the knife retailer. Sayed had just turned 18 and was using a vulnerable adult to order the knives and receive the deliveries, circumventing any age restriction by the retailer and the courier for any purchases before his 18th birthday.

There were particular challenges for law enforcement in that the knives that were being sold were, in the main, legal to sell and possess in private making the majority of his activity legal. Knives Act offences were used in relation to knife offences but this activity is harder to find and prove, relying on suitably experienced officers to evidence the marketing offences under the act.

For this volume of sales, particularly in the manner that it was done, making dangerous knives available without age verification to under 18s, the sentence given in the court was 12 months imprisonment, suspended for 18 months.

## 8.5 The antique market

The antiques market does not sit independently in terms of knife sales and balances the preservation of cultural heritage with public safety concerns. Under UK law antique knives are generally exempt from offensive weapons controls but requires the knife to be over 100 years old. Despite exemptions for antiques, it is still prohibited to sell an antique knife to a person under the age of 18.

Throughout the UK there are specialist antique retailers who are generally quite engaged with law enforcement and the knife sales community. They list at auctions and on bespoke websites and the stock typically attracts a higher price point, dealing in knives that are less attractive to with violent intent than others available in the criminal market. Importantly this section of the market may be based around person to person transfer of possession rather than from mainstream retailers of these items.

Although not normally associated with crime, the antique firearms market has shown that driving weapons underground can influence criminals turning to antiques as a viable alternative.

## 8.6 Age verification – Point of Sale and Delivery

The sale and delivery of knives in the United Kingdom is governed by legislation designed to prohibit access to age-restricted items ensuring it is difficult for knives to get into the hands of under 18s.

This section examines the current legislative framework, challenges in enforcing age verification, variations in practices among vendors and couriers, and the roles of stakeholders, as well as highlighting gaps and opportunities for improvement.

Several pieces of legislation underpin the regulation of knife sales and delivery in the UK with age verification but in the main offences regarding the sale and delivery of knives will be covered under:

### **1. Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA):**

The OWA introduced robust measures to restrict the sale of knives to individuals under the age of 18. Retailers are required to ensure age verification is completed both at the point of sale and upon delivery. The Act also includes specific provisions for online sales, mandating that sellers take reasonable precautions to ensure buyers are of legal age. Under sections

38 and 39 it also criminalises the delivery of knives to residential addresses unless adequate age verification has been completed.

Retailers must implement age verification systems that comply with the OWA. This often involves verifying age at the point of purchase but there is no minimum standard for age verification, nor is personal identification required in some processes. For in-person sales, retailers are encouraged to adopt a “Challenge 25” approach, asking customers who appear under 25 for ID to confirm they are over 18 but for obvious reasons, this cannot be implemented in the same way online.

The OWA also places significant responsibility on couriers for ensuring age verification at the point of delivery. Delivery operatives are required to:

- Verify the recipient’s age by checking valid ID.
- Refuse delivery if the recipient cannot provide proof of age.

However, industry surveys reveal inconsistency in compliance, with delivery staff often reporting a lack of clear guidance and a lack of provisions meaning that knives and bladed articles cannot be identified. A larger retailer explained that they use their own internal delivery service<sup>22</sup> for all knife sales, but there is little confidence that their own compliance checks are adequate enough. The legislation points towards the retailer ensuring this is in place, which means the retailer would have to ensure that the knife is correctly labelled and identifiable by the courier. Retailers often incur an extra cost for this service, and so when they pay couriers a fee it is fair for them to infer that the delivery would be lawful.

The sale and delivery of knives can be compared to other age-restricted goods such as alcohol, tobacco and fireworks. These products are governed by similarly strict age-verification requirements.

For alcohol, retailers and couriers must adhere to regulations under the Licensing Act 2003, requiring proof of age at purchase and delivery. Fireworks are regulated under the Explosives Regulations 2014, with age checks at both stages. However, compliance in these sectors is generally more standardised, largely due to stricter penalties and more established enforcement mechanisms.

There is significant variation in how vendors implement age verification processes. Larger, well-established retailers tend to have robust systems in place, often incorporating third-party software to verify customer age. Smaller retailers, particularly independent knife sellers, may lack the resources to implement equivalent measures, but the lack of guidance or mandated minimum standards creates a system where this is largely up to the seller.

For online sales, discrepancies arise in how vendors verify age. While some require ID uploads or cross-checks against databases, others rely on self-certification, which is easily circumvented. A number of online retailers use a system where the name, date of birth and address is collected but the only verification seems to be a self-declaration that the buyer is over 18. In some cases this is done only at one point of customer registration and not for each sale. In reality, there could be multiple people using one account which is only age verified on one occasion.

The role of delivery carrier is critical, yet their practices vary widely. Major companies like Royal Mail and DPD have explicit policies for delivering age-restricted items, however, smaller couriers or subcontractors may lack such systems, leading to lapses in compliance. There are no regulations governing who can and cannot act as a courier, so in theory any person could set themselves up to transit items for delivery in a matter of minutes.

Collection of items falls under the same legislation with the use of drop-boxes and other methods that don't include a face to face pickup. The policy in collection sites such as the Post-Office is for the collector to provide ID on collection. From the tragic death of Ronan Kanda we know that this process is not always adhered to, so this needs urgent attention. It should present the opportunity to address the obvious gaps of remote ordering and delivery, however this is only maintained by trained and compliant staff in this area. A key stakeholder in this area reverted to policy without clearly addressing the issues presented in the case of Ronan Kanda; it should not be the case that age verification through an ID document is not carried out in these circumstances. Where policy may refer to specific types of ID documents, these should refer to the document relating to the individual actually collecting the package and not just the intended recipient. A method of testing collections would help to ensure compliance and through these measures, sanctions can be applied accordingly.

Grey market sales of knives, including those through unregulated online marketplaces or private social media groups, often bypass age verification altogether. Sellers may exploit loopholes by listing knives as generic tools or using coded language and emojis to obscure their nature.

**Figure 20: CPS guidance on language used to market knives and knife use in crime**

**Knife**

- Flicky
- Chetty
- 15s
- 16s
- 17s, 22s, 27s, etc (inches of blade)
- Dipper

- Leng
- Ox
- Rams or Ramz (Rambo knife)
- ZK or Z( Zombie killer/knife )
- Shank
- Cutter
- Flicky
- .15 ( 15 inch knife )
- Boarer
- Kitchen ( kitchen )
- Kitchy ( kitchen knife )
- Zombie
- Sammy ( samurai )
- Rambo / rammy
- Shet or Chet (machete)
- Mendi or Mendy

### **Stabbing**

- Dip
- Wet
- Touched
- Ching
- Kweng
- Nank
- Chinging
- Dipped
- Juiced him
- Splashed him
- Dipped him
- Kweff/queff –stabbed him /killed him ( x got kweffed )
- Kweng , cut him / stabbed him
- Swimming ( stabbed him now he's swimming in blood )
- Cheffed
- Itch ( X itched Y )

- Poked
- Touched “phillip got touched on the mains” ( phillip got stabbed on the main road )

Despite the OWA’s provisions, enforcement against such sales remains challenging due their international footprint, inability to test purchase and the difficulty of monitoring the online space. The only methods of detecting this activity are through reports to police or using covert tactics to remain in that space and be invited into the relevant groups.

Although there are many other issues relating to the grey markets, the lack of age verification systems is a key highlight. In order to age verify as a seller in the grey market, it would take a user to user conversation and passing of information through chat channels. It is believed, although cannot often be established, that age verification is simply not conducted in the majority of cases and looking at the profile of those using this method, it is not surprising.

Test purchasing, conducted by Trading Standards, remains a critical tool for assessing compliance. Underage or others posing as underage volunteers attempt to purchase knives online or in-store, with results used to prosecute non-compliant retailers.

Challenges with test purchasing include:

- Difficulty replicating realistic scenarios for online sales.
- Complexities in testing delivery compliance, as logistics including the availability of a residential premise coupled with the availability of both volunteer test purchasers and Trading Standards staff to wait for delivery at imprecise times create significant difficulty.
- Limited resources for conducting regular and widespread testing.

Trading standards did attempt purchases at over 400 online retailers but the above constraints restricted the test purchasing to click and collect outlets only. This limited the number that supplied via this means to only 32 sites. Details of the age verification processes in place were noted during the exercise, with officers observing that where tick boxes or false details could be entered, with no further checks conducted, the system was not effective and orders proceeded. A standardised ID check process across all knife sellers would help with enforcement. Training is a crucial component of ensuring compliance. While larger retailers may provide training programs for staff, many smaller businesses and courier firms do not, or have a less structured approach.

Training for sellers could include:

- Awareness of legal obligations under the OWA and other relevant legislation.
- Practical guidance on verifying age and recognising valid ID.
- Clear protocols for refusing delivery or sales.

However, there is currently no mandatory, standardised training program for either retailers or couriers, leading to inconsistent application of the law.

100% of respondents to the voluntary sector survey answered that mandatory ID checks at each point of the process would improve the regulation of online knife sales. This is also a view shared amongst law enforcement and others outside of the retailers themselves, who would bear the cost of further requirements to confirm identity. This, amongst other provisions could restrict the sale of knives further. However, these requirements would be harder to enforce for those operating outside the UK.

In summary, there are challenges with age verification and in many cases there is no requirement for the buyer to verify a purchase using identification documents. Systems to cope with the current requirements often come at a cost to the retailer and couriers which may be passed on to the consumer, but from those outside of the retail and courier sector, the broad view is that these restrictions could be strengthened.

Best practice in this area can be taken from other products where there are two-factor authentication systems and on delivery, confirmation that the receiver has direct contact with the buyer through the use of pin codes and other methods. These are already often used for products of increased value that would represent a risk to retailers and couriers if lost. Similar systems could be made available for retailers but bearing in mind that larger retailers have a distinct advantage in terms of the resources available to bring in new systems and the restrictions would be harder to police for overseas retailers.

Ultimately there needs to be a stronger link between the buyer and the knife's destination, so that their identification as a person over 18 can be assured at point of sale and delivery. In addition to this, the buyer should be a responsible person and not someone who may have a history of violence. The introduction of a prohibited person as discussed earlier, would provide law enforcement with stronger options to try and prevent knives falling into the wrong hands. Whilst there is never a perfect approach, a prohibited person would be someone who has shown a propensity for knife possession and/or violence either from previous cautions, convictions or upon application to a Court. They would not be able to register to be a knife seller, as we have seen in some instances now where they are involved in selling. Trying to source a knife, sell or possess one should be an offence, as would be attempting to buy one on behalf of a prohibited person.

## 8.7 Overseas sales and importation

Knives can be bought online and imported into the UK in both wholesale and retail methods. Dropshipping and online marketplaces are common methods of retail sales being made, but as highlighted within the BBC investigation, websites do not have to declare their country of origin, nor do they declare whether knives are shipped from the UK or abroad.

In terms of importation into the UK, there are three main routes: Royal Mail, fast parcel operators, and freight or container shipments. Both wholesale and retail shipments can use any of these routes and each mode operates differently presenting unique challenges for enforcement.

Royal Mail is the UK's national postal service, handling international mail through a network of national mail operators. Parcels may arrive directly or via intermediary hubs, such as those in the Netherlands. It processes over 2 million parcels weekly and accounts for 80% of intercepted knives yet faces significant limitations in targeting and inspection.

In contrast, fast parcel operators, such as DHL, UPS, and FedEx, specialise in expedited delivery services and handle the end-to-end process internationally. There are no specific size requirements for something to constitute a fast parcel. Technically you could 'fast parcel' a car.

Freight and container shipments are used primarily for bulk imports and differ significantly from the other two modes. Unlike Royal Mail or fast parcel services, freight operations typically involve larger-scale logistics and are often handled by specialised importers. Freight encompasses various transportation methods, including trucks, ships, trains, and planes, offering flexibility depending on the nature and urgency of the shipment. Anyone can set up as a freight operator, provided they meet the necessary registration requirements, including securing customs approvals and maintaining appropriate facilities. When freight is received at the border, the agent conveys and stores it in authorised warehouses pending onward delivery. Additionally, freight shipments frequently transit through intermediary countries, such as the Netherlands, before arriving in the UK, further complicating oversight and enforcement.

There are varying law enforcement responses across the various importation modes and across law enforcement agencies.

The Fast Parcels Joint Border Intelligence Unit (JBIU) act as a single point of contact gathering notification of seized fast parcels and freight at the borders by United Kingdom Border Force (UKBF). The JBIU are then responsible for the onward referral of seizures/intelligence to law enforcement agencies. In the first instance, referrals are passed to the NCA

(including knife seizures). However, if not adopted by the NCA, the JBIU refer fast parcel seizures onto the Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) within the United Kingdom.

Referrals to ROCUs come in 3 forms:

- As an offensive weapon seizure (illegal under importation laws)
- As a mis-declared seizure (legal to import but not if mis-declared)
- Uchee 2 referral (legal to import)

The ROCU has 30 days to respond to Border Force – if this is not to be adopted by the ROCU or Police Force then Border Force send a letter to the intended recipient, notifying them of the seizure and the seized item enters the disposal cycle.

If the seizure is adopted, Border Force will hold the knife, photograph it, and provide a witness statement upon request. The referrals are processed by the relevant ROCU and, in the cases of knives, are usually sent directly to the intended recipients Police Force.

The force responses differ; some forces will act on seizures while others will simply submit intelligence reports. There is no standardised or consistent approach. This includes no consistent approach with feeding back intelligence and positive results to Border Force. This also represents a gap in addressing safeguarding concerns where the buyer of the knife may be under 18 but not identified.

It is challenging to understand accurately the underlying picture of online knife sales importation routes because the volume of seizures by mode is driven by the effectiveness of the targeting, screening and searching regime. Although anecdotally the majority of knife seizures (80%) are found in Royal Mail post, it is feasible that there are large volumes of undetected items within the other modes, especially where imports are in bulk.

The complexity of the international importation routes, with many intermediaries and hubs, means that often the original supplier and country of origin are masked. This results in fewer high-risk countries being appropriately targeted.

Illegal importers often rely on mislabelling or concealing knives within other items to evade detection. Border Force report that there are no apparent seasonal spikes in knife-importation seizures though certain high-demand periods may correlate with sales promotions.

The extent and quality of data capture across the various modes means that it is difficult to compare or draw conclusions. There is no standardised or mandated data capture process, making comparisons between modes difficult. Monitoring success requires standardised metrics, such as

interception rates and successful prosecutions, to assess the effectiveness of measures.

Data sharing remains a significant challenge. Border Force frequently refers cases to local police but rarely receives feedback on enforcement outcomes. Where positive feedback is shared, senior Border Force officials commented on the positive motivational effect that this has for their staff.

Also, this incomplete intelligence loop hinders the ability to refine targeting and enforcement strategies. For example, there are many instances where police action or investigation has established origins of prohibited knives but has not shared this valuable intelligence to enhance subsequent targeting.

Border Force work under the Customs and Excise Management 1979 (CEMA) and the most relevant sections regarding knife seizures are within Section 49 (importation) and Section 139 (seizure of prohibited and restricted items). Of note, this legislation is first and foremost about the collection of revenue and not control of importation of dangerous items.

UKBF use the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 and Section 141 of the Criminal Justice Act to define weapons and knife types which are prohibited and thus eligible for seizure under CEMA powers.

HMRC are the UK Customs Authority meaning the policies and strategies around the border sit with them, although this is limited to items requiring tax to enter the UK. With everything that is imported, if it is done so in bulk there has to be a customs entry on a system called Customs Declaration Service (CDS).

As of 2005, the responsibilities began to devolve from HM Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue to separate organisations. HMRC, took responsibility for all functions until 2009 when UKBA and later additionally UKBF taking control of the ports with responsibility for immigration and illicit goods.

Detection systems at the border rely heavily on outdated technology. Current X-ray machines could ideally be enhanced by AI capabilities that improve the identification of concealed weapons.

International collaboration on technology, such as the development of shared AI databases, could provide significant advancements. Border Force's recent upgrades to X-ray systems could be accompanied by AI integration to streamline detection and reduce reliance on manual inspections. Exploring emerging technologies used by international partners, such as machine learning algorithms for cargo scanning, is an important recommendation.

## **Recommendations**

### **Buyer verification and delivery process**

A recommended example of this may be:

- 1) "Buyer" to provide verification of their full ID and not simply proof of age. Standard of verification process to be agreed but could include proof of ID (Passport/Driving License) and a financial cross check which might include bank details or a utility bill that relates to themselves and the intended delivery address.
- 2) "Seller" to confirm with buyer that delivery will only be made to them personally on receipt of ID verification or to a named individual providing the delivery or collection agent with a unique reference to the sale (provided to buyer at point of sale) and with appropriate ID for themselves. Financial cross check to include confirmation that payment method (bank or platform details) is not attributable to a person under 18 years old.

The above offers a more robust method through which we can be assured that the buyers ID is properly verified as well as simply their age. It offers an end to end aspect (unique reference) which guarantees attribution to the verified buyer, even if they cannot be present for collection or delivery. It also ensures that the seller will be able to maintain a proper record of sale which could later be made available for law enforcement purposes, will be able to give proper instruction to the carrier or collection agent and check to ensure that the purchaser is a fit and proper person to do so (not a prohibited person).

- 3) "Carrier" to ensure that knives are only delivered in accordance with 1 & 2 (above) and that a delivery or collection cannot be completed without doing so. Where a carrier cannot be satisfied that 1 & 2 have been complied with, the delivery should not be completed and the buyer can be notified in due course of the failed delivery.

The above will ensure that non-compliance with 1 & 2 will lead to a failed delivery/collection. In the event that a cost or delay is incurred then the buyer or seller will be responsible for failing to comply with the process and liable for any costs incurred which should be made clear at point of sale or might be overcome with a "pseudo deposit" or "failed delivery charge" to protect carriers from potential losses.

### **Further exploration**

Consultation with couriers and retailers around delivery tracking and verification.

### **Creation of a prohibited person**

This would work with the licensing or registration of retailers. It could work on application to a court if there is cause due to the involvement or suspected involvement in violent offences. Potential options that could apply

1. A prohibited person would not be able to apply to be a registered knife seller.
2. The ownership of certain types of knives, or knives believed to be for the purpose of use in violence would be prohibited (an offence would be created)
3. Police may have additional powers in relation to the person or known premises they occupy

### **Import licensing scheme to prohibit unlicensed importation of knives**

This could be possible through changing the Open Goods Import Licence (OGIL) or another importation licensing scheme. This would support a retailer registration scheme by ensuring that sales do not shift abroad and only certain retailers or individuals can ship knives in to the UK. The intention would be for this to be obtained by a retailer, or in the case of collectors/enthusiasts individuals.

### **Review the knife import tax levy**

Currently, many knives fit into a tax bracket that leaves the possibility of importation through bulk imports, however reviewing the tax on knives may prevent this method being used. Bulk imports require few documents and rarely can be adequately investigated to a level that would prevent unlawful knives entering the UK.

### **Further exploration**

#### **Standardise entry routes into the UK for bladed items**

The variety of methods that knives can enter the UK leaves the UK border vulnerable to the importation of prohibited weapons. Knives and bladed articles should only be prohibited to enter through routes that offers enhanced levels of scrutiny at the border.

#### **Training and awareness for UKBF**

As with many involved in the process of an online sale, the knowledge and understanding around the difference between a legal and prohibited knives.

#### **Use of cease and desist letters to overseas retailers**

For retailers where prohibited weapons are listed for sale and available in the UK. A central body or function could use cease and desist letters in order to stop the sale of these knives into the country.

#### **Provisions for the removal of knife related content on law enforcement notification**

Many platforms engage frequently with law enforcement and provide details of the account holders for certain offences. Improvement is needed in the

removal of prohibited activity and data provided to the police where a knife sales investigation is taking place. Recommended provisions may be:

- d. The requirement for social media platforms to remove of prohibited material within 48 hours of police notification.
- e. The details of the account holder to be supplied to law enforcement on removal of the content.
- f. Greater awareness for UK LEA to refer and request removal of offending content.

### **Further exploration**

#### **Local policies for online platforms**

Many platform operate under global policies which causes content prohibited in the UK to be available to users. In order to ensure automated and manual systems pick up illegal content in the UK and comply with UK knife legislation, social media, marketplaces and search engines must operate a UK policy and ensure this feeds any detection system operating on content available for UK Independent end-to-end review of online knife sales 68 users. This also includes ensuring search engines do not market prohibited weapons to UK customers.

Search engines to ensure prohibited articles are not promoted or available to UK customers. When searching to buy or look at knives, search engines can currently return results advertising knives that are prohibited in the UK.

#### **Couriers to ensure that all packages containing bladed articles are clearly labelled**

There is currently a requirement for couriers to ensure age verification is carried out on delivery and that the package is labelled to ensure the delivery person can establish this needs to be done. Clearer labelling should ensure greater compliance with procedures of age verification.

#### **Age/identification verification is to be robustly employed**

The report highlights examples where young people were able to obtain knives and carry out acts of violence with them. Couriers should ensure that at points of collection, any age/ID verification is robustly employed.

### **Further exploration**

#### **UK couriers to agree data sharing agreement with UK Law Enforcement Agencies**

This will ensure risk within knife sales and delivery can be identified.

#### **Consider implementation of PIN verification system**

This system is currently employed for other deliveries such as high value items and some food deliveries. A PIN system could ensure the person receiving the knife is connected to the person ordering the knife.

## **Legal review into section 38 and 39 OWA**

This will ensure the legislation is as robust as it can be around the restrictions on delivery to residential premises.

# **9 Collaboration and partnership**

Collaboration and partnership between agencies, organisations, law enforcement, and private sector stakeholders are fundamental to addressing the sale, delivery, and misuse of knives in the UK. Tackling this issue requires a multi-agency approach to share information, enforce legislation, and develop strategies to reduce harm. However, significant challenges persist, including inconsistencies in communication, varying priorities, and resource constraints.

UK police forces are structured to operate within geographic boundaries, yet crimes involving knife sales and misuse often transcend these areas, in some cases having an international footprint.

Collaborative efforts are therefore essential, to investigate cross-border supply chains, coordinate enforcement against online sales of knives, sharing intelligence, identifying safeguarding opportunities, along with emerging trends in knife crime or prohibited sales.

Collaboration is often facilitated through mechanisms such as Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU), which bring together resources from multiple forces to address serious and organised crime. Despite these frameworks, challenges remain. ROCUs are set up to primarily deal with Serious and Organised Crime threats, of which online knife sales doesn't feature due to the low level of sentencing and a lack of being defined as serious crime.<sup>[^23]</sup>

It is the reality that some forces have greater capacity to contribute to regional efforts, creating imbalances in the response, but the capability to investigate particularly grey market offences online is lacking in all but one force. When intelligence is established, there is no clear route for this to be disseminated across the country. This creates an uneven response where intelligence can be fed into the system but not prioritised for action with the forces.

Partnerships between police forces, Trading Standards, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), UK Border Force, and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) are critical to enforcing knife legislation. For instance, Trading Standards conduct test purchasing and investigates non-compliance with age verification laws, whilst UK Border Force intercepts prohibited knives at points of entry into the UK, sharing intelligence with law

enforcement. In the middle of this sits law enforcement with priorities for acting on the intelligence fed in by Border Force whilst working with the likes of Trading Standards to identify potential offenders.

Competing priorities between agencies often limit the scope of collaboration. For example, while Border Force focuses on broader customs enforcement, knives may not always be prioritised unless flagged as a high-risk item. The intelligence from any seizures of prohibited items would generate action by law enforcement, but the result of any action is not fed back, creating a potential lack of motivation or targeting for enforcement operatives.

Major retailers, including those operating online, have been engaged in efforts to comply with knife legislation. The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 requires sellers to implement age verification measures and cooperate with law enforcement when investigating illegal sales. However, the level of engagement varies significantly. Large retailers often have dedicated compliance teams and participate in industry forums to share best practices, whereas smaller retailers may lack the resources or awareness to engage proactively with law enforcement or regulatory bodies.

Efforts to tackle County Lines drug trafficking provide a useful model for collaboration against knife sales and misuse. Key elements of this approach include:

- **Joint Task Forces:** Police forces work alongside the National Crime Agency (NCA), local authorities, and charities to disrupt supply chains and support victims.
- **Data Sharing Agreements:** Clear frameworks are established to allow the rapid exchange of information between agencies.
- **Community Engagement:** Schools, youth groups, and local businesses are involved in prevention efforts.

Applying these principles to knife crime could enhance collaboration. For example, a national task force could focus specifically on tackling online knife sales, bringing together expertise from law enforcement, Border Force, Ofcom and the private sector. Examples also include the Joint Fraud Task Force that brings together law enforcement and private industry to work through issues and share best practice.

Between February 2023 and February 2024, the Metropolitan Police collected unbiased data in relation to 144 warrants executed in relation to Class A drug supply and County Lines in order to identify whether there was a correlation between drug supply offences and weapons possession.

144 cases were reviewed and found that in 67 of them (46.5%) a knife was found in circumstances that indicated they were readily available for use in violence; such as in bedrooms or concealed yet easily accessible to the

offender. Due to legislation of that period only 5 cases were successfully charged in relation to offensive weapons found in a private place under s141 Criminal Justice Act 1988.

“Drugs and violence are intrinsically linked. County Lines offenders are regularly arrested in possession of weapons. Previous analysis has found 3 in 4 County Lines offenders are previously known to police for violence and/or weapons offences. In FY 2023-24, through the County Lines Programme, 2,072 County Lines were closed, 6,913 individuals arrested, and more than 1,460 bladed weapons seized.

“Criminals and gangs use weapons, particularly knives, to enforce drug debts, control and grow territory or market share, and further their illegal business through threats and use of violence.

“Through the County Lines Programme, we are doing all we can to reduce the violence and exploitation associated with County Lines drugs supply, across England and Wales, and up into Scotland. In 2024, we ran two County Lines Intensification Weeks, surging Policing activity to bear down on this abhorrent crime type. This resulted in 3,534 people arrested and 1,216 weapons taken off the streets, which include 170 firearms and 843 bladed weapons. A cohort of 5,784 offenders currently housed within the prison estate are known to have been involved in County Lines. 1,886 (32.6%) of these have charges or convictions for weapons, either bladed, firearm or other (classed as an offensive weapon) irrespective of any other charge.”

Dan Mitchell – Head of NCLCC

A challenge with this is that many agencies operate with limited budgets, reducing their capacity to participate in multi-agency efforts. For example, Trading Standards has seen significant budget cuts in recent years, limiting its ability to conduct test purchases or investigate complaints.

Different stakeholders also often have competing priorities. Whilst police focus on enforcement, retailers may prioritise customer experience, or speed of sale and delivery leading to tensions in implementing age verification measures. Ultimately there is broad support for a hub and spoke model with law enforcement to act as a hub with the stakeholders acting as spokes in this example.

Collaboration and partnership are essential to tackling knife sales and misuse in the UK. While there are successful examples of joint efforts, significant challenges remain, particularly around information sharing, resource constraints, and engaging the private sector. By adopting best

practice from other initiatives, such as County Lines, and enhancing training, communication, and enforcement, stakeholders can work together more effectively to reduce the availability and misuse of knives.

### **Case Study: Prosecution of Stefan Petrescu**

Petrescu ran channels on multiple social media channels including Discord, Instagram and Telegram marketing knives and other weapons for sale. The channels featured demonstrations of Petrescu showing the damage the weapons can do, an example of this is slashing water bottles.

**Figure 21: Screenshot of video showing Petrescu slashing a water bottle with a sword.**



Petrescu was selling multiple items with discreet marketing for sales. Multiple intelligence reports were present on police indices suggesting that Petrescu was involved in this activity up to 12 months prior with the latest activity flagged to the force area soon after the confirmation of identity. A key challenge in this case were the social media accounts being opened abroad. This crime type is not defined as serious crime so obtaining information from the relevant platforms was difficult without the link to other offences. It took the social media platform a total of seven days to remove the posts following notification from Law Enforcement.

**Figure 22: Examples of weapons marketed by Petrescu**



A lack of national coordination meant that there were difficulties assigning operational teams to deal with this intelligence, so several months were allowed to pass before executive action was taken. In August 2024 police executed a warrant at the home address of Petrescu, finding a number of prohibited weapons. Identified as part of the investigation were links to right wing extremist groups, with Petrescu potentially involved in the supply of weapons. The time that passed between development of the intelligence and action being taken presents a risk that Petrescu could have supplied more weapons to young or dangerous people in this time, highlighting the need for greater collaboration between forces, the private sector and others in this area.

## **Recommendations**

### **National function to allow for information and greater collaboration amongst key stakeholders**

Knife crime and online knife sales are not restricted by borders. Sales in both the legitimate and grey market are shipped across the country and this review has highlighted where action against illegal activity is frustrated by a lack of national coordination. Like County Lines, a national function is required, working in conjunction with existing processes, to coordinate cross force activity. There is also greater collaboration needed with stakeholders. Relationships at force level are difficult to manage, key partners with a role in the prevention of prohibited activity struggle with the volume of contacts

required to give an effective response. This could be scoped further from current proof of concept work being developed between the Home Office and NPCC Knife Crime & County Lines portfolios.

### **Upskilling UK Law Enforcement**

There are large disparities in the levels of knowledge across UK law enforcement in the identification, referring and removal of offending content. The types of content that are 'in scope' for removal and the mechanisms relating its referral and removal are not well known amongst wider law enforcement. A consideration would be training and development of officers that are likely to come across 'in scope' content. This requires collaboration with Ofcom.

### **Upskilling of law enforcement in the detection and investigation of grey market offences**

There are a small number of officers trained in the online techniques required to investigate grey market offences. More work needs to be done in law enforcement to increase the capability of officers to identify these sellers.

### **Review of current information sharing amongst UKBF, Trading Standards and UK law enforcement**

Information does not share fluidly between the organisations causing difficulties in the investigation of knife importation and supply. Reviewing information sharing between enforcement agencies will improve targeting and awareness, providing more effective, whole system, pursue led approach. This would also increase the capability to identify and safeguard young people who are involved in the buying or selling of knives.

### **Increase capability to conduct random test purchase operations**

Trading standards are currently inhibited by legislation and capacity when test purchasing online. There are limited provisions available for the supply of ID and the use of addresses to conduct a robust test purchase on the sale of a knife online.

### **Adjusting the sentencing guidelines of offences related to online sales**

Offences relating to the marketing, sale, supply and possession of knives and prohibited weapons should all be triable either way. The seriousness of the offence including the potential impact isn't adequately reflected in the current sentencing guidelines and as such, the overall response and the priority given to investigations is diminished.

### **Work with Ofcom to consider future Online Safety Act code changes**

Ofcom directly influence the development of the future stages of the online safety act and there should be further collaborative work between UK Law Enforcement, Ofcom and other partners to ensure that the codes are robust and cover the areas needed.

# 10 Conclusion

This review uses an evidence-based approach to make recommendations that will assist in reducing the availability of all sharp-edged knives, while giving all involved in the process of prevention and detection of offences, the necessary powers to protect communities.

Tackling the supply of knives is one key element in the overall ambition to reduce harm and whilst it is recognised that knives are readily available within someone's home, the evidence does suggest that these aren't always the 'go to' weapons that many choose. Considering the principle of the 'four As', the review and its recommendations make steps to identifying ways in which the availability (the prevalence of knife types in the community), affordability (the financial cost, chance of detection and associated penalties) and accessibility (the restrictions in place to prevent access) can be addressed to prevent them ending up in the hands of criminals, children and young adults.

Data plays a key role in this review, from understanding who is involved in the end-to-end sales process, especially those who are trying to circumvent it. Whilst police forces and other law enforcement agencies collect data around knife related crime, the focus of this data collection does not always allow the identification of trends in knife use without an intrusive and comprehensive review of all associated crime. In fact, crime involving knives is far wider than the definition of knife crime and this review seeks to look more broadly into the collection of data useful in identifying the prevalence and origin of knives used in crime. Without changes in this area, law enforcement agencies may take a sporadic and reactive approach to data questions.

The review has also highlighted a need for greater collaboration and sharing of data between stakeholders, whether public or private sector organisations. There is no blame associated with any one sector, nor does this review seek to attribute it, but a wholesale change in prioritising knife crime across the board is required. This includes the investment in resources and systems that would aid collaboration as well as setting up the legal framework in which data can be shared and used effectively. There are too many barriers, including international cooperation and data protection requirements that inhibit the investigation of illegal activity. It has been shown, through the Joint Fraud Taskforce that a framework can be built with buy-in from the public and private sector to focus on particular issues, but no such framework exists for knife related crime.

A significant concern highlighted in this review is also the glamorisation and access of knives online. Where there are systems in place to prevent UK

users being recommended illegal items in other areas such as drugs and firearms, the same focus is not present with knives. Platforms, including search engines, don't take into account localised legislation relevant to the UK and often operate under a global or region based policy. Tackling this issue requires a concerted effort from tech companies to prioritise knife sales content through their automated detection systems. There are no visible restrictions when knife content is searched, despite blurred or hidden results being automated in areas such as pornography. This could therefore encourage underage users to visit websites which stock both legal and illegal knives.

The effectiveness of existing legislation has been highlighted as an area of concern, with examples of grey market sellers setting up a legal business which provides little protection against selling knives to children or those intent on using them in acts of violence. When activity strays from legal to detectable illegal activity involving knives or prohibited knives, it is not always possible to employ a full range of law enforcement tactics. In other areas, sentencing or a classification of serious crime allows for a fuller and more robust approach. This is particularly relevant in the grey market, where to evidence an offence, there is often little legislative authority to carry out the extent of work required. Policing will of course continue to use existing legislation to the best of its ability to continue to try and tackle illegal knife sellers and is developing new partnerships to do this.

It is understood that there will be a mixed response from retailers who read about potential future registration requirements. Any registration fees would require full cost recovery from the local police force. It will no doubt increase upfront costs and bureaucracy associated with selling all knives and we would assume those costs will be passed onto the consumer, raising the costs for purchasing a knife. Those we have spoken to are broadly in favour of a registration or licensing scheme for retailers similar to firearms, but others have urged some learning from the introduction of licensing in Scotland. This should be considered for all knives and all devolved areas of the UK included.

Any consideration of the action in the UK needs to be considered alongside arrangements restricting the importation of knives, allowing only those for legitimate use into the country. International retailers are free to ship knives into the UK and the introduction of laws restricting UK retailers alone could increase the amount of knives imported or force UK businesses abroad. Retailers surveyed in this review suggest an import licence would be favourable to registration or licensing, which indicates this could be a possibility. The availability of a full range of import methods for knives may decrease the chances of detecting prohibited items at the border, whilst competing priorities again inhibit those involved.

A key feature in this review is any process or restriction preventing sales to those under the age of 18. There is already legislation available placing an onus on the retailer to ensure sufficient processes are in place to ensure

age verification at point of sale and delivery and this is inadequate. Key issues with current legislation are the lack of a minimum standard of verification and of the true identity of both the buyer and those who receive the goods. In many cases age verification does not include using documents to identify the buyer or receiver of the goods, priority is placed on speed of sale process and delivery which may come at the cost of any such system. Identity verification and additional security processes are used in other sales sectors but aren't present to the same standard in knife sales. The voluntary sector highlight this as the best chance at reducing sales and delivery to under 18s, but law enforcement and trading standards suggest that knowing who the retailers are and giving the power to test those systems is just as important.

Ronan Kanda, Victor Lee and Kyron Lee tragically lost their lives after knives were made available to criminals and people under the age of 18, but these are not the only cases. Every knife that flows through the legitimate online or bricks and mortar sales market has the possibility of being obtained with the intent of using it in violence. This review highlights where gaps in that process might exist and where opportunities for intervention, intelligence sharing, or restriction could prevent this.

The recommendations in this review are designed to be used as a system response and not necessarily used in isolation.

## **11 Glossary**

### **CJA**

Criminal Justice Act 1988

### **COPO**

Crime Overseas Production Orders

### **CPS**

## **Disposals**

Criminal justice disposal, how a case is dealt with through the criminal justice system

## **Drop-shipping**

A vendor that offers a shopfront service but the supplier directly ships the item to the buyer

## **E-commerce**

The trading of goods or services online

## **Emojis**

Emojis are small cartoon style pictures used often instead of text

## **Flagging**

A process by which content on social media is reported to the platform by a user or law enforcement

## **HMG**

His Majesty's Government

## **HOCR**

Home Office Counting Rules

## **In Scope**

Offences within the jurisdiction of the offensive weapons act

## **Knife Crime**

Specific offences counted by the Home Office when a knife is used

## **Knife Enabled Offences**

Any crime where a knife is a contributing factor

## **Mislabelling**

A process on importation where goods are labelled incorrectly which opposes their correct tax category

## **MLAT**

Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty

## **MoJ**

Ministry of Justice

## **NTS**

National Trading Standards

## **ONS**

Office of National Statistics

## **Open or clear web**

Indexed and accessible to the general public on the internet

## **OWA**

Offensive Weapons Act 2019

## **RIPA/IPA**

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000/Investigatory Powers Act 2016

## **SAR**

Suspicious Activity Report

## **Summary Only**

A criminal offence which can be heard only in the magistrate's court

## **Test Purchase Operation**

Measuring the compliance of retailers by making purchases. In the case of knife sales, ensuring age verification is present.

## **Triable Either Way**

An offence that can be heard in both a magistrate's court or a crown court

## **U2U (User to user)**

Internet services by means of which content generated directly on the service by a user, or uploaded to or shared on the service by a user, may be encountered by another user of the service

## **UKBF**

United Kingdom Border Force

## **Voluntary Sector**

Organisations whose primary purpose is to create social impact rather than profit

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## **15 Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

Independent end-to-end review full Terms of Reference (ToR)

### **Appendix B**

Offensive Weapons Act 2019, relevant sections

### **Appendix C**

Section 141 Criminal Justice Act 1988

### **Appendix D**

Section 1 Knives Act 1997

### **Appendix E**

Research on knife price points and availability

## Appendix F

Contributors to the review

## Appendix G

Recommendations

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1. A full copy of the terms of reference is contained within Appendix A.
2. Legislation includes self-service lockers or other automated pick-up points.
3. To be defined
4. Couriers and regular mail services
5. Selected offences collected through ONS Data – Attempted Murder, Threats to Kill, Assault with injury and with intent to cause serious harm, Robbery, Rape, Sexual Assault (exc. Homicide)
6. The full terms of reference is contained within Appendix A
7. Most were online only, but a small number had traditional shops too
8. The voluntary sector is made up of organisations, independent of government, focussed on social impact rather than profit. It is also sometimes referred to as 'third-sector' and 'not-for-profit'.
9. The small review team did not have the capacity to manage and sift through extensive comments if all questions were open-ended.
10. Appendices link to the survey questions for each section.
11. An example of this is the inclusion of possession offences within the ONS knife crime data when compared to the MoJ prosecution data. The possession offences display data from offence types grouped in different ways.
12. Please note that this report was finalised prior to the latest release of ONS data due in late January 25
13. Link to appendices with ADR 160 requirements. Examples of sharp instruments (not knives) include fork, pin, razorblade and others.
14. Offences include selected offences as determined by the ADR 160.
15. Our role is not to instruct firms to remove particular pieces of content or take down specific accounts, nor to investigate individual complaints. Our

role is to tackle the root causes of online content that is illegal and harmful for children, by improving the systems and processes that services use to address them. Seeking systemic improvements will reduce risk at scale, rather than focusing on individual instances.

16. Some may have a traditional shopfront presence too
17. The grey market – “An unofficial but not completely illegal system in which products are bought and sold” (Cambridge.org, 2025)
18. A channel is a broadcast account hosted by a user on a social media platform
19. Rather than subcontracted services
20. Certain offences are included as serious crime under the serious crime act 2007.



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