

## WITNESS STATEMENT

Witness Name: BENJAMIN JONES

Exhibits: AB/01-AB/04

Dated: 25 JULY 2025

## SOUTHPORT INQUIRY

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### FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF BENJAMIN JONES

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I, Benjamin Jones, will say as follows: -

#### **INTRODUCTION**

- 1 I am the Managing Director of Merlin Archery Limited, a retailer and manufacturer of archery equipment.
- 2 This witness statement is made to assist the Southport Inquiry (the "Inquiry") with the matters set out in the Rule 9 Request dated 22 July 2025.

#### **BACKGROUND**

- 3 I have been a director of Merlin Archery Limited since its incorporation in 2009. Prior to that I was a partner in Merlin Compound Bows.
- 4 Merlin Archery Limited is a privately owned family business.
- 5 My company employs approximately 42 people and operates 5 retail shops around the UK. We sell face to face in our shops, we sell online through our website [www.merlinarchery.co.uk](http://www.merlinarchery.co.uk), as well as an archery equipment manufacturing workshop producing our own brand products as shown at [www.ilovemybo.com](http://www.ilovemybo.com).
- 6 We supply archery equipment to the general public, professional athletes, clubs, schools, hotels, leisure companies and to the trade, as well as providing training and beginners courses.

#### **Factual narrative of involvement**

- 7 On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2022 at 10:30am we received an email from AR from the email address [a.megalaria7@yahoo.com](mailto:a.megalaria7@yahoo.com) with the subject 'Verification' and the body "Hi, If I bought an 18+ product how would you verify my age, do you verify ID online or does the

delivery person check my ID at my door? Also, do I have to be 18 to receive the product when it is at my door? Thanks in advance. A" (exhibit AB/01- MERA000002 )

- 8 On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2022 at 11:32am our customer service manager, Oliver Clayton-Smith, replied with the body content "Thank you for your email. If purchasing an age restricted product such as a Crossbow or Blade article for example, we would need to verify your age before we can dispatch an item. The first thing that we check is the Electoral Register as a lot of people are present on here, if so that is all we need an your account will be approved and the order processed. If you are not on the electoral register for any reason we would contact you to verify your age by an alternate method, this would normally be through a photo of a passport or driving license. Once your account has been verified once it would not need to be again, so if you were to then order another age restricted product in the future you would need to verify your age again as long as it is on the same account." (exhibit AB/01- MERA000002 )
- 9 On 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022 at 12:47am he replied with another question with the body content "Hi, I would like to purchase from Tactical Archery but I would prefer discrete packaging which doesn't provide any information on what is inside the box. Could I see a photo of what the external packaging of your products look like? Thanks in advance. A" (exhibit AB/01- MERA000002 )
- 10 On 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022 at 8:53am our customer service manager, Oliver Clayton-Smith, replied with the body content "Our parcels are all sent in plain brown paper so are as discreet as they can be, I do not have any photos to hand but I am sure you can picture what I mean." (exhibit AB/01- MERA000002 )
- 11 I notice on his reply from 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022 at 12:47am he refers to purchasing from Tactical Archery, which is a different supplier.
- 12 On 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022 at 12:51am we received an email from AR from the email address a.megalia7@yahoo.com with the subject 'Product Packaging' and the body "Hi, I would like to purchase from Merlin Archery but I would prefer discrete packaging which doesn't provide any information on what is inside the box. Does the exterior packaging give any indication of what is inside the box? Thanks in advance. A" (exhibit AB/02- MERA000003 )
- 13 On 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022 at 8:53am our customer service manager, Oliver Clayton-Smith, closed the email as the same question was asked in his reply to the earlier email. (exhibit AB/02- MERA000003 )

- 14 With the assistance of Oliver Clayton-Smith, we searched our systems for reference to the following names and addresses that were provided to us as part of this inquiry:
- a) Axel Rudakubana
  - b) anybody living at 10 Old School Close, Banks, Lancashire PR9 8SB
  - c) anybody purporting to live at 8 Old School Close, Banks (to which AR sometimes had items delivered)
  - d) AR through the pseudonym email accounts, a.megalaria7@yahoo.com or through account a.hyenadon@gmail.com or DPA; or
  - e) user of telephone 07428362306.
- 15 With the exception of a.megalaria7@yahoo.com, for which all correspondence has been provided, we can find no records connected with the above.
- 16 For complete clarification, no orders were received, delivered or cancelled in connection with the above addresses.
- 17 In considering the emails AR sent to us, the last sentence, "Also, do I have to be 18 to receive the product when it is at my door? " could be interpreted as someone under age seeking to buy an age restricted product. Potentially a crossbow as that is our main age restricted product.
- 18 In my opinion, while there could have been some low level suspicion that the enquiry could be from someone underage seeking to buy a crossbow, it would not be enough for us to contact the police. One reason for not contacting the police would be that no attempt to purchase was made. Another reason would be there is no expectation for us to contact the police for refusing to sell to an underage person. Another reason being the belief that the police would not be interested.
- 19 For example: There was a recent situation in one of our shops where we refused to sell a crossbow to a customer due to disturbing questions being asked about its potential use. Upon refusal they became abusive and refused to leave. It was deemed necessary to call 999 for assistance, but none was forthcoming and there was no follow-up, even after our store manager called to see if there would be a follow up.
- 20 Our age verification procedures for selling age restricted products were the same in 2022 as they are today. The process is as follows:

- 21 All age restricted products are clearly identified on our website with a clear statement that we will be requiring proof of age before despatch. When an order comes in and we have not previously verified the age of the purchaser, we will first check the publicly available electoral role register. If we are unable to verify, then we email the customer requesting a copy of their passport or drivers licence. Once their age has been verified, their account is updated and the order released and cleared for future orders. We keep a log of all first time customer orders of age restricted products, including method of verification and cancellations.
- 22 For purchasing crossbows in-store, we ask for proof of ID for everyone, irrespective of how old they look, and keep a crossbow register, including the name and address of the person purchasing.
- 23 If we have customers whose enquiries about crossbows appear suspicious we refuse to sell.
- 24 In our physical shops I, and my shop managers, have no recollection us needing to refuse a crossbow sale because we suspected them as being underage. Refusals are always to do with us being uncomfortable with the person buying it, not the suspected age of the buyer.
- 25 The guidance on our website has remained unchanged since before 2022. I have included an archived screen shot of the guidance in 2021 (exhibit AB/03-MERA000004) and 2022. (exhibit AB-04-MERA000005)

### **Reflection on events**

- 26 I do not believe the content of the correspondence we had with AR was sufficient enough to justify notifying the police. On reflection, the processes we had in place were sufficient to deter AR from attempting to make a purchase with us.

### **Improvements**

- 27 Since being contacted by this enquiry I will review our processes to see if there are any vulnerabilities to our age verification process and sales process.
- 28 There have been no industry wide changes.
- 29 All of our staff who are involved with sales of crossbows and other age restricted products are fully aware of the restrictions in place, and the consequences of making a mistake. Specifically for crossbow sales, an example would be any reference by customers of inappropriate use, the sale is refused.

- 30 Only suitably experienced sales technicians are allowed to sell crossbows. For example, Only 2 of our 5 shops stock crossbows because the other 3 lack the depth of knowledge I believe is necessary to sell them.
- 31 There certainly are improvements that could be made through our industry in regard to the sale of crossbows. I refer to crossbows specifically, not regular archery equipment. To elaborate, any issues with refusals, any contact with the police, any bad behaviour, inappropriate questions, 99% of the time it is related to crossbows.
- 32 At the moment, it is not a requirement to keep a crossbow sales register. At Merlin Archery we do this voluntarily as it is a proven deterrent for those wanting to buy crossbows for inappropriate use. I also believe it should also be compulsory to provide ID, even if they are clearly over 18. A combination of a requirement for ID and a crossbow register kept internally by crossbow sellers would help ensure crossbows are used only for sporting purposes.
- 33 I have extensive experience in this industry and am willing to assist further with any questions relating to the use or sale of archery equipment and crossbows should you need it.

Statement of Truth I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Signed: **SIGNATURE** Dated: 25<sup>th</sup> July 2025

Exhibit Number	Inquiry reference No.	Document description
1	<span style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 2px;">MERA000002</span>	Email correspondence – includes replies from Merlin Archery
2	<span style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 2px;">MERA000003</span>	Email correspondence – unanswered
3	<span style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 2px;">MERA000004</span>	Cached website screenshot 2021
4	<span style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 2px;">MERA000005</span>	Cached website screenshot 2022