



**Business in Focus**



# Knives, bladed items and hazardous materials

**A guide for businesses supplying bladed articles, acids,  
corrosive substances, explosives precursors and poisons**

Making sure your business complies with consumer law

**businesscompanion**  
trading standards law explained

This guide was produced as part of a business advice project by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Chartered Trading Standards Institute.





Within this document there are some direct quotes from The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA).

# Introduction

## Keeping society safe

All businesses that sell goods and services to the public have a duty to ensure they are not putting their customers and others at risk. For obvious reasons, this is particularly true for businesses that supply potentially dangerous items such as knives and bladed items, and hazardous substances such as corrosives and poisons.

The guidance contained in this booklet covers the new controls brought in by the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA) as well as older legislation that also covers these products. It has been designed to provide businesses with clear, practical information about the legal controls and their obligations under the law. It looks at things like labelling, age restrictions and different types of sale – for example, the differences between selling in-store and online, as well as other types of 'remote' sales, such as mail order or telephone sales.

While the emphasis of this guidance is on helping your business to get things right, it also contains details of the penalties that may be applied to businesses that break the law. These penalties reflect how important it is to make sure dangerous goods do not fall into the wrong hands, for the sake of businesses, consumers and society as a whole.

Part 1 of this booklet (see page 4) focuses on acids, other corrosive substances and explosives precursors or poisons; Part 2 (page 19) covers the marketing, sale and delivery of knives and other bladed articles/products.

**This guidance is for England and Wales.**

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## Background: Selling acids, other corrosive substances and explosives precursors or poisons

The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA) responds to the threat posed by the use of corrosive substances as a weapon to inflict serious harm. Whilst this type of crime is not new, the use of corrosives as a weapon is of significant concern given the life-changing injuries that these substances can inflict. The measures provided by the Act strengthen the powers of the police, trading standards and other partners to be able to tackle these crimes. The provisions are designed to restrict access to those products containing the most harmful corrosive substances by prohibiting the sale and delivery of corrosive products to under 18s.

Batteries (in any form) are exempt from the sales and delivery controls in the OWA. The substance or product has to be contained within a battery to be exempt. This means that battery acid itself is not exempt, nor are acid filler bottles.

Alongside the new laws, the Government has encouraged retailers to sign up to a **voluntary commitment** aimed at restricting access to products containing acid and other corrosive substances.

Whilst sold for legitimate uses, products containing certain chemicals can also be misused for

criminal purposes. Terrorists, for example, use them to manufacture homemade explosives (these are known as 'explosives precursors'). Other products are poisons, and can be similarly misused for criminal purposes. The Poisons Act 1972 introduced controls including a licensing regime for these products. Members of the public who wish to acquire, import, possess or use these chemicals/products must hold an explosives precursors and poisons (EPP) licence from the Home Office.

The vigilance of sellers has played a key role in enabling the authorities to detect and disrupt these criminal activities. This includes both proactive steps around controlling the purchasing of these products, as well as reporting losses, thefts or suspicious transactions. The guidance in this document aims to help you prevent serious crimes, as well as fulfil your legal obligations.

A number of corrosives subject to the OWA controls are also listed, in the same concentrations, as explosive precursors and poisons and subject to additional controls under the Poisons Act 1972.

Selling acids, other corrosive substances and explosives precursors or poisons presents particular challenges. Retailers

– both on-premises and remote (for example, online) – must have effective systems in place for preventing unlawful sales to prospective customers.

The controls on these products will depend on whether they are restricted, regulated or reportable.

**Restricted products.** These are products that have an age restriction, meaning they are prohibited from sale to a person under the legal age limit – for example, corrosives and acids cannot be sold to those under 18. There are also restrictions on where these products can be delivered.

**Regulated products.** These are products where the acquisition, possession or use by the general public is restricted without a Home Office licence – for example, explosives precursors and poisons (EPPs). Poisons are regulated products that have restrictions on who can sell them, as well as controls on who can buy them.

**Reportable products.** These are products where there are legal duties to report significant losses, thefts or suspicious transactions.

Products can be in one, two or all of the above categories. For example, sulphuric acid is a restricted, regulated and reportable product.



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Unused portions of Coating 6 products must be disposed of in strict compliance with local, state and federal laws governing such matters. Refer to the appropriate Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for more specific product information.

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## Duty of retailers

### IT IS THE LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY OF SELLERS TO ENSURE THEY DO NOT:

- sell age-restricted corrosive products to people who are under the minimum legal age of 18
- deliver, or arrange to deliver, corrosive products to residential addresses or to lockers

Residential premises are defined for the purposes of the OWA as "premises used solely for residential purposes". This definition has been used to ensure that deliveries of corrosive products can be made to businesses that are run from residential premises.

A locker is defined as "a lockable container to which the package was delivered with a view to its collection by the buyer, or a person acting on behalf of the buyer, in accordance with arrangements made between the seller and the buyer". Lockers are often positioned in petrol stations or retail outlets and involve a code being sent to the purchaser in order to open it. They do not easily enable age verification to be carried out at the point of collection.

### IN ADDITION TO THE ABOVE, SELLERS MUST ENSURE THEY DO NOT SELL:

- regulated substances (EPPs) above the allowed concentration limits to a member of the public who does not hold a valid Home Office EPP licence
- regulated poisons to a member of the public unless the retailer is a registered pharmacist or they are under the supervision of a registered pharmacist

### SELLERS MUST:

- ensure all packages containing a corrosive product are clearly marked\* to indicate that they contain a corrosive product and that they must only be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over
- record the details of any transaction of a regulated substance (EPP) on the back of the purchaser's EPP licence (which is a physical piece of paper designed to have these details added to it)
- ensure that if a product containing a regulated EPP substance above the concentration threshold is supplied to an EPP licence holder, it is properly labelled with "Acquisition, possession or use by the general public is restricted"

- identify and report to the national contact point any suspicious transactions, losses or theft of regulated substances or products of concern



**It is a criminal offence to sell corrosive products to a person under 18.**



**It is a criminal offence to deliver a corrosive product, or arrange for its delivery, to a residential address or a locker.**

[\*It is up to the seller to determine how best to meet this marking requirement - for example by using a sticker or other label. Sellers could consider the use of symbols as part of the package labelling process. However, further advice should be sought on this, noting the requirements of [the GB chemical classification, labelling and packaging \(CLP\) rules](#).]

Additional information on this can also be found in the [Home Office statutory guidance on the OWA](#).

**AGE-RESTRICTED CORROSIVE PRODUCTS UNDER THE OFFENSIVE WEAPONS ACT 2019**

Name of substance and Chemical Abstracts Service Registry Number (CAS RN)	Concentration limit (weight in weight)	May be present in
ammonium hydroxide (CAS RN 1336-21-6)	10%	household cleaners, disinfectants, stain treaters
formic acid (CAS RN 64-18-6)	10%	wart removers, household descalers, food preservatives
hydrochloric acid (CAS RN 7647-01-0)	10%	household cleaners (toilet bowl, bathroom tile and other porcelain cleaners), brick and patio cleaners, limescale removers
hydrofluoric acid (CAS RN 7664-39-3)	0%	aluminium wheel cleaners, wire cleaners, rust removers
nitric acid (CAS RN 7697-37-2)	3%	drain cleaners, toilet bowl cleaners, descalers
phosphoric acid (CAS RN 7664-38-2)	70%	bath cleaners, tile cleaners, sink cleaners, toilet bowl cleaners, rust removers
sodium hydroxide (CAS RN 1310-73-2)	12%	drain cleaners, oven cleaners, paint strippers
sodium hypochlorite (CAS RN 7681-52-9)	10%	drain cleaners, toilet bowl cleaners, bleach (low concentration), descalers
sulphuric acid (CAS RN 7664-93-9)	15%	drain cleaners, brick cleaners, car wheel cleaners, acid for car batteries (sold as such)

# Sales of acid: voluntary commitments for retailers

The [voluntary commitment for retailers scheme](#) engages with retailers to agree:

- to comply with the Poisons Act 1972 and promote awareness to staff of what this means. This applies to the sale of products, including those containing levels of acid and other corrosive substances that are either regulated or reportable under the Poisons Act 1972
- not to sell products that contain potentially harmful levels of acid or corrosive substances to people under the age of 18. Where appropriate, this will include applying Challenge 21/25 policies when asking for age identification, and supporting staff with till alerts, supervision and the inclusion of the products in age-restricted sales training
- that equivalent age restriction measures are applied to products sold remotely

## CORROSIVE SUBSTANCES OF CONCERN COVERED BY THE VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS

Chemical	Concentration limit (weight in weight)	May be present in
sulphuric acid	any	drain cleaners/unblockers, brick cleaners, car batteries
sodium hydroxide	12% and over	drain cleaners/unblockers, paint strippers
hydrochloric acid	10% and over	brick and patio cleaners, limescale removers
ammonium hydroxide	10% and over	cleaning products
Sodium hypochlorite	10% and over	cleaning products

The scheme effectively mirrors the subsequent legal age restrictions on these products brought in by the OWA, but also extends this to any concentration of sulphuric acid, and not just products above the 15% weight in weight (w/w) concentration specified in the OWA.

Further details can be found here: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/sales-of-acid-voluntary-commitments-for-retailers/responsible-sales-of-acid-and-corrosive-substances-voluntary-commitments](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sales-of-acid-voluntary-commitments-for-retailers/responsible-sales-of-acid-and-corrosive-substances-voluntary-commitments)

**REGULATED EXPLOSIVES PRECURSORS THAT REQUIRE A HOME OFFICE EPP LICENCE TO BE SOLD TO MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

Chemical	Concentration limit (weight in weight)	May be present in
hydrogen peroxide	12%	bleach, hair bleach, disinfectants, cleaning agents
nitromethane	30% (or 24% vol)	fuel for model engines
nitric acid	3%	etching agent, metal treatment, pH adjuster
sodium chlorate, potassium chlorate, sodium perchlorate and potassium perchlorate	40%	pyrotechnic kits, aquatic oxygenating tablets
sulphuric acid	15%	drain cleaner, brick cleaner, car wheel cleaner, acid for car batteries

Business-to-business transactions are outside of the EPP licensing requirements. However, sellers must still ask to see evidence of the purchaser's business, trade or profession as well as asking the purchaser to explain their intended use of the chemicals; sellers need to satisfy themselves it is a genuine business-to-business transaction and

the purchase is not for a malicious purpose.

Any member of the general public who is not using the regulated chemicals as part of their trade, business or profession will need to have an EPP licence to acquire, possess or use the regulated chemicals.

If the consumer asks to purchase a regulated explosives precursor, you must:

- satisfy yourself that the purchase is a business transaction and exempt from the licensing requirement or by a member of the public
- remember corrosives listed in the OWA such as sulphuric acid are also age-restricted and any purchaser, even if a trade professional or business, must still be over 18 to buy them
- if the purchaser is a member of the public, ask to see their EPP licence and associated photographic ID
- check that the licence permits them to buy the product type, quantity and concentration involved and that the purchase is for the specified use
- fill out the back of the licence
- report any suspicious transactions

## Reportable products

A reportable product is one that contains any of the substances listed in the table on the right.

You are legally obliged to report to the national contact point suspicious transactions, significant losses and thefts of products containing the substances in orange.

Products containing the substances in green are also of concern, but reporting is not mandatory.

Suspicious transactions, losses and thefts must be reported to the national contact point using the [online reporting tool](#), by calling 0800 789321, or by sending an email to [chemical.reporting@met.police.uk](mailto:chemical.reporting@met.police.uk).

To be a reportable product, a listed chemical should generally be present, either:

- on its own or the main ingredient
- ... or
- in a simple mixture, typically with fewer than five ingredients

Products containing less than 1% of any of the above chemicals, or fertilisers that are not labelled for nitrogen (N) content, are in general of no concern.

Substance	Typical products
any concentration of regulated explosives precursors in the table on page 9	as above
sulphuric acid	drain cleaner, brick cleaner, car wheel cleaner, acid for car batteries
hexamine	solid camping fuel, model steam engine solid fuel
acetone	nail varnish remover, household solvent
potassium nitrate	food preservative, fertiliser, pyrotechnics
sodium nitrate	fertiliser
calcium nitrate	fertiliser
calcium ammonium nitrate	fertiliser
ammonium nitrate (more than 16% Nitrogen by weight)	fertiliser
other chlorate, perchlorate and nitrate salts	chemical compounds
permanganate salts	disinfectant
fine metal powders such as aluminium and magnesium	pyrotechnic supplies, paint supplies
products marked with a skull and cross bones warning label	pest control, cleaning products



## HOW TO IDENTIFY PRODUCTS OF CONCERN

The following steps will help you sell responsibly and meet your legal requirements:

- 1** Check whether your products contain any of the above listed chemicals or are labelled with the 'skull and crossbones' pictogram. The ingredients of a product can normally be found on the label, in the safety data sheet or in other product information. If you cannot find this information, contact your supplier.
- 2** Identify the products of concern. Products of concern are those in which a listed chemical is present, either:
  - on its own or the main ingredient ...or
  - in a simple mixture, typically five or less ingredients
- 3** Products containing less than 1% of any of the listed chemicals, or fertilisers that are not labelled for nitrogen (N) content, are in general of no concern.
- 4** Inform your staff of the products of concern, what to look out for and how to report them.
- 5** If possible, store the products so that they can be easily monitored by your staff - for example, close to or behind the sales counter or, if feasible, in a locked storeroom.
- 6** Periodically carry out stock checks to monitor stock movement and any potential losses/thefts.
- 7** Periodically review your stocked products to ensure the information remains up to date.

## COMPLYING WITH THE LAW

- 1** Identify which of your products are affected by suspicious transaction reporting requirements.
- 2** Implement a system that reminds sales staff/delivery staff or agents that a product requires suspicious transaction reporting.
- 3** Be clear with staff about suspicious behaviours (see the box on the right).
- 4** Make sure your staff know about the record of suspicious transactions (or other internal company record procedures) and how to report to the national contact point.
- 5** Ensure the above points are in your training manual.
- 6** Remind your staff about the procedures for refusing a sale.

### How to recognise suspicious transactions

A suspicious transaction is any transaction or attempted transaction where there are reasonable grounds for suspecting that the product is intended for malicious purposes. Whether or not behaviour is suspicious has to be judged on a case-by-case basis. Indicators of suspicious behaviour may include when a customer:

- appears nervous or avoids communication
- attempts to purchase an unusual amount of a product or unusual combinations of products
- is not familiar with the regular use(s) of the product(s), nor with the handling instructions
- is not willing to share what they plan to use the product(s) for
- refuses alternative products or products with a lower (but for the proposed use sufficient) concentration
- insists on paying cash, especially large amounts
- is unwilling to provide identity or home address details if requested
- requests packaging or delivery methods that deviate from what would be ordinary, advised or expected

## Regulated poisons

Regulated poisons may be sold to a member of the public only by, or under the supervision of, a registered pharmacist. If you are not a registered pharmacist, or under the supervision of one, you must refuse the sale of any regulated poison you may stock.

Substance	Concentration limit (weight in weight)
aluminium phosphide	-
arsenic and its compounds (other than calcium arsenites, copper acetoarsenite, copper arsenates, copper arsenites, lead arsenates)	-
barium salts (other than barium sulphate, barium carbonate and barium silicofluoride)	-
bromomethane	-
chloropicrin	-
fluoroacetic acid, its salts and fluoroacetamide	-
hydrogen cyanide and metal cyanides (other than ferrocyanides and ferricyanides)	-
lead acetates and compounds of lead with acids from fixed oils	-
magnesium phosphide	-
mercury and its compounds, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• nitrates of mercury</li> <li>• oxides of mercury</li> <li>• mercuric cyanide oxides</li> <li>• mercuric thiocyanate</li> <li>• ammonium mercuric chlorides</li> <li>• potassium mercuric iodides</li> <li>• organic compounds of mercury that contain a methyl (CH<sub>3</sub>) group directly linked to the mercury atom</li> </ul>	-
Oxalic acid	10%
phenols (phenol and phenolic isomers of cresols, xlenols and monoethylphenols), compounds of phenols with a metal, 60% w/w of phenols or, for compounds of phenols with a metal, the equivalent of 60% w/w of phenols	-
phosphorus yellow	-
strychnine and its salts and its quaternary compounds	-
thallium and its salts	-

Note: a full list of reportable poisons is available on the [GOV.UK website](https://www.gov.uk).

## What does the supplier have to ensure is on the label?

If you intend to supply any products containing a regulated poison or explosives precursors over the specified concentrations listed above to a member of the general public, you must ensure that the product is labelled with the following text:

**‘Acquisition, possession or use by the general public is restricted’**

This restriction must be clearly indicated on the packaging. You will need to verify that such a label is affixed to the packaging; if it is not, you must affix one yourself.

You may be able to ensure that this is done through your supply chain. The manufacturer or importer first placing such products on the market for consumer use is best placed to affix the required label. However, the legal duty falls to the supplier to ensure that the label is affixed to any regulated product sold to a member of the public. If you supply a regulated poison or explosives precursor over the specified concentrations listed to a member of

the public without this label, you will commit a criminal offence.

Most regulated products that require this labelling will also need to be labelled according to Regulation (EC) No 1272/2008 on classification, labelling and packaging of substances and mixtures (known as 'CLP') due to their inherent hazardous properties.

CLP came into force on 20 January 2009 in all European Union (EU) Member States, including the UK. The EU CLP Regulation adopts the United Nations' Globally Harmonised System of the classification and labelling of chemicals (GHS) across all EU countries, including the UK when the UK was an EU Member State.

Post-Brexit, the EU CLP Regulation is retained in GB law and is known as GB CLP. These arrangements mean that Great Britain continues to adopt the GHS, independently of the EU.

Article 32((6) of GB CLP states that:

"Label elements resulting from the requirements provided for in other Community acts shall be placed in the section for supplemental information on the label referred to in Article 25."

This means that, for products that fall within the scope of GB CLP, the labelling required must be placed in the section for supplemental information within the CLP label.

Before you order stock through your supply chain, check that it is properly labelled. If it is not, then you are advised not to purchase it to avoid any subsequent supply labelling offences. Take the labelling issue up with the manufacturer / importer / wholesaler. Source alternative, correctly labelled products.

More information on GB CLP can be found on the [Health and Safety Executive website](#).

# Complying with the law when selling these products

## Selling in-store

Before handing over the substance:

- check the person's age using a Challenge 21/25 approach if the product is a corrosive and covered by the legal age restrictions in the OWA or under the voluntary commitments for retailers scheme
- if the product is a regulated poison ensure that the sale is by, or under the supervision of, a registered pharmacist. Record the transaction as required

If the product is a regulated substance and requires an EPP licence:

- check that the photographic ID matches the person and that the photographic ID reference matches the ID reference on the licence front page
- check that the product being purchased is allowed as part of the licence condition's:
  - substance
  - concentration
  - quantity
- record the transaction details in the table on the back of the licence

Depending on your company's circumstances, you could before the transaction is completed:

- ask for the customer to provide a scanned copy of their licence before they are able to complete a transaction for a regulated substance
- if you require customers to register for a customer account, you could allow them to upload a scanned copy of their licence to their account record

The Home Office is developing an online licence number-checking tool, which will allow you to enter the licence number and an identity detail (such as the customer's date of birth or surname) into a form to check whether it is a valid licence number and that the licence number is associated with that individual.

## Selling remotely and providing delivery

The law does not prohibit online or other forms or remote sales of regulated substances to members of the public. However, you must remember that it is a criminal offence to deliver corrosive substances to a residential address or a locker.

Explosives, corrosives and poisons are Royal Mail-prohibited items and must not be sent through the post.

Licensed poisons can only be supplied to the public by a pharmacy business. Remote sale systems must ensure the sale is by, or under the supervision of, a registered pharmacist.

For remote sales, retailers must still comply with the requirements to:

- not supply regulated substances above the concentration threshold to members of the public, unless they hold an EPP licence
- verify that the member of the public holds a valid licence
- record the details of any transaction on the back of the licence
- ensure any product containing a regulated substance above the concentration threshold that

“It is a criminal offence to deliver corrosive substances to a residential address or a locker”



is supplied to a member of the public is labelled with "Acquisition, possession or use by the general public is restricted"

- identify and report any suspicious transactions

You must ensure that your remote sales system has robust age verification and ID / licence checks. Online age verification software is available that makes use of various sources of information in order to verify both age and identity during the ordering process. These checks include using the electoral register and/or credit reference agencies. There are also businesses that offer online access to electoral register information, which could be used to verify a purchaser's age.

If the product is regulated and requires an EPP licence, the system must be capable of checking that the:

- photographic ID matches the person and that the photographic ID reference matches the ID reference on the front page of the licence
- product being purchased is allowed as part of the licence condition's:
  - substance
  - concentration
  - quantity

Your delivery staff/provider will then need to physically check these same requirements. You will need to provide the delivery agent with the order amount and detail to allow these checks to be done.

Your delivery staff/provider will then need to record the transaction details in the table on the back of the purchaser's licence.

You must ensure that the regulated substance is given only to the licence holder. It cannot be left unattended or left with another individual.

Remember, even if the purchaser has a valid EPP licence you must not deliver corrosive substances listed in the OWA to a residential address or a locker.

Your delivery staff/provider must record that these checks and requirements have all been done and provide this evidence to you after delivery. You must retain this evidence; no specific retention period is specified, but you should consider retaining this information for at least three years, in accordance with any data protection policies you may have.





Your system must also include a process to identify whether the transaction is suspicious in some way or if there may be reasonable grounds to suspect that the product is intended for malicious use. For example, there may have been multiple purchases of the same chemical over a short period that cannot be easily explained or the customer is requesting unusual amounts for the stated purpose. In such cases you must report this to the national contact point.

See '[Online sales of age-restricted products](#)' for more information regarding online sales.

### Collect in-store

For some retailers that also have a high street presence, purchasers could view and reserve products remotely and then collect in-store, where age verification and licence checks could be carried out by members of staff, as for a normal face-to-face transaction.

See '[Underage sales](#)' for more information on effective age verification procedures.

## Enforcement

Non-compliance with the law is a criminal offence. The police are responsible for enforcing the regime for explosives precursors and poisons. The General Pharmaceutical Council will continue to have a role in inspecting pharmacies and associated pharmacy premises. Trading standards officers enforce the laws on age-restricted corrosive products and their supply, as well as product labelling.

For more information on the work of trading standards services - and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law - please see '[Trading standards: powers, enforcement and penalties](#)'.

### **Key legislation**

[Poisons Act 1972](#)

[Control of Poisons and Explosives](#)

[Precursors Regulations 2015](#)

[Offensive Weapons Act 2019](#)

# Background: Guidance on the marketing, sale and delivery of knives, bladed articles and bladed products

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

Controls on the sale of knives and offensive weapons have been in place for decades, including age restrictions. However, not all knife and offensive weapon offending is committed by young people. The carrying of an offensive weapon, a knife, or a bladed/pointed article by anyone is a serious offence. Following rises in knife crime and the possession and use of products with novel designs, particularly large serrated blade weapons (known as 'zombie' knives), the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (OWA) brought in further restrictions on knives and 'bladed products' and controls on their supply and delivery.

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

Alongside the new laws, the Government has introduced a [voluntary retailers' agreement](#); trading standards and the police encourage retailers to sign up to the agreement, which aims to restrict access to these products. There is also a [knife retailer toolkit](#), which can be found on the National Business Crime Centre website.

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

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

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

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

## Bladed articles

These are any knife, knife blade, razor blade, axe, or other article with a blade or sharp point, which is made or adapted to use for causing injury to a person. **It is an offence to sell a bladed article to a person under 18.**

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

This applies to any article which is, or has, a blade. This can include things that you may not initially think of as a knife – for example, carpentry adzes, gardening tools such as shears, secateurs, hooks and slashers, paint scrapers and multi-tools (tools that contain a knife or blade alongside other devices such as a screwdriver, can opener, etc).

The only exception in the law to the bladed or sharply pointed age-restriction provision is a folding pocket knife, and only if the blade does not exceed 7.62 cm (3 inches). Typically this would catch Swiss army-style knives. 'Folding pocket knife' means immediately foldable, simply by pressing it into place. If any

further action is required, such as pressing a button or releasing a catch (as is the case with a lock knife), the knife is not a folding pocket knife and not exempted.

All other bladed articles which are plainly not foldable pocket knives – for instance, kitchen knives or a foldable cut-throat razor – are technically caught by the age restriction, irrespective of length.

The prohibition on the sale to a person under 18 does not apply to weapons of the above description if they are antiques. For these purposes a weapon is an antique if it was manufactured more than 100 years before the date of any alleged offence having been committed.

Whilst the courts are the final arbiter of whether an article is a bladed article, it is unlikely that the following items would be considered subject to the age restriction:

- cutlery knives other than sharply pointed steak knives
- small scissors with rounded tips
- utility knives with small cutting blades
- snap-off cutters
- pizza cutters
- cheese knives
- plastic cutlery knives
- encased razor blades (also referred to as 'safety' razors)
- blades which are part of domestic appliances, such as food processors and blenders

- blades which are part of lawn mowers and similar tools
- woodturning tools such as chisels

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

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

- a butterknife, with no cutting edge and no point is a bladed article (Booker v DPP [2005] 169J.P. 368, DG)
- a screwdriver is not a bladed article (R v Davis [1998] Crim L.R. 564 CA)
- a 'lock knife' does not come into the category of 'folding pocket knife' because it is not immediately foldable at all times (R v Deegan [1998] 2 Cr. App. R. 121 CA)

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

In addition to these controls, if these items also fall within the OWA definition of "bladed product" (see below) then they must NOT be delivered to residential premises unless certain conditions are met if sold remotely.



### Bladed products

The term "bladed product" is a new term introduced in the OWA and is intended to cover a subset of bladed articles. It means an article with a blade that is capable of causing a serious injury to a person which involves cutting that person's skin. Bladed products must not be delivered to residential premises unless certain conditions are met if sold remotely.

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

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



“Retailers are expected to act responsibly and to consider carefully whether an item could commonly be defined as a knife”

in the list below are unlikely to be considered bladed products:

- cutlery knives (other than sharply pointed steak knives)
- utility knives with small cutting blades
- a pocket knife with a folding blade 7.62 cm (3 inches) long, or less
- snap-off cutters
- pizza cutters
- small cheese knives

This is because the objective is to reduce access to dangerous knives and blades and their use in violent crime. The types of bladed articles listed above are unlikely to fall within the definition of bladed product, and may therefore still be delivered to residential premises.

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

### Age verification

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

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

If you already have existing Challenge 21/25 policies to ensure that anyone who appears to be below the age of 18 provides acceptable identification before purchasing an age-restricted product, these can be extended to cover the sale of articles with a point or blade. Acceptable ID is:

- a passport.
- an EU photocard driving licence
- other valid forms of identification, including (for England and Wales) electronic age verification. This approach will also mean that visual assessment is sufficient for anyone who is clearly over the age of 21/25

### **ELECTRONIC AND DIGITAL AGE VERIFICATION**

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

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

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

### **COLLECTION POINTS**

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

### **DELIVERY**

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

- clearly and properly labelled on its packaging
- only given to an age-verified person
- not left unattended
- not delivered to a residential address without the necessary checks
- not delivered to a locker

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

See '[Online sales of age-restricted products](#)' for more information regarding online sales.

See '[Underage sales](#)' for more information on effective age verification procedures.

# Labelling

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

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

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

Example labelling:

**This package contains a bladed article and must only be delivered into the hands of a person aged 18 or over**

It is unlikely that electronic labels used on handheld signature devices often used by delivery companies and couriers would satisfy the requirement to label the product. The OWA is clear that the package itself must be clearly labelled.

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

## **DELIVERY TO RESIDENTIAL PREMISES**

The OWA creates a new offence for the seller to deliver, or arrange the delivery of, 'bladed products' to residential premises, unless certain checks are carried out by the seller before the delivery is arranged.

As delivery can be arranged at point of sale – for example, when an online checkout process requires the purchaser to provide an address for delivery prior to clicking 'buy' in their online basket etc – these checks need to occur before the contract of sale is concluded (that is, before the purchase can be completed and payment is taken).

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

It is for the seller to satisfy themselves that the address is not used solely for residential purposes. A record must be kept of how this is done and of the information used to satisfy the seller that the address is not solely residential.

The offence of delivery to a residential address applies both to sellers who themselves deliver items (through their delivery arm) and to sellers who arrange for delivery by a separate delivery company.

There are defences available to the seller where the company took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to prevent the item being delivered to a person under the age of 18. The effect of this is that where a seller is sure that the bladed product will not be handed to a person aged under 18, they can deliver it to a residential premises. Where no such arrangements are in place, the item will have to be collected in person at a collection point where proper age verification checks can take place.

For example, you may sell online and have specific online age verification processes in place, prior to the sale being processed, to confirm that the purchaser is 18 or over. Where these checks are carried out and you allow the sale to occur, there must be further checks to ensure that the item is only delivered to that person (or another person whose age is verified at point of delivery). If you just send the item through the mail as a normal parcel to a residential address, you will commit an offence.

### USING DELIVERY COMPANIES/ COURIERS

If you have a pre-existing contractual arrangement with a third-party delivery company to deliver knives and other bladed articles, then the courier/delivery agent must carry out checks upon delivery to ensure the knife or bladed article is only delivered to a person who is at least 18.

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

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

Sellers who sell to residential addresses must not use delivery companies that do not provide an age verification service, or whose terms and conditions expressly forbid the carriage of knives – for example DPD or Hermes.

The seller is required to ensure that parcels containing these items are clearly labelled as required when they are dispatched; it is not the responsibility of the delivery company to do so.

Where sellers do not make such explicit declarations and contractual arrangements with a delivery company that provides an age verification service, then they will not be able to access that defence if they send knives or bladed articles to a residential address.

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

### EXAMPLES OF A WEAK AGE VERIFICATION SYSTEM

The following examples would be insufficient to demonstrate that robust age verification has taken place:

- relying on the person purchasing the item to tick a box confirming that they are 18 or over
- relying in any other way on information provided by the buyer that they are 18 or over without conducting additional checks
- using payment systems that may require the customer to be 18 or over, but do not verify age at point of purchase (for example, by credit card)

See '[Online sales of age-restricted products](#)' for more information regarding online sales.

## Banned offensive weapons

In addition to the age restriction on the sale of 'legal' knives and bladed articles, there are a large number of banned offensive weapon products that it is illegal to sell, hire, lend or give to anyone irrespective of their age. These are:

- flick knives (also known as 'switchblades' or 'automatic knives') – a blade hidden inside a handle, which shoots out when a button is pressed
- gravity knives
- butterfly knives (also known as 'balisongs') – a blade hidden inside a handle that splits in the middle
- disguised knives – a blade or sharp point hidden inside what looks like everyday objects such as a buckle, phone, brush or lipstick
- stealth knives – a knife or spike not made from metal (except when used at home, for food or a toy)
- zombie knives – a knife with a cutting edge, a serrated edge and images or words suggesting it is used for violence
- swords, including samurai swords – a curved blade over 50 cm (with some exceptions, such as antiques and swords made to traditional methods before 1954)



- sword-sticks – a hollow walking stick or cane containing a blade
- push daggers
- blowpipes ('blow gun')
- telescopic truncheons – extend automatically by pressing button or spring in the handle
- batons – straight, side-handled or friction-lock truncheons
- hollow kubotans – a cylinder-shaped keychain holding spikes
- shurikens (also known as 'shaken', 'death stars' or 'throwing stars')
- kusari-gama – a sickle attached to a rope, cord or wire
- kyoketsu-shoge – a hook-knife attached to a rope, cord or wire
- kusari (or 'manrikigusari') – a weight attached to a rope, cord or wire
- hand or foot-claws
- knuckledusters

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

“Trading standards officers enforce the laws on age-restricted products and their supply”



# The Knives Act 1997

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

- indicates or suggests that it is suitable for combat (the term 'suitable for combat' means that the knife is suitable for use as a weapon for inflicting injury or causing fear of injury to the person)

...or

- is otherwise likely to stimulate or encourage violent behaviour involving the use of the knife as a weapon

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

- applied to the knife
- on the knife or on any packaging in which it is contained
- included in any advertisement that expressly or by implication relates to the knife
- there are exemptions to allow sales of such items for legitimate purposes, such as for use by armed forces, as antiques or as collectors' pieces
- when considering the sale of knives and bladed articles and the marketing of such, it is therefore essential that you actively review and document your decisions as to:

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

Further guidance on the sale of knives, including restrictions on the marketing of knives, see '[Knives and other bladed items](#)'.

## ENFORCEMENT

Trading standards officers enforce the laws on age-restricted products and their supply.

For more information on the work of trading standards services - and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law – please see '[Trading standards: powers, enforcement and penalties](#)'.

## Key legislation

[Restriction of Offensive Weapons Act 1959](#)  
[Criminal Justice Act 1988](#)  
[Knives Act 1997](#)  
[Offensive Weapons Act 2019](#)

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# More information

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