

Offensive Weapons Bill (HC 232)

Written Evidence to the Public Bill Committee

Submitted by Christopher Mark Ashbolt: Mora Distribution Limited

Executive Summary:

This document primarily outlines the lack of collaboration by the Home Office, the strength of feeling by the industry and end users as well as reiterating the proposals previously presented to the Minister for Safeguarding's office (supported by MPS, MOPAC and Croydon Trading Standards) which were presented again by MOPAC on my behalf and still not acknowledged.

It also highlights the punitive inequalities proposed between Online retailing and Bricks and Mortar retailing and that it makes importers who supply the Military liable to a custodial sentence.

In the Impact assessment 63% of respondents opposed the ban on sales to residential addresses and despite this the Bill still presents this as a solution to knife crime.

Please see section (4) for a real solution to preventing access to bladed tools by those who would wish to use them as weapons.

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(1) Introduction:

- (a) Mora Distribution are importers and distributors of various types of bladed tools and were established in 2009, since our formation we have continually grown as a business by focusing on delivering “quality stock, next day delivery” at the lowest price we can achieve.
- (b) We have been working with the Metropolitan Police since 24th February 2016, initially under the “Operation Sceptre” banner but more recently as part of the “MPS Knife Crime Retailer Steering Group” trying to minimise the importation of and access to offensive weapons.
- (c) Our meetings at New Scotland Yard have forged links with many other companies and agencies and, as with all committees, sometimes we agree, sometimes we see a different path, but it is fair to say that the MPS Knife Crime Retailer Steering Group all wish to see reduced availability of bladed tools to those who would wish to use them as weapons.
- (d) I will go on to explain the proposals and representations made by Mora Distribution, how they were broadly accepted by most agencies and ignored by the Home Office.
- (e) Our focus will be surrounding the remote sale of bladed tools as this is our area of expertise. We have been made aware that other interested parties are making representations surrounding their fields.
- (f) CAVEAT: I am not a solicitor and have interpreted the Bill as best possible with the assistance of other industry members. Should I have inadvertently misinterpreted any part I apologise.

(2) History and Timeline:

- (a) As this stretches back to 24th February 2016 I will start the timeline to my first attempts to meet with the Minister for Safeguarding. That meeting, despite the Home Office claiming to be “working with the industry” has never happened.
- (i) 20/10/17 to Sarah Newton MP requesting meeting
 - (ii) 24/10/17 to Rt Hon Caroline Noakes MP asking her to chase Sarah Newton
 - (iii) 24/10/17 from Caroline Noakes – Sarah Newton is considering my request for a meeting.
 - (iv) 27/10/17 from Lorraine Cavill offering an appointment with Sarah Newton 20/10/17 17:00
 - (v) 9/11/17 Victoria Atkins takes over from Sarah Newton.
 - (vi) 9/11/17 to Lorraine Cavill asking that my appointment be transferred to Victoria Atkins
 - (vii) 11/11/17 from Victoria Atkins asking me to see Nick Hunt instead.
 - (viii) 15/11/17 to Lorraine Cavill insisting that I see the Minister
 - (ix) 15/11/17 from Lorraine Cavill Victoria Atkins will see me 4/12/17
 - (x) 1/12/17 Meeting with Victoria Atkins cancelled – offered Nick Hunt on 11th of December
 - (xi) 11th December Meeting with Nick Hunt
 - (xii) 18/4/18 Direct retailer forum at NSY which Minister for Safeguarding’s office do not attend
- (b) The only member of our industry that we are aware of having met the Minister was Garry Woodhouse from Whitby & Co as a constituent, not in her role as Minister for Safeguarding.
- (c) Claims made by the Home Office that they are “working with the industry” cannot be considered valid.

(3) The Bill

- (a) There are numerous issues surrounding the Draft Bill but the foremost must be that it is phrased in such a way that vendors and couriers will be guilty until proven innocent. Any company dispatching to a residential property would be guilty of an offense and required to justify their innocence under the defences offered.
- (b) The Bill itself discriminates against the disabled and house bound incapable of accessing a collection point but requiring bladed tools for past times, livelihoods and hobbies.
- (c) Little thought appears to have gone into the inclusions and exclusions. Please see appendix 9 where items (a) through (f) are excluded from the Bill but (g) will be prohibited.
 - (i) 8(a) Crossbows are excluded
 - (ii) 8(b) non-locking folding knives with a blade of less than 3" – excluded
 - (iii) 8(c) Fencing rapiers excluded under the definition of "Sport"
 - (iv) 8(d) Dwarf Axe excluded under "re-enactment"
 - (v) 8(e) Broad Sword excluded under "re-enactment"
 - (vi) 8(f) Katana or Samurai Sword exclude under "Sport"
 - (vii) 8(g) Mini geometric wood chipper / carver. Included
- (d) It is grossly unfair to subject either self-employed couriers or their corporate bodies to liability for prosecution should they be adjudged to have failed due diligence in age verification.
- (e) Examples of impact on productivity;
 - (i) Mobile hairdressers able to send their scissors to be sharpened but unable to have them returned.
 - (ii) Gardeners unable to buy new Lawnmower blades.
 - (iii) Joiners unable to order specialist chisels or gouges.
 - (iv) Plumbers unable to order pipe cutting tools
 - (v) Electricians screwdrivers could no longer be couriered.
 - (vi) Scout leaders unable to have tools delivered with which to teach their charges.
- (f) Under this draft bill whenever our company are in possession of special operational equipment for the MOD the directors will be liable for a twelve-month custodial sentence. We supply the military thousands of bladed tools a year but would need to reconsider supplying the MOD from a UK base of operations.

(4) Proposed amendments

- (a) Remove all references to remote sales of bladed tools. There is no evidence that this will reduce knife crime but will only impact on UK productivity by preventing access to working tools.
- (b) Introduce importer licensing to empower UKBA to seize and destroy any bladed tool coming across UK borders. **This policy has the support of The Metropolitan Police, MOPAC and Trading Standards.** This license would include open door / open book access to importer records, stock and premises. Sales and customer records to be held for the inspection of any governmental or law enforcement body requiring access.
- (c) Introduce retailer registration / licensing which will empower trading standards to confiscate stock from retailers failing multiple test purchases or selling without permission.
- (d) Introduce a requirement that all bladed tools must be stored behind glass or a counter in bricks and mortar retailers
- (e) Insert an "Age verification checklist" for all retailers of bladed tools (As suggested by the APPG on Digital ID / Age verification 4th July 2018).
 - (i) Photo ID – Passport / Driving License / EU ID card
 - (ii) Use card transactions only for traceability
 - (iii) Ensure dispatch via a signed for courier service
- (d) Insert a defence for possession of offensive weapons when it is accompanied by an MOD purchase order or quartermasters letter or if being held as stock for military reorders.

(5) Petition 222776

(a) On Thursday 21st June I applied for a petition to block article 15 of the Bill and it was permitted for publishing on the 28th of June. As of today, the petition has attracted 18682 signatures and is still awaiting a government response.

(b) We have yet to inform all affected parties of it's existence but are gaining more support and celebrity endorsements by the day.

(c) <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/222776>

(d) This petition was never done with the intention of blocking the Bill, that can be done under the DDA. The intention was solely to get the attention of the Home Office who appear to not consider the opinion of the representative of 600+ retailers relevant.

(e) As you will see from the petition map, the issue is not access to tools in conurbations but in the rural economy where tools are required to carry out a days work.



(6) Letters of support and quotes

Ben Fogle:

“This law seems to be loaded to the assumption we are all criminals. The majority of bladed tools are used by hardworking folk. Stop the criminals at grass roots rather than penalise the artisans who need them.”

Ray Mears:

“This new draft law is not the best proposal for the current situation”

“eradicate this new draft law which will stop customers from being able to have bladed tools delivered to their home address”

Business Aspirations Cheshire:

“No sensible person wants to see knife crime. Banning the sale of woodworking tools is not the way to reduce the crime.”

Geoffrey Guy @CdaGuy:

“Stabbings have been done with bicycle spokes sharp sticks and broken bottles but the whittling knives I need are apparently causing knife crime.”

Lee Cooper @ch3flee:

“As a chef how else can we buy knives of superior quality?”

(7) Closing statement / Impact Assessment

- (a) In section B 1 of the Impact assessment the Home office claim to have worked with 12 Major retailers, of the 12 businesses mentioned none are major retailers of bladed tools. John Lewis, Waitrose and eBay have specific policies not to sell bladed tools online.
- (b) The Impact assessment is full of misguided and ill-informed assumptions like the majority of pick up points being in supermarkets and petrol stations when they are mainly in corner shops. Also, the assessments understanding of shipping costs seems to assume that no online retailer uses a “signed for” service.
- (c) In the “Statutory Equalities Section / Does your policy option/proposal consider” yes has been ticked without due consideration to the disabled and infirm and their access to bladed tools for hobbies and livelihoods.
- (d) In the Business Net Present Value, the assessment of a loss of £2M is massively misjudged, MDL represent £1M per year alone and would need to leave the UK to continue supplying the MOD the thousands of tools we supply annually.
- (e) The online test purchases carried out historically cannot evidence their methodology to prove that they have not accidentally included non-UK based e-retailers notorious for disregarding age verifications. Indeed, the notorious Christmas 2016 online TP results have now been obfuscated under section 31. However, ***“The online test purchasing exercise of knives which took place in December 2016 was a joint exercise carried out at the request of the Metropolitan Police. Croydon Trading standards worked with the Police in carrying out the exercise on the agreement that any follow up action in relation to sales made or issues occurring would be undertaken by the police and not Croydon Trading standards. As such we do not hold the information that you have requested. All the businesses had a UK geographical base but Trading Standards did not check their registered addresses. Police were informed of any sales that were made in order that they might take appropriate follow-up action.”*** proves that at no point was the grey importing of bladed tools and offensive weapons considered.
- (f) We were very disappointed to find that as one of the largest importers of bladed tools in the UK our submission to the consultation was not referenced.

Due to the restrictions of the written submission guidelines I am unable to supply my full evidence, but I am available for oral evidence at your convenience.

(8) Image Appendix

(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)



(g)

