

Our Ref: TB/JSM

The Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
Direct Communications Unit
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

2 August 2017

Dear Amber,

Re: Proposals to restrict online sale of knives

I am writing to you regarding your proposals, announced on 18 July, to change the law to require knives purchased online to be collected in person.

The Countryside Alliance recognises the problem of knife crime and fully supports efforts to reduce it, which must include tackling underage purchasing of knives. However, we have concerns that these proposals will adversely affect rural communities without any evidence that changing the law as you propose will reduce knife related crime.

I appreciate that there will be a consultation on these proposals later this year, and we look forward to taking part in that, but I wanted to express some initial concerns.

Farming and country sports are important to many rural communities and these often require the use of knives. 3.5 million people in the UK regularly coarse, game or sea fish and 600,000 people take part in shooting, with over 400,000 employed in agriculture. These people are often in rural areas. One in six people in the UK live in rural areas yet seven out of ten villages in rural areas no longer have a shop. Combined with often limited public transport, and high fuel costs, the proposals to require knives purchased online to be collected in person (likely to be from a shop located in an urban area) will not be practical for many people in rural areas, or significantly inconvenience them.

Many farming and country sports retailers do not have an outlet but these retailers are very popular with many of our 100,000 members and supporters who enjoy being able to purchase knives from independent businesses online. There is a risk that small business owners may be disproportionately affected by the proposals on account of not having an outlet and the additional costs involved in adhering to the proposals.

One of the main problems of identifying online knife purchasers is caused by inadequate training of delivery drivers and couriers who fail to carry out the necessary age verification on delivery. I appreciate that the Home Office is already co-operating with the British Retail Consortium in their aim "to minimise the underage sale of knives [online]" and we hope that the option of strengthening the existing 2016 voluntary agreement between retailers and the Home Office will be considered before any change in the law is brought forward.

As you know, there is existing software for checking a person's identity online which is used by government agencies. GOV.UK Verify gives agencies the ability to check a person's identity through an external approved organisation such as Royal Mail or Barclays. We believe that this system could be extended to online retailers as a requirement for the sale of knives, and we hope this option will also be considered.

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I am aware that the latest figures from the National Crime Survey for England and Wales show a 20 per cent increase in knife crime since 2012, and the Countryside Alliance will support evidence-based proposals to help reduce this. However, the latest statistics have been described by the Office for National Statistics as "not statistically significant" as the increase could be attributed to previous low recording figures, and the police increasing efforts to tackle knife related crime. We therefore do not believe that these statistics can be used to justify the changes to the law which you are proposing.

I would be delighted to discuss the proposals with your officials to ensure that any policies to tackle knife crime are effective, without adversely affecting rural communities.

Yours Tim

Tim Bonner

Chief Executive

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cc.

- Sarah Newton MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability
- Simon Hart MP, Chairman, Countryside Alliance