

Home Secretary backs police to increase stop and search

Police will have greater powers to prevent knife crime and tackle serious violence as the Home Secretary permanently lifts restrictions on their use of stop and search in areas where they anticipate serious violence to happen.

In a letter sent to police forces today (Monday 16 May), the Home Secretary will remove restrictions on section 60 that have been in place since 2014. These restrictions have limited when officers could use the vital power and decreased their confidence in deploying it.

Removing these restrictions means that more officers can authorise section 60, the powers can be in place for longer and can be used when police anticipate that serious violence 'may' occur rather than 'will' occur.

This will give officers full operational flexibility and the confidence they need to use the tool, helping rid the streets of dangerous weapons and save lives.

The move coincides with the launch of Operation Sceptre – a week of intensive action from every police force in England and Wales to combat knife crime up and down the country.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

The devastating impact of knife crime on families who have lost their loved one is unbearable. No one should have to endure the pain and suffering of the victims of these appalling crimes and we have a responsibility to them to do everything in our power to prevent future tragedies.

Since 2019, the police have removed over 50,000 knives and offensive weapons from our streets and in the 2 years to March 2021, over 150,000 arrests were made following stop and search, preventing thousands of possible fatal injuries.

I stand wholeheartedly behind the police so that they can build on their work to drive down knife crime by making it easier for officers to use these powers to seize more weapons, arrest more suspects and save more lives.

Since 2019, stop and search use has increased by around 85% and has contributed to over 50,000 deadly knives and offensive weapons being taken off our streets.

The government has further signalled its commitment to support police forces to use stop and search powers today by launching a consultation to make it

easier for officers to search known knife carriers.

This follows the introduction of Serious Violence Reduction Orders under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act passed last month which will give the police the power to stop and search adults who have previously been convicted for knife or other offensive weapon crimes.

These measures are intended to help further drive down knife crime after recent statistics have indicated there has been a 4% decrease in stabbings in the year to December 2021. From March 2019 until now, under this government, stabbings have fallen around 10%.

Permanently relaxing the conditions maintains forces' use of section 60 in line with the original legislative position laid out in the 1994 Act and means:

1. Reducing the threshold that must be met before a Section 60 authorisation can be given from reasonably believing serious violence "will" occur to "may" occur.
2. Lowering the rank of officer able to give an initial Section 60 authorisation from senior officer to an officer of or above the rank of an inspector.
3. Increasing the maximum period in which a Section 60 authorisation can remain in place (without extension) from 15 hours to 24 hours.
4. Lowering the rank of officer required to extend a Section 60 authorisation from senior officer to superintendent or above and increasing the maximum period to which an authorisation can be extended (beyond an initial 24 hours) from 39 hours to 48 hours.
5. Section 60 authorisations no longer needed to be publicly communicated to communities in advance.

The government will be working with policing partners to provide strong guidance to forces on ensuring transparent communication with communities when section 60 will be used to help build community trust and confidence, noting that in some instances this might not be possible due to operational tactics.

The Home Office has already asked the College of Policing to update its stop and search guidance to ensure its fair and proportionate use. The updated guidance was published in July 2020 and provides best practice examples for forces to use on community engagement and scrutiny.