

Gazette

COMMENT

Action at last on knives

FOR murder victims and their bereaved families, the weapon used is likely to be a rather academic consideration.

So it seems absurd the law chooses to distinguish between murder by gun and by knife.

Those sentenced for shooting their victim land a 25-year minimum jail sentence.

Stab them and the ceiling drops to 15 years.

The reasons for this discrepancy lie so deep in the legal past that no one seems able to remember why they arose in the first place.

Certainly they appear utterly irrational at a time when knife crime, in Essex as elsewhere, has become entrenched.

The low level is also deeply insulting to victims. Jack Straw now, at last, plans to raise the bar so that sentencing for knife and gun murder are the same.

The public response is likely to be – what kept you?

It seems an Essex campaigner, Anne Oakes-Odger, has been a major influence in persuading the Justice Secretary to implement and fast-track the changes.

At least the law will now speak a bit more clearly about society's abhorrence of knives.

Jack Straw and the Justice Department have been won over by logical argument. They may also have been moved to act by something else – the passion and enduring grief of Mrs Oakes-Odger, whose son was casually murdered with a knife.

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CAMPAIGN JOY FOR MUM OF MURDERED WESTLEY

By GINA MARDEN

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A CAMPAIGNING mum thinks the Government has taken the right approach to sentencing those who kill with a knife.

Anne Oakes-Odger began her crusade to get tougher sentences for knife killers after her son Westley, 27, was murdered in September, 2005.

Her campaign mirrors that of the family of teenager Ben Kinsella, who was knifed to death in June last year.

Following his senseless killing, in Islington, his sister – former EastEnders actress Brooke Kinsella, who teaches at the Future Faces Theatre School in Benfleet – became the public face of her family's pain.

The tragic 16-year-old was one of a growing number of people to have lost their life to knife crime.

Now justice secretary Jack Straw has announced proposals to lock up murderers, who killed with a blade, for a minimum of 25 years.

Mr Straw, who wants the legislation in place by early next year, said he wanted the minimum term for knife killers raised from 15 to 25 years.

He said: "It is only right that thugs who carry knives with the intention of using them, potentially to kill, should the opportunity arise, go to prison for a

“It is only right that thugs who carry knives with the intention of using them, potentially to kill, go to prison for a very long time”

very long time.”

Mrs Oakes-Odger has battled for knife-related killings to be brought into line with gun-related murders.

Of Jack Straw's announcement, she said: "This is predominantly down to my campaigning."

"It was with the support of Colchester MP Bob Russell that we made the call for knife crime to be dealt with in the same terms as gun crime."

"If you shoot someone, the life sentence tariff starts at 30 years."

"If you stab someone, which is a horrendous way to die, the starting tariff was 15 years."

"I think 25 years is a pretty good starting point, although how that equates into the sentencing guidelines, we will have to see."

Her son Westley was set upon at a cashpoint in Hunwicke Road, Colchester, by brothers Mark and Andrew Fredericks.

They stabbed him in the neck and he died from his injuries.

Andrew Fredericks, 32, was jailed for life for murder and told to serve a minimum of 15 years.



■ Crusade – Ann Oakes-Odger and, right, her murdered son Westley



■ Flashback – what drove Ann Oakes-Odger's knife crime fight

with in the courts. Ms Oakes-Odger added: "We do need a deterrent. People need to realise there is a consequence to carrying a knife and that if they choose to take a life in that way, then they will be dealt with robustly."

Ben Kinsella's sister Brooke, 26, said the justice secretary's decision was a positive step.

She said: "We're just ecstatic."

"This is something that will mean people will remember Ben, so his death wasn't in vain."

"For a 16-year-old boy to have actually changed the law I think is amazing, so we're really happy."

"To be honest, we'd have liked it to be 30 years to match guns, but we're more than happy – 25 is ten more years."

Jack Straw's proposals have

“This change is predominantly down to my campaigning. I think 25 years is a pretty good starting point”

also been met with a cautious welcome from politicians.

Bob Russell, MP for Colchester, said: "I am delighted. It is long overdue."

"I pay tribute to Ms Oakes-Odger and her national campaign based on her personal tragedy in Colchester."

"It is an issue I have pressed twice through the Home Affairs Select Committee."

"It all started when Ms Oakes-Odger contacted me following the brutal murder of her son."

"You are three to four times more likely to be killed by somebody with a knife than somebody with a gun."

"It's long overdue that the Government recognised the seriousness of knife crime."

"This is a welcome step by the Justice Secretary."

"Mrs Oakes-Odger is the one who is worthy of fulsome praise because of the work she has done and continues to do."

Victory for Ann as knife crime sentence is to increase

His brother, Mark Fredericks, 36, has been jailed for seven years for manslaughter.

Both had denied murder and blamed each other for striking the fatal blow.

Ms Oakes-Odger branded the sentences a "nonsense".

She wrote to the Attorney General and asked him to look at the case in the Appeal Court

before starting a petition.

Since then, she has founded the organisation www.knife-crimes.org and tours schools to speak about her experiences.

She has twice addressed the Commons Home Affairs Select Committee on the issue of sentencing, and is working with the Ministry of Justice to improve the way knife crime is dealt

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW?
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