

STEPHEN JOLLY TAKES AIM AT A STRONGER FUTURE FOR THE GUN TRADE

Gun Trade Insider sat down with newly appointed Gun Trade Association executive director Stephen Jolly to discuss his priorities for the role, how he plans to support the trade through challenging times, and why he believes the future of the industry depends on a strong, focused voice.

Gun Trade Insider: You're officially taking on the role of executive director next week. How has the transition been so far?

Stephen Jolly: Yes, I start officially on Monday, 24th March, but I've been shadowing Simon West behind the scenes for a couple of weeks. That's been incredibly useful – he's been generous in offering guidance, which I appreciate. Of course, Simon is a hard act to follow. He's articulate, charming, deeply knowledgeable, well-regarded.

GTI: What drew you to the role?

SJ: I've known Simon for some time, so I had a sense of the work the GTA was involved in. Interestingly, he didn't personally invite me to apply - I saw the role advertised. I've been working abroad for much of the past five years, and with a young family, the opportunity to base myself in the UK is an attractive proposition. A number of things about the role really appealed to me.

For one, I am a shooter. I recently shot in the Varsity clay pigeon match against Oxford at EJ Churchill – Cambridge won, naturally! While I wouldn't by any means call myself an elite shot, I'm certainly competent. I've also been a rough shooter for many years. But that wasn't the primary reason for applying.

What really interested me was the unique position of the gun trade - particularly the tension between being a trade and industry body while also being close to a consumer base comprised of shooters. It presents a compelling challenge: how to balance industrial and commercial priorities with the expectations of a wider shooting community.

GTI: Do you think it's important to separate the GTA from broader countryside or shooting lobbies?

SJ: Yes, I do. There are plenty of other organisations representing field sports or broader rural interests. The GTA has a clear mandate, and I intend to stick to that. I won't pretend to be what we're not.

We're a trade body. That includes manufacturers, distributors and retailers. And while that overlaps with field sports, our focus must always be on the industrial

and commercial health of the sector.

GTI: As you take the reins, are there any immediate priorities?

SJ: First, I need to get my feet under the table. Simon has a particular style and approach, and inevitably, mine will differ. My initial focus will be on ensuring the organisation is fit for purpose - from internal processes to external services.

One area I'll be reviewing is the value we offer to members, particularly those in the retail trade, where we don't currently have full coverage. Given the political and economic headwinds, retailers are facing a tough environment. I'll be looking at how we can better support them. That will help us to recruit new members, especially among retailers, and service them better.

GTI: What about the regulatory side - are there pressing issues there?

SJ: My main area of concern is the Government's debate around harmonising the licensing requirements for shotguns and Section One firearms. If handled clumsily, this could have a devastating impact on the trade. This is a complex area and needs some finesse. We can debate the requirements of responsible, proportional changes to the legislation but the shotgun certificate needs to be retained. Its loss would introduce unnecessary bureaucracy and depress sales.

GTI: Given your background, do you feel well prepared for that kind of lobbying work?

SJ: Yes. I've spent much of my career dealing with politicians, civil servants, regulators, trade unions. I believe in quiet suasion, not shouting from the rooftops. The aim is to build constructive partnerships, even with those who might be sceptical of our sector. Perversely, that can on occasion include engaging with those who oppose shooting. While we won't see eye-to-eye, I've no objection to maintaining cordial, professional relations. That's the only way to influence policy in any meaningful way.

GTI: Beyond lobbying and retail support, what are your wider goals for the GTA?



SJ: I'm very interested in the industrial and commercial aspects of the trade. That includes ensuring our sector is recognised not only for its domestic recreational role, but also for its export potential and contributions to national security. We represent members with military and law enforcement contracts. In today's geopolitical climate, that's becoming more and more important.

I'm also passionate about recruiting the next generation of shooters – a key interest of trade. Around 70 percent of licence holders are over 50. That's not sustainable. We need to encourage younger participation – at schools, universities, and colleges. That's why I was pleased to shoot at Varsity level myself. There's something we can build on there.

I would also like to revisit the idea of a National Shooting Week. We could benefit from a nationwide event that introduces people to shooting in a safe, structured way. The Americans

have a National Shooting Month – perhaps that's a stretch here, but a week is surely achievable.

GTI: What are your early reflections on the membership base and how you plan to engage with it?

SJ: I'll be writing to members soon to introduce myself. Our RFDs are, by and large, small businesses. Their needs differ from our larger members, and we must remain mindful of that - from legal support to regulatory guidance and general business resilience.

Above all, I want to ensure our members, large and small, feel supported and represented in what is a relentlessly complex, challenging landscape. ■

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