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Cash payments for scrap metal to be banned

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Railway cable thieves who cause travel chaos face harsher penalties under measures announced by Home Secretary Theresa May on Thursday (26 January).

Cash payments for scrap metal - including copper cables used by railway signalling systems - will be banned and penalties increased to tackle the growing menace of metal theft. In a statement to parliament, the Home Secretary said the government intends to lay an urgent amendment to the legal aid, sentencing and punishment of offenders bill to create a new criminal offence to prohibit cash payments to purchase scrap metal. It will also significantly increase the fines for all offences under the existing scrap metal dealers act 1964 that regulates the scrap metal recycling industry.

Theresa May said: "We're putting a stop to cash payments and we're imposing unlimited penalties on anyone who breaks the law. This government will do what it takes to protect the public, business and our national heritage from the scourge of metal theft."

Michael Roberts, chief executive of the Association of Train Operating Companies, responded: "These new powers provide a strong deterrent to registered dealers trading in stolen metal but further legislation is required to stop unregistered scrap yards from buying stolen metal. The government now needs to create a robust new licensing regime covering all scrap yards, giving police and local councils the power to search and investigate them, and to close down any dealers involved in theft."

Cash transactions for scrap metal are often completed without any proof of personal identification or proof that the individual legitimately owns the metal being sold. This leads to anonymous, low risk transactions for those individuals who steal metal.

The House of Commons Transport Committee said that in 2010/11 cable theft caused the delay or cancellation of more than 35,000 national rail services (causing over 365,000 minutes of delay) and cost Network Rail over £16m.

On Thursday the committee published a report examining railway cable theft which calls for the police to be given additional powers to tackle the problem. Chair Louise Ellman said: "The government should introduce a new offence of aggravated trespass on the railway to help deter cable thieves. The British Transport Police should be given new powers so that officers can enter both registered and unregistered scrap metal sites along with additional resources to carry out their enforcement work."

This week's announcement follows the commitment outlined in the National Infrastructure Plan, published in November 2011, where the government allocated £5m to establish a metal theft taskforce to enhance law enforcement activity in this area. The government says further measures to crack down on rogue metal dealers will be outlined in due course.

Stolen cable: can disrupt train services - now cash transactions at scrap yards



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