

The four-legged railway recruits sniffing out metal thieves

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Specially trained sniffer dogs are now being used to track down metal thieves who cause major delays to passengers and freight on several routes.

Network Rail has enlisted the canine recruits, provided by Search Dogs UK, to crack down on criminals who steal vital cables and materials from the railway and catch those who illegally sell those items on.

They are being used on the Chiltern main line and key West Midlands routes, North West, and the West Coast main line between London Euston and Crewe.

A widespread operation is underway to mark railway property with SelectaDNA*, a permanent synthetic solution only visible under special police torches, so metal can be found and identified after it goes missing.

The special DNA spray also has a unique scent which the dogs can detect, leading police directly to any stolen supplies illegally on sale at scrap metal dealers.

Superintendent Mark Cleland, British Transport Police national lead for metal crime, said: “We’re working with partners across the entire country and throughout the metals recycling industry to target those who we suspect of flouting the law or operating outside of their licence.

“By taking a multi-agency approach, we are maximising our ability to identify those who are attacking our national infrastructure, making it harder for them to sell stolen metal and gain from their activities. We’re warning would-be offenders that we will take action against them and anyone involved in the theft and trade of metal from the railway will be brought to justice.”

Figures released by Network Rail** show that since 2017 there were:

- 22 incidents of serious metal theft on the Chiltern main line between London Marylebone, Banbury, Leamington Spa, Solihull and Birmingham, and rail routes across the West Midlands. These incidents across Network Rail’s Central route caused trains to be delayed for a total of 19,000 minutes – or 13 days – and cost the taxpayer nearly £1m.
- 31 incidents of serious metal theft on rail routes in Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Lancashire, Cheshire and Cumbria. This includes serious damage to the signalling system on the West Coast main line near Crewe during the first national COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020.
- There were 27 incidents of serious metal theft on the West Coast main line between Crewe, Stoke-on-Trent, Stafford, Northampton, Milton Keynes, Watford and London Euston.

The total cost to the taxpayer across the whole country between 2017 and 2022 was nearly £16 million and there were more than 330 thefts.

Surprise scrap dealer site visits, in conjunction with the telecoms industry, have been taking place in a week of action to remind traders not to handle stolen metal and of their obligations under the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013.

By law dealers must ensure traded metal is legally sourced and that sellers’ details are recorded and kept as part of any sale.

Organised criminal gangs are increasingly targeting metal used in infrastructure and exploiting high metal prices.

Andrea Graham, head of crime and security for Network Rail’s North West and Central region, said: “Metal theft continues to cause huge problems for passengers and freight customers at a very significant cost to our business – which is of course funded by the taxpayer.

“We’re always looking at new ways to crack down on criminals and now we have man’s best friend on the case too. Our message to thieves who think they can steal from us is clear – we will find you and bring you to justice, because you’re not only putting your own life at risk by trespassing on the tracks, but also the lives of our passengers and staff.”

*SelectaDNA is a patented, forensic marking solution that harnesses the encoding power of DNA, enabling users to mark and identify items of property and criminals. It’s widely used across the UK’s telecoms

network, to mark cable and batteries in particular.

SelectaDNA is identical in composition to the natural DNA found in every living organism on the planet, meaning it is completely safe, and each code is completely unique. The codes are checked against all known biological genomes to ensure that each SelectaDNA code does not occur anywhere else in nature. This provides the security of knowing that every code only exists on the items it has been used to mark.

SelectaDNA is analysed by the same methods as all other types forensic DNA testing, and the codes are recorded on the SelectaDNA Police and Insurance approved database Secure Asset Register, so that a code found on an item of property or criminal can be identified back to a specific owner or location.

****Network Rail figures railway metal theft 2017-2022**

Photo and video credit: Network Rail