

# Stealing the future

The huge increase in metal theft is proving fatal to individuals as well as causing general damage. **Tony Glover** reports on the need for legislation to deal with it

## ■ LAST MONTH, A 16-YEAR-OLD BOY DIED IN AN ELECTRICITY SUBSTATION. THIS HAPPENED IN

the course of an alleged theft of copper cable. There have been four such deaths so far this year and at least 31 people have been injured. One particularly unfortunate incident was reported in the *Daily Mail* of a man named James Sorby, aged 22, who was burnt so badly on his face that his daughter was unable to recognise him. He had reportedly been trying to take cabling from an electricity substation in Leeds.

Every day there are thefts taking place across the UK against our national energy infrastructure. These leave sites unsafe as well as causing disruption to the public and the economy. We have seen more than 7,000 incidents in the past year, and year-on-year figures are doubling.

It is not just electricity infrastructure that is attacked, but gas pipes and equipment as well. This has caused explosions in private homes and has nearly caused carbon monoxide poisoning. So far, no-one has been seriously injured but again the fear is that this could happen any time.

A large proportion of these thefts are small scale and low value yet high impact – thefts that amount to no more than a few hundred pounds. There is an

### AT A GLANCE

Theft of metal within energy infrastructure is damaging the UK. But how can it be tackled?

example of a £5 brass valve that was removed from an oil-filled transformer which resulted in 30,000 litres of oil leaking out. Fortunately, this was contained within the site but, if it had not, it could have caused road accidents and damaged the local environment.

So the Energy Networks Association (ENA), an industry body for UK wires and pipes companies that carry electricity and gas to UK homes and businesses, is attempting to address this problem.

Safety remains the paramount concern. The ENA is making the UK's infrastructure as secure as possible, but its remit covers hundreds of thousands of sites. Moves are being made to make metal easier to identify but, again, we are dealing with millions of metres of cable. Companies are moving to lower value aluminium from higher value metals such as copper where possible, but this will not stop the problem.

Despite many detection initiatives, the incidence of thefts continues to grow, and every day the odds increase that an innocent member of the public will be killed or seriously injured as a result of metal theft.

The ENA believes it is vital to close down the means of disposal of stolen metal. If the small-time thief has nowhere to sell it on, he will not steal it. So we need to focus on the metal recycling industry. The largest amount of metal is processed by highly respectable companies, but they cannot control their supply chains so we need legislation that can.

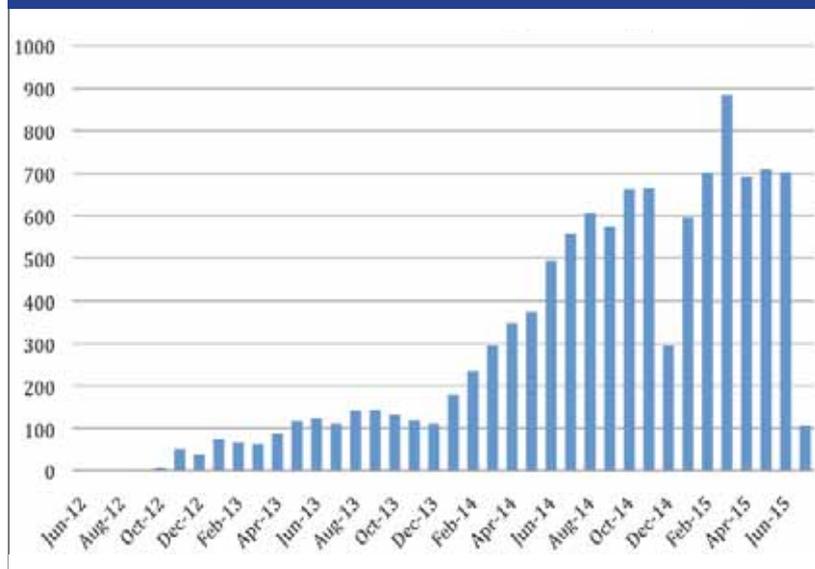
The current law is from the time of *Steptoe & Son*. The ENA believes that greater police powers to close sites which have stolen metal, coupled with an effective registration scheme and a cashless purchasing system, will stop most of the thefts.

Not everyone will be happy about this, of course. It will cause problems to the industry, but the ENA is willing to sit down with them to see how we can change things in a way that will minimise this.

It is clear that change is coming. New crime prevention minister Baroness Browning has made clear that the law will be changed. This is vital if we are to prevent any more deaths like that of the 16-year-old last month. ■

*Tony Glover is head of press and public affairs for the Energy Networks Association*

## INCIDENCES OF METAL THEFT



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