

It's a steal

Motorway service areas are being targeted by gangs on the lookout for valuable truck cargoes to steal. So what's being done?

By **Carol Millett**

MOTORWAY SERVICE AREAS (MSAs) should be safe havens for truck drivers, offering a place to rest after the stresses of the road. However these locations are being targeted by criminal gangs, intent on stealing trucks' cargoes either by stealth or by force.

According to the Transported Asset Protection Association (TAPA), cargo theft at MSAs is on the rise. In its latest report on cargo thefts in the UK, TAPA revealed that in June alone there were more than 70 cargo thefts, with more than half (50.7%) occurring at MSAs. These findings are echoed in a joint report from the BSI and the National Vehicle Crime Intelligence Service (NaVCIS). Newly published figures show there were 386 cargo thefts in the second quarter, an improvement at least, on the first quarter's 454 reported thefts.

However, the report also highlights the rising trend for these thefts to occur at MSAs, with the M1 accounting for 36% and the M62 13% of all thefts in the period. Crime hotspots along the M1 include Hartshead Moor, Donington Park and Leicester Forest East services. Overall, BSI and NaVCIS rate MSAs as only "slightly less vulnerable" than unsecured off-road sites, due to the "lack of basic security measures such as fencing or CCTV cameras" at many of these sites.

Nor are these thefts random, one-off incidents, the report notes, with organised gangs striking those MSAs known for their poor security multiple times.

More worryingly, a substantial number of cargo thefts

Counting the cost of crime

High-value thefts from MSAs in June included:

- £358,242 worth of USB sticks from Welcome Break's M62 Hartshead Moor services, Bradford;
- £122,107 worth of toys and games from Moto's M1 Trowell services;
- £111,669 worth of sound bars and televisions from Welcome Break's M1 Newport Pagnell services;
- £110,893 worth of IT products from Welcome Break's A50 Derby South services;
- £78,555 worth of medical products from Welcome Break's M1 Leicester Forest East services;
- £76,289 worth of pharmaceutical products from Moto's M1 Trowell services; and
- £74,759 worth of car parts from Roadchef's M1 Northampton services.



also involved threats to drivers, with some being physically threatened and held at knifepoint.

Then there is the economic cost. The NaVCIS/BSI report estimates companies lost more than an estimated £14m in the second quarter due to cargo theft, up £1m on the first quarter, with thieves targeting high-value loads. TAPA's report lists a number of high-value thefts in June, with a value up to £350,000 (see box below).

Collaboration

Police forces are now collaborating to tackle the problem. In the Midlands, Northamptonshire police is running Operation BARRIC in collaboration with NaVCIS and Leicestershire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and Lincolnshire police forces. This is dedicated to targeting cargo theft gangs and raising awareness among drivers on how to prevent break-ins. A similar strategy, dubbed Operation Hollow, is being operated by Essex, Kent, and Suffolk police forces.

NaVCIS intelligence officer Andrew Round said these measures have had some success, disrupting the gangs' operations and resulting in a number of significant arrests, including the recent apprehension of members of a West Yorkshire-based gang that had been targeting MSAs in the Midlands and the Thames Valley region.

NaVCIS is also working with Highways England, MSA providers, the RHA, and insurers to raise awareness of the problem, holding meetings every quarter to share information.

Round said these meetings had been successful in encouraging MSA operators to improve security measures at crime hotspots, such as at Roadchef's Northampton MSA on the M1, which has been fitted with monitored CCTV cameras, cutting cargo crime significantly. Roadchef has also launched a programme to roll out CCTV cameras at all its MSAs.

MSA operator Moto has also improved security at



Victims of crime

Haulier Mick Threlfall contacted his MP after suffering a spate of cargo and fuel thefts this year at MSAs. Threlfall, owner of Preston-based haulage firm M Threlfall Transport, said: "The problem is rife. These incidents happen at MSAs across the country on a daily basis. And when you complain to the MSA operator you find they have cameras but no one monitoring them, and when you complain to the police they don't seem to have the resources to do anything about it."

So incensed was Threlfall by the problem that he asked his MP to lobby transport and Home Office ministers. But despite the MP's best efforts there has been no response from the Home Office as yet and a letter from transport minister Jesse Norman stated that the government cannot directly regulate MSA operators as they are private companies.

"My local MP was very supportive, but Jesse Norman's letter was disappointing to say the least. The problem is getting worse. We pay up to £31 a night per vehicle at these MSAs and yet they cannot guarantee my drivers' security. The government should be doing something about it. This is organised crime."

Dewsbury-based haulage firm YDS UK has suffered several thefts of both cargo and fuel at MSAs this year. In the latest incident, the firm's new curtainsider, which was parked at Moto's Trowell services, was slashed by thieves and its cargo of toiletries stolen (pictured above and right).

When director Richard Brown contacted Moto's parking contractor CPC Plus to complain, Grahame Rose, the firm's development director, told him that Moto was working with the police and NaVCIS to cut the number of thefts, but added that "parking at Moto sites is at a vehicle owner's own risk", and that the ANPR camera system on site "does not cover the parking areas".

Brown told *CM*: "I don't think it's much to ask to be able to park [when] paying top money and not have goods stolen and curtains slashed. It's becoming a major issue. We have had about five fuel thefts this year and countless curtains cut, even when the trailers have been empty and doors left open. These people who run the car parks at services are basically taking our money and not doing anything for it."

Brown wants the government to do more to provide affordable and secure truckstops for the haulage industry. He also questions police tactics, noting that his emails to Nottingham police have gone unanswered. "All they want to do is issue a crime number and think they have done their job," he said.



crime hotspots by introducing security patrols at its MSA truckstop areas at nine locations. It also has ANPR cameras installed at 57 locations.

But these improvements are piecemeal, with some providers more proactive than others and as long as the security levels remain poor at other MSAs the problem will persist, said Round.

"While we've seen a big reduction at Northampton we've seen big rises in the East Midlands and Leicestershire area and lately a lot of cargo theft at Leicester Forest East, Newport Pagnell, Tibshelf and Trowell services," he added.

And while Round recognises that MSAs have improved security at some locations he believes the cost of doing so will continue to make a comprehensive roll-out of effective security measures, such as monitored CCTV cameras and patrols, unlikely.

He believes the problem needs to be tackled at government level so all MSAs are required to invest in security measures. "We'd like to see the government introduce mandatory levels of security," he said.

RHA infrastructure and security manager Chryst Rampley agreed. She said: "MSAs are not doing enough to provide adequate security. The problem is that proper security measures cost money. Government needs to stipulate a minimum security level."

So far, these demands have fallen on deaf ears, with both the DfT and Highways England stating that as MSAs are privately owned they cannot be directly regulated by government.

So what should hauliers do? NaVCIS and BSI recommend drivers seek out secure parking, with perimeter fencing, CCTV, entrance and exit security checkpoints, police surveillance, freight vehicle-specific lots and sufficient lighting – ruling out most, if not all, UK MSAs. They also recommend drivers call Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111 if they witness any cargo theft.