

"Fuelling Crime"

The theft of petrol from garage forecourts is commonly known as a "drive away" or a "bilking" and is committed in one of two ways; the driver either fills up their car with petrol and then simply drives away without even entering the shop to pay or they fill up with fuel and then make an excuse to the cashier that they have forgotten their wallet or they pay for items from the shop and don't mention they have petrol. If the driver genuinely forgets their wallet and later returns then clearly there is no crime. This type of crime is prevalent across the country and most areas have seen an increase in recent months which may be linked to the 20% rise in fuel costs.

There are two types of criminals that practice this crime, the first is involved in other types of crime and is stealing fuel to enable them to get around in their car to commit burglaries, thefts and other dishonesty offences. The second is the opportunist who sees the chance to get away without paying for a tank of fuel. Both are dishonest and both can expect to be arrested and dealt with in the same way by the Criminal Justice System.

Thames Valley Police at Bracknell along with Bracknell Forest Council are planning a number of operations to target this type of crime with a view to reducing the numbers that occur. Each and every one of us pays for this crime, mainly through the duty applied to fuel prices which could be lower if fuel theft was stopped. Inspector Pete Carter is working with the regional managers for the forecourts in the Borough to tighten up security and cashier processes so as to make it easier to catch the offenders and prove the crime. Every offence of bilking that is reported to police is investigated and the CCTV film is used in evidence. Chief Inspector Simon Bowden is having all of this year's offences reviewed and anyone who has stolen petrol can expect a visit from local police officers. He said 'Criminals need cars to get around which means they need fuel to run them. Many of them are out of work and cannot afford up to £70 a tank and will therefore simply drive away without paying. My officers will seek to prove that their cars have been used in crime and then obtain confiscation orders so that their cars can be crushed. By dealing with this crime effectively we can take burglars and car thieves off the roads and reduce other types of crime, making Bracknell a safer place.'

In 2007/08, many types of crime have reduced in number, the theft of fuel is bucking the trend; in the first six months of 2008 there has been a 28% increase in this type of crime with 240 crimes being committed between January and the end of June. Operations that are being considered include covert ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition), stinger devices to puncture the tyres of offending cars before they leave, the taking of fingerprints from individuals claiming to have forgotten their money, along with an enhanced Forecourt Watch that could see drivers who have failed to pay for fuel unable to fill up at any forecourt in the Borough. The Forecourt Watch could be operated in a similar way to the existing Pub Watch Scheme which has the power to ban drinkers from all licensed premises in the Borough.

Anyone who suspects that somebody they know is involved in crime in any way should contact the local police on 08458 505 505 or alternatively they can speak confidentially to Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111. Even the smallest piece of information can often prove most important and be the last piece of the jigsaw to enable a crime to be solved and justice to be done.