

Metals have enjoyed the glare of the media spotlight recently, with police forces across the country recording increases in thefts of everything from copper piping to cables to church roofs – evidence, if ever it were needed, that metal is a valuable resource.

The value of metal has too often been taken for granted in the drive to boost the UK's recycling rates, with government resources turned to developing the market for newly recovered materials. But as the country's approach to recycling matures and waste management becomes more sophisticated, metal is rapidly coming to the forefront of the recycling debate.

Metals can be recycled time and time again, and recovering metals reduces the pressure on landfill, reduces demand for raw materials, reduces greenhouse gas emissions and enables the UK to meet targets for recycling vehicles, WEEE, packaging and batteries.

Every year, 15 million tonnes of recovered metals are processed for industry – a UK activity worth £4bn.

Recovered metals are vital to home-based manufacturing as the country has virtually no supply of raw materials and must import resources such as iron ore. Of the 15 million tonnes recovered in 2006, 90% was ferrous metal, with around two million tonnes arising internally in steelworks and 11 million tonnes handled by metal recycling companies.

Of the latter, 25% supplied UK steelmaking, 8% supplied UK foundries and, because this is all that UK manufacturing needs, the remainder (67%) went to export – trade that has remained steady over the past 10 years.

Last year, the UK accounted for more European exports than any other country, with 4.4 million tonnes (60%) of its 7.4 million tonnes of ferrous exports traded beyond Europe's borders. The overall volume of UK exports is growing steadily as domestic collection improves and world demand for metals increases, with significant markets in Spain, Turkey and Asia. In fact, the industry is now a net contributor to the UK balance of trade and the world's fifth largest exporter of recovered iron and steel – a big achievement for a small island.

The UK holds an even stronger position in relation to the export of nonferrous metals. Aluminium collection has increased substantially with the recent focus on recycling packaging materials. In 2006 exports were up 160% on 2000, reaching 387,000 tonnes.

There is a vast amount of potential for metal recycling as an industry.

New approaches to waste management, booming global manufacturing and construction, and growing consumer commitment to recycling as many different materials as possible are all contributing to the dynamism of the metals market.

What the metals recycling industry is witnessing however, is creeping bureaucratisation, and business development is being hampered by overregulation.

The UK metal recycling industry has been subject to an increasing range of regulation and controls, generally emanating from Europe. Because Europe defines scrap metal as 'waste' material the industry is subject not only to site licensing but also international shipping controls designed to protect the environment. And because nearly all products contain a substantial amount of metal, the industry is also at the forefront of introducing new collection, treatment, media separation and market development arrangements associated with European Directives for the recovery of end-of-life products. The average site operator now needs to deal with 15 to 20 sets of environmental regulation.

All of this has led to increased administration and costs, which ultimately affects trading prices and commercial viability.

The recently revised trans-frontier shipment of waste regulations are a particularly thorny issue for metals exporters, and the BMRA is lobbying for the Government to reconsider the regulatory framework.

Changes introduced by the European government with the aim of protecting the environment

from the dumping of problematic wastes, although wellintentioned, mean European exporters are now required to provide information about who they buy from and who their customers will be. This information is often difficult to obtain, can threaten commercial confidentiality and places a strain on trading relations between exporters and their long-standing customers.

And there are already examples of overseas consumers turning to suppliers in non-European countries as a result.

The British Metals Recycling Association is vigorously contesting the introduction of what its members regard as barriers to trade and the free movement of goods.

It hopes that a revision of the European Waste Framework Directive, soon to reach its second reading in the European Parliament, will enable redefinition of when materials cease to be 'waste' and allow recovered metals to be properly recognised as secondary raw material for industry.

Directives, it has to be said, are not all bad. They do help to raise the public profile of metal recycling, as can be seen by the effect of the recent End of Life Vehicles, Packaging and Waste Electronic and Electrical Equipment (WEEE) Directives. More members of the public than ever before are now aware of the need to recycle these items and how they can do so.

In coming years, metal recovery and recycling will be a key issue. Consumers will expect to be able to recycle any items containing metal, governments will demand the recovery of all recyclable materials, and overseas markets will be hungrier than ever for this valuable resource. Now is the time to get infrastructure and legislation right so that the UK can maximise the environmental and economic benefits of recycling metals.

It would be a crime not to do so.