

Queen's Park Trust

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Car Theft Protection Guide

The Keyless Theft Crisis: Relay Attacks Explained

If your car has keyless entry, you're facing a threat that locks and alarms alone can't stop. In July 2023, keyless relay theft accounted for 98% of all stolen vehicles that recovery companies helped locate. That's not a security oversight--that's the new normal.

Here's how it works: thieves use a relay device to capture the signal from your car key--even from inside your home, several metres away. The device tricks your car into thinking the key is close by. Your doors unlock. The engine starts. Your car is gone in under 60 seconds, and the thief never needs to touch your physical keys.

Most people miss the critical detail: your key doesn't need to be near your car. Thieves can be operating within metres of your home while your keys sit in your kitchen drawer. This is why traditional physical locks and steering wheel locks are only part of the solution. You need to block the signal itself.

Electronic Immobilisation (Tracking, Alarms, Immobilisers)

A Thatcham-approved alarm system with movement sensors, anti-grab protection, and tracking does three things: it deters the casual opportunist, it alerts you if someone attempts entry, and it gives the police a location to recover your vehicle.

More importantly, a GPS tracker attached to your vehicle means even if a thief succeeds in taking your car, the police can locate and recover it. Recovery rates jump dramatically with active tracking.

Key-Level Signal Protection (Faraday Pouches)

Store your car key fob in a signal-blocking Faraday pouch when you're at home. This simple step stops relay thieves dead--they cannot capture a signal that doesn't exist. The Defender Pouch costs around £6 and is proven effective in independent tests. Check your pouch's integrity every few months, as wear and tear can compromise the shielding.

Keep your keys away from doors and windows. Distance matters. A key stored near an exterior wall is easier to target than one kept in a central interior room.

Vehicle-Level Physical Deterrents

Steering wheel locks, pedal boxes, and gear stick locks (particularly Sold Secure Diamond-rated products) make your car harder to drive if someone does manage to bypass electronic security. A Disklok covers the entire steering wheel and is visibly intimidating to thieves.

Electronic Security Systems You Can Rely On

The honest truth is that electronics alone won't stop a determined thief, but they dramatically increase the cost and complexity of theft and improve recovery odds.

Thatcham-Approved Alarms

Alarms rated Thatcham Category 1 or 2 include immobilisation, movement sensors, and tracking capability. These systems trigger an alarm if someone attempts to break in or move your vehicle, and they alert the monitoring centre, which can dispatch police.

Insurance companies actively discount premiums for Thatcham-approved systems--often by 10-20% depending on your vehicle and postcode. The visible alarm sticker alone acts as a deterrent.

Ghost Immobilisers

A Ghost Immobiliser requires a user-defined PIN code, entered via your vehicle's dashboard buttons, before the engine will start. Even if a thief unlocks the car and disables the alarm, they cannot start it without the PIN. These systems are nearly invisible to thieves and are highly effective against relay attacks and traditional theft.

GPS Tracking Devices

GPS trackers won't prevent theft, but they transform a stolen vehicle from a permanent loss into a recovery opportunity. Police prioritise vehicles with active tracking, and recovery rates exceed 90% in urban areas when a vehicle is tracked in real time.

Keyless Protection: Your Defence Against Relay Attacks

If your car was manufactured after 2015, it almost certainly has keyless entry. Here's your practical defence against relay theft:

Signal-Blocking Faraday Pouches

A Faraday bag creates an electromagnetic shield around your key fob, blocking signal transmission. The bag needs to enclose the fob completely--gaps in the shielding allow signal leakage. At-home tests using a spare key and relay simulator should be done every 3-6 months to ensure the pouch is still effective.

Cost is minimal (£6-£20 for a quality pouch), and the protection is substantial. This is non-negotiable if you have a keyless car.

Distance from Windows & Doors

Even with a Faraday pouch, store your keys in a central interior room, away from external walls, windows, and doors. Relay range extends further near exit points. Interior storage reduces the capture distance and makes your home a harder target.

Motion Sensor Key Fobs

Many newer vehicles, including Ford Focus, Fiesta, BMW, Audi, and Mercedes models, include motion sensor technology in the key fob. The fob goes into sleep mode after 40 seconds of inactivity, preventing constant signal transmission. If your vehicle has this feature, ensure it's active and that you allow your key to go dormant when not in use.

Parking Smart: Location & Lighting Matter

Your car's location when parked is as important as the security devices protecting it. Thieves operate like any rational criminal--they avoid locations with high visibility, lighting, and potential witnesses.

Parked in a well-lit, busy area, your car is a harder target than an identical car parked in a dark, isolated location. If you park on your driveway, ensure motion-triggered security lighting is installed. If you use a car park, prioritise monitored facilities with CCTV and security presence.

Semi-private areas (driveways, residential car parks) account for 38% of thefts. These are considered lower-risk by thieves, which means your driveway needs active deterrents like bollards and lighting to offset that perception.

Insurance

Most insurance policies in the UK cover keyless car theft, including relay attacks, provided there's no evidence of negligence. If your car is stolen using signal-cloning technology and you've taken reasonable steps to secure it (signal-blocking pouch, secure key storage, distance from windows), your insurer should cover the loss.

Here's what "reasonable steps" means in practice: Faraday pouch, key storage 10+ metres from external doors, window locks engaged, and ideally a physical deterrent like bollards or steering wheel lock.