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HEADLINE: WHY I'LL MAKE THE CRIMINAL PAY . . .NOT THE CRIME

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BODY:

IT MAY be an old saying but it's hard to think of a more effective way of reducing crime than by demonstrating that crime doesn't pay. You do that, of course, by ensuring more criminals are brought to justice. The record numbers of police - with more on the way - will play a big part in achieving this. So too will the overhaul of the criminal justice system now under way to rebalance it in favour of the victim.

But it's much harder to get this essential message across if people see drug dealers enjoying a champagne lifestyle or convicted criminals leaving jail to return to their luxury mansions and massive bank balances.

Instead the danger is that impressionable youngsters will see these crooks in their designer clothes and expensive cars as role models to copy.

So as well as stepping up our drive to bring more criminals to justice, we are going to hit them hard where it hurts most - in their pockets.

We are going to seize their yachts, their cars, their homes and their cash wherever and whenever we find their ill-gotten gains.

In short, we are going to ensure they no longer profit from their life of crime.

And we are not just going after those in charge of big, sophisticated crime networks - the people who behave in public like company directors though they've never done an honest day's work in their lives.

We are targeting in a much more effective way the local crooks and drug dealers whose legal incomes - if they have them at all - can't possibly support the flash cars and lifestyle they are leading.

These are the people who too often in the past have escaped full investigation because the police understandably have focused on the major criminals and have lacked the resources to go after the assets of the middlemen.

All this is possible because of the Proceeds of Crime Act which came into force at the end of last year. And it's already having a big impact.

Every week since then, police and customs officers have seized around GBP 1million in suspect cash - money made from crime or intended for use in crime which the crooks had, up to then, managed to hide from the police.

But that's just the start. Because the Act also sets up a new high-powered body, which starts work tomorrow, to target specifically the criminals and their ill-

gotten gains.

The **Assets Recovery Agency** is a mix of investigators, lawyers, accountants and other experts brought together to give fresh impetus to the drive to track down and recover the profits of crime.

They'll have the expertise to follow the trail of cash in this country and abroad - and the powers to recover it wherever it is hidden.

Homes, furnishings, paintings, yachts and cars will also be seized. And they'll be able to investigate and dismantle their network of illegal operations.

No one will be beyond their reach. Jane Earl, the Agency's Director, and her team can apply to the civil courts to recover assets even if police can't gather enough evidence for a criminal conviction.

If it looks like assets have come from crime, and no legitimate explanation can be given as to how they have been generated, they'll be taken away.

It's not just the Agency that will be hitting criminals in their pockets. Police and customs now have stronger powers to investigate where criminals have hidden their cash.

We are also tightening our defences against money laundering, with banks being under new obligations to co-operate and report on transactions they think are suspicious.

Targeting the proceeds of crime is going to be the norm from now on, no longer the exception. I've no doubt criminals - and some lawyers - will regard this as wrong. I see it as ensuring that the law-abiding citizen gets a fair deal.

It's not right that these crooks enjoy a lavish lifestyle at the expense of the victims of their crimes.

WE AIM to more than double to GBP 60million each year the amount already confiscated - and to plough back much of this money into crime reduction and policing. Millions of pounds will be spent, too, in community projects in those neighbourhoods that have been most blighted by crime.

Crime has fallen sharply over the past six years but remains far too high. And, worryingly, some crimes - such as violent attacks and gun offences - have increased, not fallen.

So there is no complacency in Government but a determination to use every means possible to reduce crime and the fear of crime. By showing that crime doesn't pay and using the money seized to improve policing and strengthen communities, we will help reduce crime now and in the future.

Supporting the overwhelming majority of families who play by the rules, helping people rebuild their communities and tackling crime and antisocial behaviour is central to this Government's ambitions for our country.

The launch tomorrow of the **Assets Recovery Agency** and the new powers for our crime fighters is another step towards meeting these goals.

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