

HILL STREET BLUES

How do the police make contact with elements of society who are either 'invisible' or who wouldn't normally talk to a police officer? Answer - put the police on bikes! That's exactly what has been done in a pilot scheme in Sheffield, U.K. Four police officers from the city's Fawcett Street police station have formed the 'Community Cycle Unit', as Jim Swannack reports.

The city of Sheffield (like Rome) is built on seven hills, and the base for the city's new police cycle unit, Fawcett Street Police Station, is near the bottom of one of them – so most patrols start up a steep climb.

But this is not necessarily a disadvantage: it has come as a surprise to both fellow officers and members of the public just how quickly cycle officers can respond to a call, particularly if they were uphill from the incident location. Then following an arrest, officers radio for transport, just as a foot patrol would. "We usually beat the car transporting the prisoner back to the station because the traffic's so bad", said Sgt Crookes.

Police Constables Bob Kenney and Alan Houcher first considered the idea for a cycle unit in 1999, following press coverage of cycle units in Glasgow and Blackpool. They needed a business plan to show senior officers the benefits of the scheme, and so drew up a document which also included a risk assessment. The only serious area of concern was the tram lines in some streets – Sheffield has a modern 'Supertram' system.

The other problem to overcome was the initial cost: each bike costs over £2500. They looked first for sponsorship from the city's business community and cycle traders. Quite by chance, Mark James of J E James Cycles in Sheffield had built up a maintenance-free bike specially-adapted for police work at around the same time. PC Kenney saw this on display and asked whether the Sheffield unit could test it out.

At first other officers saw the idea as a bit of a joke, especially with the hills around Sheffield. The important factor identified by PC Kenney in the success of the scheme is that the four officers involved were all cyclists in civilian life. To just tell officers that they were assigned to the cycle unit wouldn't work. "The enthusiasm for cycling has to be there first in order to get you out in all weathers on a bike, day after day."

The unit was started in January 2001 for a trial period, after which the success of the scheme will be evaluated. The initial response from senior officers was lukewarm, but now the scheme's been up and running for a while they have received a much more positive response.

Because the unit is new, officers attract attention wherever they go, but this is considered an important aspect of their work. "The biggest problem we have to overcome is the fear of crime. The public want us to catch the criminals of course, but what they really want is not to have their house broken into, not to be mugged or not to have their car radio pinched" said PC Kenney.

The station is in one of the poorer areas of the city, yet also close to the university and the leafy suburbs. It is around the university that some of the most effective work has been done. The bikes can get quickly into areas that car bound officers just can't reach. The pedestrian walkways and back-alleys in the local council estates through which criminals might escape from a police car suddenly no longer provide a quick getaway.

Officers ride in pairs as a safety measure when patrolling particular beats, but are available to respond to emergency calls if requested by radio.

The cycle unit's impact in certain areas has been tremendous. After a spate of muggings and robberies in pedestrian underpasses, beats were adapted to include these areas. Virtually overnight this type of crime disappeared. Officers are now on first name terms with many of the homeless people who beg in the city's pedestrian subways.

Following a number of thefts of BMX bikes from the local skate arena officers now patrol the area regularly. Apparently, none of the kids would talk to them until PC Alan Houcher decided to see if he could ride a couple of drop-offs and a table-top or two. Once the kids saw that, the whole atmosphere changed. Soon kids surrounded him clamouring for a go on the bike: another bridge to a previously reluctant section of society successfully made.

So will the scheme continue? Bob Kenney thinks so. Senior management within the police service have seen the benefits of the scheme. Other officers in other police stations are now trying to set up their own cycle units using our knowledge and experience. Whether this will happen or not depends, as always, on finance.

However, the people of Sheffield certainly seem to like the cycle patrols, even if they're still surprised to see them: "We're certainly high profile on the bikes. It takes a bit of getting used to. People just stop and stare when we ride past."

As we went to press, we heard that after seeing the article about York's cycling paramedic in Velo Vision Issue 3, the Sheffield police cyclists have made contact, and the two operations are now working together on a 'best practice' scheme to help foster further police and paramedic schemes across the country. Thanks to PC Bob Kenney, Sgt Bob Crookes and Mark James for their help in the preparation of this article.

For further information they can be contacted at: South Yorkshire Police – Community Cycle Unit, 64 Fawcett Street, Netherthorpe, Sheffield, S3 7PN, UK. Tel +44 114 220 2020

For information regarding the bikes themselves, please contact: Mark James, J E James Cycles, 347-361 Bramall Lane, Highfield, Sheffield, S2 4RN. Tel +44 114 255 0557

Plenty more information about police cycling can be found at the website of the International Police Mountain Biking Association: www.ipmba.org

THE BIKES

The bikes have been designed to be as maintenance-free as possible. Grimeca hydraulic disc brakes front and rear mean officers can stop on a sixpence, and Rohloff Speedhubs mean that gear changes can be effected while stationary. The hub gears also mean that there are no potentially fragile derailleur gears hanging down. Front suspension forks increase the speed over rough terrain and suspension seat posts increase rider comfort.

The design of the frames has evolved over the last year. They now come equipped with the special Rohloff rear dropouts, eliminating the disc brake torque arm of the first bikes. An old-fashioned 'nurse's lock' is still a feature, although like the rack mounts and hydraulic brake-cable bosses, it's now brazed on in the factory.

PC Kenney describes the Rohloff hubs as the best bit about the bikes. "The only time you notice them is when you ride your own bike and they're not there." The hubs have now covered over 1500 miles of police driving with absolutely no mechanical problems. In fact the only problems they've had with the bikes were the previous disc brakes, which would jam on with the heat generated from stopping a fully-laden police bike at the bottom of one of Sheffield's many hills.

A Topeak rack-top pack slides onto the matching rear rack and contains all the officers' paperwork. A specially-made reflective yellow cover keeps everything clean and dry. Radios and handcuffs etc are all carried in a custom-designed stab/bullet proof vest. The bikes are painted in a specially-formulated reflective white, with 'POLICE' written in large black letters. White Specialized cycling helmets are similarly marked.

The bikes are also equipped with blue flashing lights and two-tone sirens. However, as PC Kenney says "They'd probably cause road traffic accidents if we ever used them, because stunned motorists would be staring at us rather than watching the road. So far they have only been used as a PR tool when the officers visit schools."

Clothing has also evolved over the last year. They now ride in specially-designed breathable jackets, Polaris cycling trousers and stiff bottomed shoes. SPD pedals were tried, but officers spend too much time off the bikes for these to be effective.

