




Driving the changes

An operation to put the brakes on motorcyclists who speed along the rural roads of North Yorkshire has helped to cut the numbers of casualties and is set to start again next month. John Dean reports on a scheme run by the force and North Yorkshire County Council.

 More cash is being invested in a police-backed scheme which is reducing the carnage witnessed every year on the roads of North Yorkshire. The county, one of the largest in Britain, is largely rural with many miles of winding roads across moorland or through the Dales, the kind of routes particularly popular with motorcyclists keen to try out their skills at high speed.

As a result, hundreds of bikers, many from outside the area, have been killed or seriously injured on North Yorkshire roads over the years, leading to increasing calls for more to be done to reduce the problem.

Last year, North Yorkshire Police and North Yorkshire County Council launched a campaign designed to crack down on road users deliberately flouting the

law, combined with education to prevent repeat offences.

So successful was the initiative in reducing the number of accidents that the campaign, codenamed Operation Halter, has now been approved again for this year, due to start next month.

The roots of Operation Halter lie in growing concern during the mid to late nineties about the number of motorcyclists being killed or hurt on county roads, which resulted initially in BikeSafe 2000.

Designed to educate riders, BikeSafe 2000 used methods including education workshops and taking riders out on supervised rides to stress the tenets of safe riding, part of an initiative to reduce road deaths by 40 per cent by 2010. Although car incidents levelled off, there was no effect on motorcyclists' behaviour and

in 2003, 28 riders were killed.

Road Policing Inspector Chris Charlton said: 'Twenty-eight deaths was the highest number we had ever had. In that year one in three deaths were motorcyclists and we realised we had a significant problem.

'Essentially, we had two factors. One was collisions involving males aged 30 and above, a number of whom had returned to the pastime, the second was the anti-social behaviour aspect, a younger element who had honed their skills on the track and were practising on the road.'

More disposable income meant more people could afford powerful bikes and council meetings across the county were witnessing increasing complaints by councillors and other community representatives worried about what was happening.

Targeting the speeders

Operation Halter was the response, a high-profile package of police enforcement measures to press home the message that North Yorkshire would not tolerate such dangerous riding.

Sixteen routes were targeted as part of Operation Halter, which ran from April to early November last year, the peak times for accidents as the holiday season gets under way. The funding, obtained through the county council, covers police overtime and equipment. Each route was chosen after analysis of accident statistics, speeding reports and complaints of noise disturbance and they included the A170 Thirsk to Scarborough road, the B1363 York to Helmsley road and the B1257 Stokesley to Helmsley road. The

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B1257 is typical of the kind of problems which North Yorkshire has experienced, its mixture of sharp corners and straights over the North York Moors irresistible to motorcyclists.

The situation became so bad that local residents called for action, weary of having to deal with serious accidents - some had taken injured riders into their homes to wait for emergency teams to arrive - and were frightened for their own safety when edging their cars out onto the road, ever wary that a motorbike might speed round the corner at well over 100mph.

Under Operation Halter, police ensured motorcyclists saw officers wherever they went. Insp Charlton said: 'We were saying that we welcomed people to North Yorkshire but that these riders had to moderate their behaviour.'

He is critical of some elements of the motorcycle press which tended to promote the county as a place for fast riding.

'It is irresponsible. We have a lot of rural roads and, especially during the summer months, we have a lot of slow moving traffic; horses, walkers, cyclists, all vulnerable road users, but these bikers showed no appreciation of the risks. We were recording speeds of more than 130mph on A class rural roads and at that speed, reactions and senses are uncontrolled. That was certainly the case with these riders.

'One of the problems is that we are a rural area surrounded by the likes of Teesside, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, and Humberside, and we inherit offenders and casualties. We mounted a high-profile disruptive campaign. We wanted them to think there was a road police officer round every bend.'

There was also a system to fast-track speeding prosecutions, with cases coming to court within six weeks. Of the 404 prosecutions for speeding since the Operation began, there have already been 256 convictions with some still pending.

Of those prosecuted, 48 were motorcyclists and Insp Charlton said the fact that there were also



Insp Chris Charlton

plenty of car drivers meant the force could defend any allegations of discriminating against bike riders.

He said: 'Ultimately, it is a fine line but we believe we are running a justified operation targeting vulnerable road users, that is motorbike riders, and protecting them from death and injury.'

Last year, 17 motorcyclists were killed on the roads, a significant reduction on previous years, with 28 in 2003 and 23 deaths in 2002. Having reviewed the success of the operation, the police, through the county council, accessed more funding to run the campaign this year, starting again in April.

The case for further funding was made by Della Cannings, chief constable of North Yorkshire Police, and Mike Moore, North Yorkshire County Council's director of environmental services, who said the campaign had led to more responsible motorbike riding.

Heightened awareness

In a joint report to the county council committee for the Hambleton district, they said: "Anecdotal feedback to police officers carrying out enforcement work has confirmed a heightened awareness. It is a fact that motorcycle casualties show a 30 per cent reduction countywide compared with the previous year,

whereas this trend does not appear to have been replicated in neighbouring counties. It is not considered unreasonable to assume, therefore, that this joint speed enforcement initiative has had a very real effect on reducing the numbers of motorcycle casualties on the roads in the county."

Dave Collins, assistant chief constable, was invited to outline the scheme to a meeting of the safety campaign organisation ROSPA at the end of February this year.

Insp Charlton, while acknowledging some claims that the poor weather may have reduced the number of riders in 2004, believes Operation Halter was the main reason for the reduction, pointing to high levels of casual-

ties in other force areas.

He said: 'Anecdotally, we were hearing that bikers were saying that North Yorkshire police had stopped what they saw as our lenient and liberal approach and were taking a robust stance against bad driving. I prefer the phrase taking a more robust stance.'

There is a public reassurance element as well. Insp Charlton said: 'The feedback from council meetings is that people are very supportive of what we did.'

Which is why, come April, North Yorkshire police will be once more targeting those motorbike riders who seem to value their lives - and those of other road users - so lightly.



North Yorkshire police say between 1994 and 2004, 160 riders and pillion passengers died in accidents on the county's roads, 2002 and 2003 were the worst years with 28 dead in 2003 and 23 dead in 2002. The dead covered all age groups, ranging from a 51-year-old man who collided with a coach and a 15-year-old girl who was a pillion passenger killed with her father when they crashed. There are also men in their 20s, badly hurt or killed, ploughing into vehicles, trees and even shopfronts. There were many more injury-only accidents

● The Home Office has just announced its proposals to crack down on dangerous driving. Ministers say the proposals are in response to public concerns about the often devastating consequences for victims of careless and dangerous driving and the consultation paper followed discussions with the police, judges and road safety campaigners

The key proposals to be consulted on include:

- A new offence dealing with death resulting from illegal (disqualified or unlicensed) driving carrying a maximum five years imprisonment
- A requirement for courts to take serious injuries into account when sentencing
- A new offence of causing death by careless driving carrying a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment

Home Office Minister Baroness Scotland said: 'Whilst we have made great advances in recent years in improving road safety, too many people are still killed or seriously injured as a result of dangerous, careless and illegal driving. We need to ensure that the criminal law plays an effective role in protecting road users and pedestrians and that the justice system is on the side of the victim.'

'Our proposals, which we aim to take forward in legislation, seek to strike the right balance between the level of criminal culpability on the part of the bad or illegal driver and the devastation that their action may cause.'

'Too many of those who have been disqualified from driving by a court or who drive without an appropriate licence put other road users at risk by taking a vehicle out on the road in clear breach of both the law and their responsibilities to other road users. It is right that they should be held accountable for any consequences that may result, irrespective of the standard of the driving involved.'