



Bob Pitt, chairman of the South Yorkshire Police Federation

Local views

Facing violence in a 'safe city'

During the 12 month period from April 2005 to March 2006, 129 South Yorkshire police officers recorded the fact that they had suffered injuries as a result of being assaulted by the public. Of these, 18 were sustained by officers like PC Tony Mulhall, tasked with policing Sheffield's city centre. PC Mulhall recently appeared in CCTV footage attempting to restrain Toni Comer.

Of course, the figures quoted do not tell the whole story, just as blurred CCTV images often fail to capture the full picture. Sheffield, quite rightly, prides itself on being a safe city with a diverse and cosmopolitan population.

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It is a sad fact that city centre policing elsewhere in England and Wales exacts a much higher price in terms of assaults upon police officers, yet even 18 officers assaulted in the execution of their duties during a single year is 18 too many.

We asked officers working Sheffield's city centre, how many had faced overt violence or threats of violence within the previous three months and were not surprised to hear that the figure was closer to 100 percent. In other words, the lot of the city centre police officer is to be physically and verbally threatened and abused as a matter of alarming regularity.

It is time for the public and for all relevant public bodies to realise that abusing police officers is not something that merits a debate over whether or not the officer was anticipating trouble when he or she arrived at a scene of disorder. Worse still, where an officer, mistakenly, but in good faith, applies the law and is

assaulted during the resistance that follows, the attack might not be seen as unlawful if the officer cannot prove that he or she was acting fully in the execution of his or her duty.

A free society is indeed a wonderful thing and central to this is that police officers should be accountable for their actions. It is, after all key to the philosophy of policing by consent. Unfortunately, it relies upon a longstanding agreement between the police and the public that each will help the other towards the maintenance of order. But there is an increasing trend within every walk of life to shed personal responsibility and find someone else to blame; all the more so if there is the prospect of financial compensation.

Commonsense judgement and moral obligations are giving way to bare faced, technical exploitation.

There is no simple remedy to all that ails our city centres but the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts could make a welcome start by backing those police officers more readily. They have the job of policing volatile environments, more often than not whilst hopelessly outnumbered.

While we're at it, what would be wrong with introducing legislation to make it an offence to abuse a police officer in anyway? We wouldn't need to decide whether or not a police officer could or could not be alarmed or distressed under the terms of the Public Order Act or whether the officer had made a simple mistake, easily remedied at the police station without the need to resort to violence.