

IN YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

SNIFFING OUT TROUBLE ON MERSEYSIDE

Specials magazine spent a night on duty with a team on Merseyside to find out more about their work and some of their current operations

MERSEYSIDE

OPERATION
BOND

IT'S THE SATURDAY AFTER PAYDAY, AND THE STREETS OF LIVERPOOL ARE CROWDED WITH REVELLERS DETERMINED TO LET THEIR HAIR DOWN. BUT FOR THE DEDICATED SPECIAL OFFICERS OF LIVERPOOL NORTH BCU, IT'S THE START OF AN EIGHT-HOUR SHIFT ENSURING PARTYGOERS STAY SAFE WHILE HAVING A GOOD TIME.

And after just two minutes, they make their first arrest – a man is picked up on suspicion of possession of drugs thought to be cannabis and cocaine.

Set up by the Merseyside Police Proactive Licensing Team, Operation Bond is staffed and run primarily by Specials from St. Anne Street Police Station, and other stations (Walton Lane and Lower Lane) in Liverpool North, and forms part of the city centre-based Operation City Plan.

An on-going initiative, City Plan uses both Specials and regulars to provide a visible presence around Liverpool's bars and clubs, deterring anti-social behaviour, violence and drug use.

Tonight, nine Specials are joined by two proactive licensing team officers, Leo, a trained sniffer dog, and his two handlers. A pair of plain-clothes Specials scour queues looking for suspicious behaviour, another pair observe, four perform searches, and Sergeant Brian Farebrother, a Special of eight years' service, staffs the mobile police unit.

At 10pm, the streets are already thronged with people. The Specials start funnelling punters towards Leo, who sets to work sniffing out anything suspicious.

Special Sergeant David Jones says drugs are commonplace. "We find anything, from cannabis, to cocaine, to ecstasy. We have picked up heroin,

and weapons can be quite common. The likelihood is that if you have got something, we will find it."

Despite being only 24, David, an employment law solicitor from Wirral, has six years of service with the Specials, joining when he was a law student at Sheffield University. He does around 12 hours a week, normally patrolling on a Saturday night.

His commitment to the Specials means he is barred from practising criminal law. But he hopes to join the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) – where he says his time with the Specials will be invaluable. "I actually think that all CPS staff should do a shift with us – rather than just seeing what goes on in court, it would give them greater experience."

People seem happy to cooperate, and even form queues. If anyone acts suspiciously then individuals are searched. Some are less compliant, and David spends time questioning a man after he gives a series of false addresses.

Suddenly, SC Liam Fitzpatrick notices someone running away – they had spotted Leo, the sniffer dog. He gives chase and, together with four other officers, wrestles the man to the ground to stop him. The man is led off for questioning by Liam, and later pleads guilty to possession of crack cocaine.

Like most of tonight's team, Liam is in his twenties. Constable Andy Martin, of Merseyside Police Proactive Licensing Team, says their age can be an advantage for the type of work they do.

"I started when I was just twenty and I found it difficult talking to people. It is

"Suddenly someone runs away – they had spotted Leo"



TOP: SPECIAL SERGEANT BRIAN FAREBROTHER

BOTTOM: SPECIAL SERGEANT DAVID JONES



not that easy for them but they just get on with it. To all intents and purposes, they are police officers. It's more available manpower for us. We wouldn't be able to do this without the support they provide. They're dead keen, and seem to find these operations really interesting. I think they like coming out late."

Plain clothes SC Taylor, says her youth makes her task easier. "No-one is going to suspect me, I just don't have that look about me. I've got a baby face."

SC Taylor, who does around 50 hours a month – well over the minimum of 16 – eventually wants to join the police force. Although she regularly deals with the public, she says nothing prepares you for the front line of policing. "There is no real substitute for the experience and the pressures that you can find yourself under.

"When you are in the police you have powers to do things, whereas when I am working, I can't really let people know what I do. If they found out I was in the police, they would probably cause trouble."

One final arrest – again, on suspicion of possession of a class A drug – takes the »

STAY SAFE

AS well as the mean streets of LA and Rio, Ross Kemp's recent Sky One series on gangs also took him to Liverpool.

Focussing on the turf war between the NoggaDogz Norris Green gang and the Croccy Crew of Croxteth, Kemp highlighted the work of Operation Stay Safe, an initiative where Specials from Liverpool North contributed to get vulnerable young people off the streets.

Operating from neighbourhood police stations in Walton Lane and Lower Lane during last year's summer holidays, Stay Safe covered Anfield, Norris Green and Clubmoor.

Specials patrolled streets and parks late at night, taking any vulnerable children to a local church hall, where they were met by social workers. Parents were then contacted and asked to collect their children. Parents would then be spoken to by the social workers about their children's welfare.

Special Constable Liam Fitzpatrick, 24, from Northern Ireland, is a support worker with Mencap, and volunteers around three days a week with Liverpool North Specials. He worked on Stay Safe.

He says: "We found some kids aged around 11 and 12 walking around in the parks at night, and some of them were with known drug dealers. We actually found one 13-year-old girl at 1.30am with a bottle of vodka. She was drunk out of her head.

"Most kids were resistant – they didn't see how what they were doing was wrong. They didn't know they were vulnerable because they do it all the time.

"We explained our powers to them, and they did have a certain respect when we said we wanted to take them to a place of safety. When they came to the church hall and saw the social workers, they realised their behaviour isn't appropriate.

"Some parents break down in tears when they talk to the social workers.. They didn't actually understand that their behaviour is a crime. Some weren't aware that their kids are on the streets. They didn't know what they were getting up to out there."



"There is no real substitute for the experience and the pressures that you can find yourself under"



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SC LEANNE BINNS ON DUTY IN LIVERPOOL CITY CENTRE AS PART OF OPERATION BOND

final tally to three. At around midnight, the team moves to patrol queues in a bar recently found to be in breach of its licensing conditions for failing to provide CCTV footage.

Special Constable Leanne Binns, 25, from Liverpool, is nearing the end of her shift. The hairdresser normally does around eight hours a week, and tonight is one of her first occasions on duty with Operation Bond.

"It definitely helps me at work," she says. "You are just out there with the public. I wasn't really a very confident person, but now I have noticed I am much more confident in myself. I've really enjoyed it tonight."

Sophie Shepherd, 21, from Sheffield, has enjoyed herself too, albeit for slightly

different reasons. Chatting away to the Specials, she seems glad they're around.

"They are fantastic," she says. "They are looking out for us all. If there is any trouble, they are there to sort it out."

A quick chat with the door staff, and the team are on their way back to St Anne's Street Police Station to catch up with paperwork. Although clearly tired, Special Sergeant Jones faces another three hours on the streets, dealing with the most difficult period of the night – closing time.

Doesn't he resent sacrificing his weekend? "I am used to it now. I enjoy it," he says. "I do go out on Friday, but this just gives me the chance to give something back. A lot of us work and go out in the city centre. It's good to make it a little bit safer and help people out." ●

TOP RIGHT: THE FULL TEAM AFTER THE BRIEFING SESSION

BELOW: SC LEANNE BINNS



MAJOR INVESTIGATIONS

LIVERPOOL has seen some high-profile murders in recent years, with the death of 11-year-old Rhys Jones in August 2007 and the October 2008 stabbing of 16-year old Joseph Lappin capturing headlines.

During such major investigations, Specials from across Merseyside have been involved with helping to gather information, and reassure the public.

Operation Cable was set up by Merseyside Police in September 2007 to secure the arrest of 50 high profile gun and gang crime suspects, with Specials providing much-needed additional manpower.

Last year, Special Constable Liam Fitzpatrick took part in 11 raids as part of Operation Cable.

He says: "Sometimes, I was the one who found the drugs, a couple of times people were needed to guard the back doors. It just gives the regulars more confidence that there are extra men there. If the warrant asks for us to make the building safe, having extra staff speeds it all up. With PCSOs and Specials there, you can get through more warrants in a day.

"I think we are doing enough. Norris Green and Croxteth are quite low key at the moment."

Special Inspector Neil Wilson says: "We provide high visibility to the local communities and help our colleagues with keeping those communities safe. When major incidents take place like the Rhys Jones and Joseph Lappin murders, the Special Constabulary is asked to assist with the investigations as manpower is often stretched."