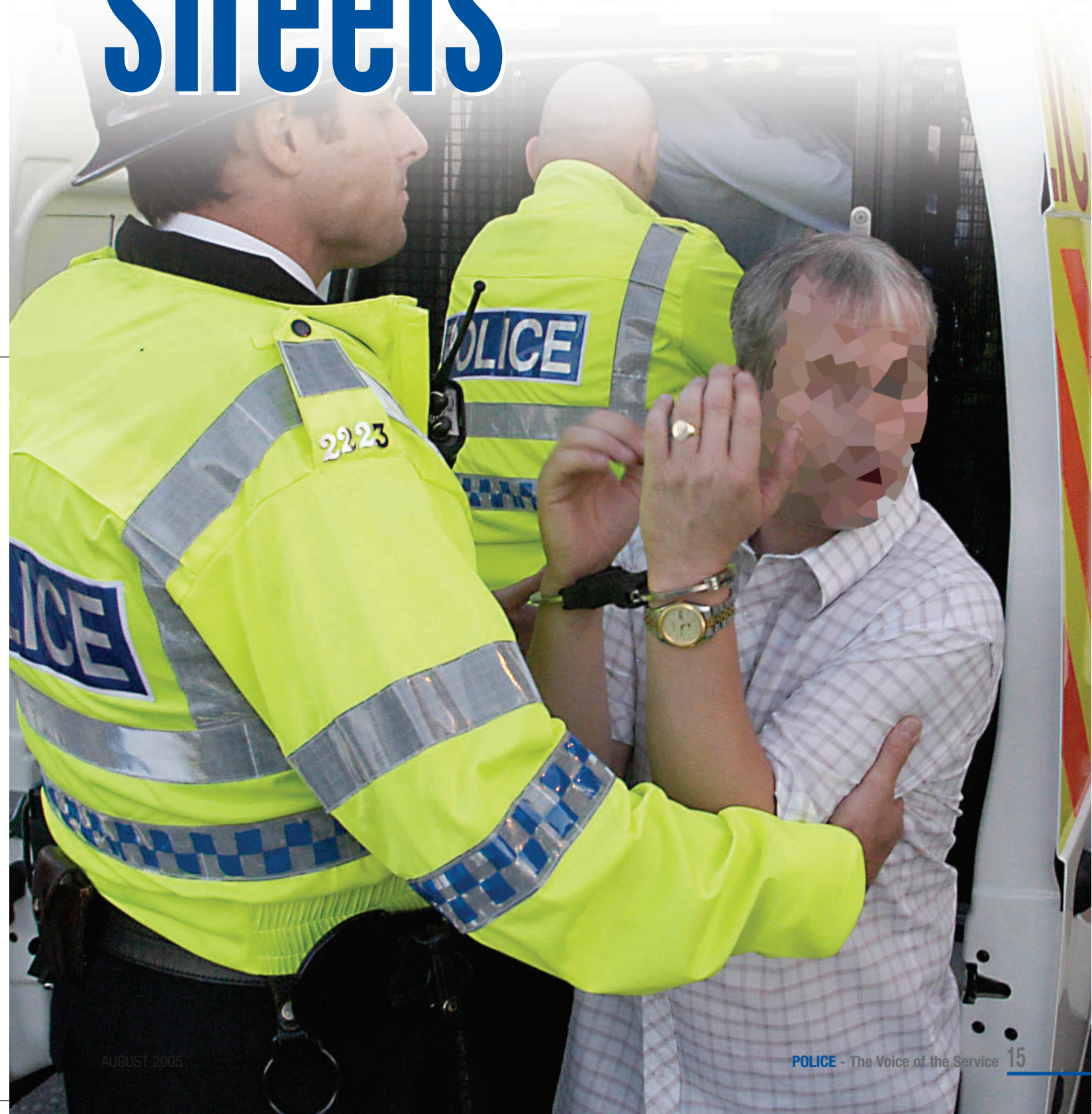


# Reclaiming the streets



### Northumbria Police has launched a campaign to call time on violent drunken anti-social behaviour. The strategy, called The Party's Over, has been praised by police minister Hazel Blears. John Dean reports from the streets of a northern town to find out how effective the strategy has been so far.

It is 10pm on a balmy summer's night and the streets of Whitley Bay are thronging with revellers, many of them in high spirits and the worse the wear for drink. Some drinkers could potentially be on the brink of being violent or getting involved in other anti-social behaviour.

This is part of the reason, alongside a Government push to combat anti-social behaviour nationally, why Northumbria Police launched its Drunkenness, Violence and Disorder (DVD) strategy under the title The Party's Over when new chief constable Mike Craik took up his post earlier this year.

He made clear that he was not prepared to tolerate drunken violence on the streets of Tyne and Wear and Northumberland and that his officers would address the issues head-on in places like Whitley Bay.

Whitley Bay is a small town with a big reputation, its seafront bars and clubs have made it the hen and stag night capital of Britain, advertised as such on the Internet and attracting thousands of people on a weekend.

The main focus, of the four-month police operation over the summer, is just four streets which run down to the sea and whose many bars and clubs fill up rapidly during a weekend evening.

And among the revellers tonight there are already a number of police officers, conspicuous in their yellow jackets, constantly on the lookout for the first signs of trouble yet also prepared to mingle with the crowds, swapping jokes and allowing themselves to be photographed with revellers.

Already, the decision to mix the very human face of the police with an aggressive intolerance of drunken disorder is starting to produce results with the number of



Police officers are taking a tough stance but are encouraged to mingle with drinkers

arrests having tumbled in the town, from around 15 down to less than a quarter at around three arrests.

Sgt Bob Rushbrooke, who oversees The Party's Over in the town, said: 'Whitley Bay is renowned for people coming to enjoy the sea, the pubs and the clubs and we can get 5,000 to 6,000 people coming into those four streets on a weekend. Most of the people come to enjoy themselves, but a hard core drink excessive alcohol, lose their inhibitions and cause trouble. For them the party is over.'

The key to implementing the

strategy in Whitley Bay has been to use police officers in a different way, with shifts realigned to slot in with the ebb and flow of the night-time drinkers.

The town has a distinctive pattern of night-time behaviour, with revellers heading in from the Metro station then moving down to the seafront as the night progresses. Later in the night they head back out, either on the Metro or using taxis.

'The analogy I use,' said Sgt Rushbrooke, 'is that it is like the tide coming in then going out again.'

Another major emphasis of

the operation is on getting police officers out on the streets, mingling with the drinkers rather than observing them from their vehicles.

The force acknowledges that it has thrown resources at the problem because in addition to the regular town officers, numbers are boosted by trainee constables, the narcotics dogs are used to sniff out drugs, the mounted section carries out patrols and plain-clothes officers take up positions in places like taxi queues to gather intelligence.

The criminal justice system is helping too, with tough fines for those who break the law: there have been recent cases of £300 fines for drunk and disorderly and £200 for those found urinating in the street. This is linked to a three-strikes policy so that those convicted or cautioned twice can be placed into the ASBO system.

Another element has been working with St John Ambulance to provide extra cover for drunken people who accidentally injure themselves.

Adding to the approach is a specially-designated team on mountain bikes which scours surrounding streets and open spaces in search of youngsters under age drinking. Those apprehended are taken home to their parents and warned about their future conduct. In just a few weeks the number of such incidents has plummeted.

For Sgt Rushbrooke, the key is balancing the need to keep the revellers safe and making life tolerable for people living nearby: the main drinking streets are just yards from residential areas.

He said: 'We have to remember the community's point of view and get the balance right between the needs of the night-time economy and the needs of



## THE PARTY'S OVER

people who live in the area.

'It is working. We were getting 15 to 16 arrests a night for drunkenness, now it is down to three. People are coming up to us and saying that what we are doing is fantastic.

'We are not trying to ruin people's fun, what we are trying to do is facilitate a safe environment. It is about engineering a situation which means people can enjoy the night life and get home in one piece.

'We take the view that if people do cause trouble, we will take them out early so that they cannot go on to do something more serious later in the night.

'By getting officers out onto the streets, talking to people, asking them if they are having a good night, we can develop a relationship with them. You might see a group on the Friday night and see them again over the weekend and they will remember you were the ones who had a bit crack with them.

'But if we see someone who is drunk and we have a word and calm them down, and they then walk away and all we get is abuse, we will lock them up because later they might seriously assault somebody. We want people to have a good night in Whitley Bay and not be bothered about that kind of behaviour.'

An example of early intervention happens early on the Saturday night we join the team, where just after 7pm a report comes in from the Metro station where a man has been badly assaulted, pelted with beer cans and kicked. Police move in and four men are arrested and locked up for the night; they cannot spread their mayhem into the town centre.

We are out with Sgt (Acting) Neil Pacey, operations manager for The Party's Over in North Tyneside. He walks comfortably through the crowds, pausing to talk to revellers and to doormen, with whom the improved relationship is crucial.

One pub doorman says: 'It has definitely got a lot better. We know the police are there for us and they know they can rely on us to help them if there is an incident.'

Sgt Pacey said: 'When we set up the initiative, we looked to reduce the number of assaults, increase the public reassurance and lower the level of tolerance to DVD. We wanted to take a more decisive approach to people drinking and being violent.

'In the short-term we became more visible but we also have closer links with the hotel and bar staff and with the taxi drivers. We have had countless positive letters from taxi drivers and hotel and pub managers saying how pleased they are with the way it is working.

'Our officers are instructed to get out of their vehicles and interact with the public, to be firm, fair and friendly and let the public know what is not acceptable behaviour.

'We have had to change the mindset of the police officers to make sure they get off their vehicles. The public reassurance has been fantastic and the businesses are happy.

'It is not complicated policing but it does need strong leadership and guidance and it is resource-intensive but the results are good.'

And tough action is taken when required. An example is a call from a pub where one of a group who try to sneak drugs past

the doormen. Police arrest the man and his friend, who is also implicated.

Some of their friends approach the police; it is the kind of situation which could go wrong but the firm and fair approach ensures it goes off peacefully and the chances of two drugged-up men causing trouble later in the night is averted.

In another incident, officers deal with a young girl who has

had her drink spiked. It will prove difficult to track down the perpetrator but she is offered the help she needs and the quick intervention of the police prevents the situation getting out of hand.

The officers on the streets know they will not avert trouble every time, that there will be drunken flare-ups, but the signs are that the party is indeed over for many of the those who used to resort to using their fists.



**Mike Craik, Chief Constable**

When he became Chief Constable of Northumbria in March, Mike Craik made cracking down on drunken disorder a priority.

He said crimes involving alcohol were a major worry for a lot of people and in Northumbria that has included drunken men engaging in violence, a rise in women acting the same way and a problem with under-age drinkers.

The force has backed the Party's Over initiative with practical measures including an emphasis on foot patrols, using civilians to process arrested people to keep officers on the streets and a lack of tolerance of drunken behaviour.

In addition, the force has struck a deal with Camelot which means stores selling alcohol to under-age people could lose their Lottery licence and the income that comes with it.

Mr Craik said: 'We have adopted an unashamedly aggressive policing style with a reduced level of tolerance for crimes associated with drinking.

'It is not so much about what you do but when you do it and we use early intervention. I would rather arrest someone early in the evening for drunk and disorderly instead of waiting for them to carry out a serious assault later in the evening.

'Officers are friendly with drinkers - we want people to enjoy a drink - but there is no second chance for those causing trouble.'