

Surrey Civic Network

Received wisdom from past High Sheriffs to the incoming High Sheriff, is to ensure that you have a focus for the year. This helps enormously when prioritisation is required to resolve the many inevitable diary conflicts, but much more importantly, it ensures that all of the effort throughout the year has a chance of making an impact, however superficial and fleeting.

I agreed with my predecessor, Robert Napier, that I would be delighted to continue the focus he began during his year, on the number of permanent exclusions of pupils from schools across the county. Not just in secondary schools, but, amazingly to a naive outsider, also in primary and even nursery schools. The terrible link between exclusions from school and future involvement with the police, courts and prisons is unarguable. The issue itself, however, is highly complex and therefore difficult to address. Nevertheless, the High Sheriff's powers to Convene and Connect, will be used to the maximum, and I know, and greatly appreciate, that everyone present will be pleased to provide whatever assistance you can. Thank you all in advance!

With help from professionals across the county, and indeed from the County Council itself, we propose to tackle this sensitive matter from two directions. First, I have been greatly impressed by the excellent outreach activities already well underway through our Universities and Colleges, targeted at secondary schools and particularly at those pupils who are struggling in their studies, for whatever reasons, and seriously at risk of exclusion. This impactful work will be on display at the High Sheriff's Garden Party, when networking will be encouraged between schools, colleges, universities, support organisations and charities, to maximise the effectiveness of this great work.

The second front will be to encourage early intervention in the primary system, and we are seeking involvement in the county-wide conferences planned for September, and currently being finalised by Head Teachers. Apparently, appropriate venues for such large gatherings are difficult to identify, so the 'carrot' has been offered to hold the two events on campus at the University of Surrey. We await developments with great anticipation, but are already organising the production of directories linking schools with appropriate local charities, and also the production of a video featuring young people who have suffered permanent exclusion, explaining the resulting, quite devastating, effects that fact had on their lives. We believe that such tangible actions will be welcomed by Heads and school teachers everywhere.

Whether I am able to make any difference remains to be seen, but I would like to share my reasons for selecting this difficult focus for my year.

My wife, Cath and I both come from loving families, in Leeds and Newcastle respectively, who had very little in the way of money. And yet we received exceptional schooling and were able to progress to university, where we both met, all entirely on the basis of what was right for us as young individuals, and nothing whatsoever to do with wealth. We were inspired by teachers, lecturers and new friends from totally diverse backgrounds and countries. We enjoyed opportunities to glimpse possible futures that we had never imagined, even in our wildest dreams - in short, it completely changed our lives.

I believe that it is our collective duty to ensure that all children and young people have access to such opportunities. None should have such inspirational moments denied to them. We must always remember that it will be a totally individual spark that will make the difference for each of them - perhaps in sport, music, dancing, singing, science, engineering, apprenticeships, civic and military service - who knows? There are some wonderful charities and organisations willing to provide such inspiration across a very broad spectrum of activity, and we will ensure that as many as possible are given support. One route, of course, is for them to apply to the High Sheriff Youth Awards, where I am delighted to be a trustee. All members of the Trustee Board look forward to considering appropriate applications from every corner of our county, and we will certainly welcome whatever encouragement you are able to provide for all relevant organisations in your area to get involved.

In addition to the main focus, as Patron for the year, I will also be actively encouraging the continued development of the Volunteer Police Cadets. We currently have 6 very successful Units, and a medium term ambition to have 11, one in each Borough and District across the county. Encouragingly, nearly a quarter of the cadets are from difficult and disadvantaged backgrounds, and every cadet I have met has been engaged, enthusiastic and keen to participate as a member of a team.

Finally, I am also proud to be a Patron of two excellent charities, Surrey Youth Focus and SATRO, and will be doing all I can to support them both, and of course to enlist their help with my main focus for the year.