



## Greater London 2012-13

The Lord Chief Justice's words during my Declaration rang in my ears – he said “remember that being a High Sheriff gives you enormous access and use it wisely.”

High Sheriffs often adopt a charity or a project to support during their time as High Sheriff. Since the High Sheriff's tenure lasts only 12 months, I felt it was important to ensure any project I supported would be sustainable and make a real difference. It was also important for me (like all other High Sheriffs) to choose something I cared about and of which I had some experience. As the Chairman of the British Transport Police Authority, one issue that had been troubling me over the last few years was the number of suicides on the rail network.

Each year some 350 people die following impact with a train in Great Britain. A large number of these fatalities are a result of people taking their own lives. Research shows that for every fatal incident, British Transport Police (BTP) responds to some nine other incidents involving what is termed pre-suicidal behaviour. These may amount to attempts at suicide,

reconnoitering, third party reports or other incidents involving vulnerable people in proximity to the railway which give rise to concerns for their safety.

It is quite clear that many of these individuals suffer from some form of mental illness and need help. While the police have a primary duty to protect life, they are not able to provide the specialist services that will ultimately help to save the lives of those in suicidal crisis, and it was here I hoped I could make a difference.

Using the level of access inherent in the High Sheriff's role, I contacted a large swathe of people for support, including local and national health services, the rail industry, health professional bodies, individual mental health institutions, research bodies, legislators and lobby groups.

I was heartened by the response – it appeared I had struck a chord. Institutions came forward to give the project support in cash, in kind and in expert advice. A pilot project was launched around the stations in North London, which is a suicide hotspot,

bringing together police and mental health professionals. By placing mental health experts in custody suites to provide screening of detainees, including providing the facility of assessing individuals on an outreach basis, vulnerable people have direct access to the services they need. Working together also means health professionals can share data and anticipate potential crisis points for vulnerable individuals. Above all the pilot project is organised to take a holistic view of the support needed by individuals and, most crucially, is able to deliver that support consistently.

The project is under way and early signs are that it is making a real difference to those that need help most. Without the access to key individuals and decision makers enabled through the High Sheriff's role it would not have been possible to garner such support and commitment, which, most importantly of all, has widespread support to continue saving lives. □

**Mrs U Banerjee CBE**

*High Sheriff of Greater London 2012-13*