



## Hertfordshire 2012-13

This time last year I was starting out on what I imagined might be quite an extraordinary journey. Safe territory was the Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics and all that good feeling and neighbourliness, flag waving and pride. The Queen visited, the sun shone, thousands lined the streets and Her

Majesty planted a tree in a Jubilee plantation at Hatfield House. The torch came through the county, Team GB won two gold medals at the white water rafting centre at our eastern edge at Broxbourne, and the Paralympics made a lasting difference to everyone's perception of disability.



Opening the Green Canteen, a Watford Community Housing and Herts Mind Network social enterprise.

Half an eyebrow was raised at my Declaration when I mentioned gardening and horticulture in the same sentence as therapy, rehabilitation and crime prevention. As a garden designer I wanted to concentrate on something I knew about, and this part of the journey took me to some wonderful organisations, full of dedicated professionals and volunteers doing very valuable work supporting some of the most vulnerable in our county. It has been a privilege to write about them on my blog.

The therapy bit of gardening we all probably know about and can relate to. I said this to a Rotarian group who replied that some husbands thought gardening was punishment! Of course it can be, and it is used as part of community payback schemes to improve schools and other areas where anti-social behaviour is rife, where a small amount of landscaping can make all the difference. But what I found particularly interesting were some of the creative partnerships using a commercial enterprise to rebuild lives. To give confidence, life skills, training, volunteering opportunities, work experience – a job even – to people who never thought that was possible, either because of learning disability, addictions, a criminal past, mental health issues – whatever the reasons, I found this inspiring.

One such example uses the commercial farm owned by the Royal Veterinary College near Potters Bar to engage with the most prolific offenders, on the Choices and Consequences programme. It is run by a voluntary organisation, Farming for All, with input from probation and the police. For some, the sight of a vulnerable animal which cannot help itself has had astonishing results. For others it is the routine of work in a commercial organisation which has unlocked the door to a less chaotic lifestyle. Another example is Sunnyside Rural Trust which has taken



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over the district council's greenhouses and has the contract to grow all their bedding plants. For adults with learning disabilities the opportunity to say 'I have a job' makes a huge difference to self-confidence and quality of life.

We are lucky in Hertfordshire to have many organisations which are working across statutory, private and voluntary sectors in imaginative ways. It has been great to unearth some of these, to listen to their plans and hear the pride they take in their work, to drink countless cups of tea with dedicated and passionate people and to shout about their success. At the end of the year, the High Sheriff's Award ceremony gave me just this opportunity, and many of the award winners were involved in horticulture in some way.

I was hugely helped by the Hertfordshire Community Foundation, which administers the High Sheriff's Fund, but also has in-depth knowledge of many of these voluntary organisations in the county. Representatives signposted me, and advised that I visit all the CVS across the county, which led to many fruitful and perceptive meetings and new connections.

James Williams, Secretary to the High Sheriffs' Association, is a brilliant Under Sheriff and guided me through the more formal set pieces: Court Awards, the Justice Service in St Albans Abbey for over 1,000, and a summer party in September when the sun even shone. He happily dusted off his gap-year skills and helped as the wine waiter at a court lunch too!

The core work of High Sheriff still remains loosely around law and order, symbolised by my last three engagements in office: lunch with Hertfordshire Constabulary for a debrief, and to thank all those whom I had met in my year; the Hertfordshire Probation Achievement Awards for Service Users recognising those who



With the judging panel for High Sheriff's Awards at the Farming For All lambing course, dressed for the cold and compliant, left to right Howard Guard (2007-08), David Cansdale DL, Fiona Trenchard (2013-14).



With the Mayor of Stevenage and the Royal Anglian Regiment as they receive the honorary Freedom of the Borough.

have made real progress in turning their lives around and the staff who have helped them; and, finally, a visit to HMP The Mount to give an award to the parks and gardens department for its work.

It has been a great privilege and an extraordinary journey. □

**The Hon Mrs Stuart-Smith**  
High Sheriff of Hertfordshire 2012-13