



Awards raise awareness

WHILE THIS anniversary year of Magna Carta provides a stark reminder of the antiquity of the office, a recent predecessor of mine in Kent remarked upon the sheer scope of the office of High Sheriff today. Support for the judiciary at all levels remains a central feature of the role and I attended the Crown Courts at Maidstone and Canterbury on several occasions.

Together with the ceremonial aspect of the office, I have found that the role has offered real scope for involvement in both the public and voluntary sectors of the county. I primarily concentrated my time on programmes working with vulnerable young people and families, tackling social problems at their root causes. These early intervention initiatives aim to engage young people who are at risk of dropping out of school, while developing their aspirations and opportunities and actively deterring them from falling into the criminal justice system.

The awards ceremony that I held at Leeds Castle in March recognised several organisations involved in this preventative agenda. Intervention in the early years is as significant as the effect of neglectful parenting in the 'first 1000 days' on a child's development and subsequent behaviour. Family Nurse Partnership is a government scheme, which supports young mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds from late in their pregnancy until the child is two years old. The Play and Learn Scheme (PALS) in Ramsgate takes experienced play workers into the homes of parents equipping them with the skills they need to bring up a young child. These awards, run in association with Kent Community Foundation, proved to be an excellent vehicle to raise the profile of both the Shrievalty and the organisations concerned.

Addressing the lack of aspiration among children and young people is a particular concern in Thanet. I chaired an initiative to introduce an educational enrichment programme for five primary



Winners of the High Sheriff of Kent Awards at Leeds Castle

schools in the area for Year 6 pupils. This activity was delivered by Canterbury Christ Church University as part of its outreach programme to widen access to higher education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The large prison estate in Kent is facing a number of challenges with the persistently acute shortage of prison officers in the South East. Fortunately, a number of charities are operating within the system exemplified by the Prison Listener Service – a Samaritan service delivered by prisoners to prisoners – which has been invaluable in addressing mental illness in Kent prisons. I was able to give High Sheriff's Awards both to the initiator of the scheme from the Canterbury Samaritans and to the prisoner who supervised its introduction into HMP Elmley. The demonstrable success of training prisoners to become mentors for other prisoners is also reflected in the work of the Shannon Trust, which improves literacy in our prisons. A High Sheriff's Award was justly deserved for the extent and quality of the scheme in HMP Maidstone.

The privatisation of the probation service is still in its infancy but Kent is pursuing the invaluable Integrated Offender Management (IOM) programme, which brings together the police, prison service, social services and NHS to work with individuals collectively to resettle them successfully back into the community. I was able to give a High Sheriff's Award to an excellent IOM scheme operating in Thanet.

Through the work of my predecessors to ensure continuity, the awareness of the Shrievalty is becoming ever more widespread across the county. The awards personally given out each year by the High Sheriff together with the recently instituted Community Awards – jointly awarded by District and Parish Councils and the High Sheriff – are all picked up by the local press and social media such as Twitter. Fortunately, the traditions of this ancient office are securely embedded in the county while its awareness continues to flourish. Long may that be the case.

◆ Hugo Fenwick
High Sheriff of Kent 2014-15