



## Promoting youth

THE ‘dreaming spires’ of Oxford somewhat belies the fact that 20 per cent of the school age population are below the child poverty line and ‘county lines’ drugs have led to an increase in child drug exploitation. I decided to dedicate my year to the ‘youth’ of Oxfordshire, especially in the most deprived areas.

I have focused attention on those youth organisations which promote leadership as it appears to me that these create the most transformational outcomes whether it’s the various cadet organisations or multitude of other youth organisations. One of my first engagements was to swear in new police cadets in Oxford. I was delighted that 15 of the cadets attended the High Sheriff’s garden party where they formed a guard of honour to the delight of the Chief Constable.

Through a fundraising challenge involving many local businesses I have secured over £150,000 of sponsorship that is partly being directed to a national sports charity, Access Sport, which runs a High Sheriff-funded programme in both Oxford and Manchester. This project promotes physical activity and exercise among teenagers in deprived communities to tackle endemic issues of obesity and diabetes. The project has already encouraged over 2,500 children to participate in a variety of local sports clubs and created 100 new coaches and 100



High Sheriff's Black Dog



Richard Venables (R) (Oxfordshire) with Kerry Darch (prison personal trainer), Professor Ruth Farwell (Buckinghamshire) and her husband Dr Martin Daniels at HMP Springhill parkrun

new volunteers to provide a sustainable platform for the future – at the same time transforming lives through sport.

Leading from the front, I also embarked on a personal challenge. It was literally a running start to the shrieval year as I completed the London Marathon in searing heat only two weeks after the swearing-in ceremony. I have since followed this up with several half marathons and triathlons, and in July I completed a 100km race along the length of the Ridgeway in 18 hours. In June I completed my 100th parkrun at HMP Springhill, where they had recently started this event which is organised by both prisoners and prison officers. I was also accompanied by the High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire but I won't disclose who won the shrieval race!

I have also become increasingly aware of the problems of mental health in our school-age population. I held a fundraising dinner with D'Overbroeck's School, Oxford, to purchase a SANE (a leading UK mental health charity) black dog named Sirius which is now

emblazoned with both the High Sheriff's coat of arms and the Shrievalty badge. This very elegant work of art comprises a four-foot-high stylised black dog and it will travel around every secondary school and places of higher education in the county to destigmatise mental health and offer advice to students and teachers with the help of volunteers from SANE.

I have also been supporting the 'Getting Court' initiative (The High Sheriff summer 2016, pp 14-15) where local school children are invited to the Crown Court every Thursday. This programme is fully booked for the year and provides a real insight into the consequences of breaking the law while also stimulating many to participate in the Mock Trials competitions.

After six months I feel I am fully into my stride and thoroughly enjoying the opportunities that the position of High Sheriff affords.

♦ Richard Venables DL  
*High Sheriff of Oxfordshire 2018-19*