



## Surrey 2013-14

One of the questions that many of us have discussed as we prepare for our year in office is whether to have a theme. I decided that I would like to explore the social value of the arts and, in particular, to understand their potential within our system of justice. And so I was fascinated to observe a workshop, run by the charity Keep Out, at HMP Coldingley in which prisoners role-played the harsh and humiliating reality of prison life before an audience of adolescents already known to the police. This was in effect an extraordinary piece of theatre intended to deter young people from crime, but it also serves to reduce reoffending among the prisoners who take part. Later that month I attended a preview of *The Domestic Abuse Project*, a powerful new play by a youth theatre company, Peer Productions. Through theatre a team of young people have been able to study and demonstrate the warning signs of domestic abuse and its impact upon families.

I certainly did not expect to emerge from HMP Bronzefield with a gift bag of jewellery and cards or to find, inside



Helen Bowcock, after making her Declaration as High Sheriff of Surrey at Guildford Cathedral, with Jenny French and Joan Henson, volunteers from a local community project.

a prison, a newly launched social enterprise to develop craft skills and raise revenue. Given that employment is shown to reduce the incentive to reoffend, craft enterprises like this one make sense not only to improve the quality of life within prison but also to

prepare for life beyond the gate. I also had the opportunity to see art fulfil an important purpose within a restorative justice programme at HMP Send. As a 'community guest', I had been invited to take part in the final workshop run by Sycamore Tree, in which prisoners were invited to express regret for their crime and to apologise. But, for one or two, speaking in public was too daunting and so they expressed themselves through vivid paintings which they held in front of us. I was rather touched by their curiosity about my role as High Sheriff and they were the most attentive audience during what has become a reasonably frequent explanation.

I have enjoyed getting to know Surrey Youth Support Service, visiting their projects with young offenders and other young people at risk. Recently they invited me to visit a carpentry workshop where those who had been given community orders were being taught to make wooden boxes. The boxes have a very special purpose as they are donated to the neo-natal ward of St Peter's Hospital, Chertsey for



The High Sheriff at her garden party at a charity stand with members of Opportunities, a community project providing unemployed women with training and skills.



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bereaved parents to take home their baby's possessions. In many cases the young people take great care in decorating the boxes with their own designs and this provides an opportunity to reflect and to feel that they are helping others and making a contribution to society. The workshop manager, who volunteered for many years for Victim Support, also showed

me a jigsaw designed and made to demonstrate to child witnesses that their testimony is of value even when a conviction is not obtained.

Surrey is a surprisingly varied county and I keep on discovering innovations here, particularly in attempts to address the problems of youth offending, reoffending and the underlying causes

of crime. And, in a county that has a number of prisons, the opportunity that being High Sheriff has afforded to meet prisoners themselves will remain one of the most vivid aspects of my year. □

***Dr Helen Bowcock DL***  
*High Sheriff of Surrey 2013-14*