



Photo credit: Paul Davis, PVD Media Ltd

Blending the virtual with the in-person

THERE WERE times during the planning I did in the years ahead of taking office where I wished I had an official handbook to tell me exactly what to do as High Sheriff. But then COVID-19 hit, and if I'd had a blueprint I would have needed to throw it away and start all over again anyway!

My plan had always been to utilise digital technology to connect with the people of Shropshire, but I had no idea how important this would be within the first few months of my shrieval year, in the midst of a global pandemic (not words I ever expected to use!). Zoom and Teams video calls replaced face-to-face meetings, almost everything in

my diary was cancelled, and all of the organisations I'd planned to connect with also suddenly had to completely change the way they worked.

My husband Mark and I sat down to develop a revised plan and went through the contacts database I'd developed to set up Zoom meetings, while also developing a structured social media and press campaign. Mark's role became (and still is) very limited in terms of events and he has been more focused on supporting the writing and researching that goes on.

As I reflect on this halfway through my shrieval year, lockdown has eased enough to allow me to travel around the beautiful county of Shropshire



News from and about members

Left: Dean Harris focusing on addiction with some of the team from the Shropshire Recovery Partnership to support September's Recovery Month

Below: Face-to face meetings with the mayors of Newport and Bridgnorth to discuss the effects of COVID-19 on businesses and the community as part of a 16-town blitz after the end of the first lockdown period

(adhering to social distancing) – it would be easy to revert back to 100 per cent in-person meetings. And yet there are things I've learned since April which have convinced me that 'blending' face-to-face and virtual appointments is the way forward, not only for the remainder of my year but also for future High Sheriffs too. Evolving the role by embracing technology as a communication tool is the single biggest way to ensure the role is kept relevant in today's society. In addition, it allows us to be more efficient; for example, a meeting in Ludlow in south Shropshire followed by another in Whitchurch to the north could see me needing to leave 80 minutes or so between the two (and that's on a day with no traffic). Scheduling both as video calls means I don't even need eight minutes

between them. There's nothing like meeting face to face but video calling does remove many barriers such as distance.

Of course, getting out and about to see first-hand the fantastic work communities are undertaking (especially in light of the extreme difficulties coronavirus has presented for our charities and volunteers) is vital, and it's something I spend several days a week doing. But I've been able to do so much more – connect businesses and charities together, source funds for projects, spread awareness for my key topics – by spending one day a week at my computer.

The other huge advantage is using social media; again, something I'd planned to do anyway but it became all the more important once we were in lockdown. I post on Facebook and Instagram every weekday, connecting with the community, voluntary organisations and local groups, and I also make use of LinkedIn to liaise with the business community.

I'm by no means a social media expert but I firmly believe it's the way forward for High Sheriffs to share the good work we do with the public, raise the profile of organisations/groups, highlight key causes

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and raise awareness of the history and importance of the role. It's absolutely not about vanity, but the power of social media should not be ignored – the reach of some posts has truly astounded me, it's a game changer! Plus, with more than three-quarters of adults under 50 active on Facebook, using social media is essential for us to get younger people engaged – after all, those we connect with online could be the High Sheriffs of years to come!

My advice for future High Sheriffs is yes, by all means 'just do your own thing', but also consider how you utilise technology during your shrieval year, blending virtual and traditional to make the very best of taking on this prestigious role while being agile and proactive in the modern post-coronavirus world.

◆ Dean Harris JP
High Sheriff of Shropshire 2020-21

