



# Multi-faith collaboration

**LIKE MOST High Sheriffs in the UK I suspect, I felt a degree of frustration as the national lockdown was implemented. The very first realisation for me was the fact that my Declaration, usually held at Guildford Cathedral, would not go ahead as normal.**

However, my background is in technology, providing web and app solutions so, not to be beaten, the previous High Sheriff Bridget Biddell and I set about planning a very different experience, bringing together the various people involved online for Surrey's very first virtual Declaration which was screened afterwards on the shrieval website and social media. Facebook alone recorded almost 2,000 views resulting in many more people getting to see the ceremony than ever before and sharing in my taking the oath traditionally – the first Muslim High Sheriff in Surrey in some thousand years.

Thereafter, unable to take part in civic events and visits due to cancellation, and with travel around the county restricted, I concentrated on supporting my local community as much as was allowed.

Being in a position to shine a light on the Muslim community and generate awareness of the good work they do across Surrey, I worked with Muslims who played their part in the COVID-19 lockdown period, particularly in Woking where I am based. Woking is home to the Shah Jahan Mosque – the UK's first mosque, purpose built in 1889 – and there, volunteers on furlough decided to help vulnerable people by delivering food and essential supplies, supported by financial aid from nearby St Dunstan's Catholic Church. The end result was a multi-faith community, working closely together to support people of all faiths during the pandemic. The group was featured in the national news and received a visit from TRH the Earl and Countess of Wessex – an occasion which really brought the community together.

During lockdown I also joined the Lord-Lieutenant on a visit to Surrey Police headquarters to see the Strategic and Tactical Teams in action managing COVID-19. We saw the true partnership between the public, private and armed services, along with retired officers with

Photo credit: Andy Newbold Photography



High Sheriff with grandson Muhammed Ali

vast experience who volunteered their help. It gave me confidence that we were in safe hands. Surrey University rallied students for volunteer services and converted part of the veterinary school into a temporary mortuary, just some of many stories about volunteers in the county... and not forgetting the incredible work by our NHS and other emergency services.

While adhering to government guidelines and as lockdown relaxed, I was honoured to take part in VJ75 and other remembrance events as well as to work with youth and charity groups. As I write, further restrictions are imminent and so I will be returning to technology to make the best of my position by arranging Zoom sessions with schools, groups and charities across Surrey and trying as actively as possible to make the most of being High Sheriff in the most difficult of years for everyone.

**Shahid Azeem DL**  
*High Sheriff of Surrey 2020-21*



High Sheriff at the Shah Jahan Mosque with Imam Hashmi, his wife Kawther Hashmi and THR the Earl and Countess of Wessex

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