



## Championing those who help others cope with loneliness

**LONG AGO I decided that during my year as High Sheriff of Tyne and Wear I would focus my time on supporting local organisations which help alleviate the effects of loneliness.**

Loneliness affects people of all ages and backgrounds. It's an area where so many volunteers and community groups do valuable work, work which all too often isn't recognised or appreciated. I wanted to give thanks and recognition to the people who give their time and skills to help others overcome the debilitating effects of feeling isolated.

While the arrival of COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown has led to changes for all of us, it's only reinforced

my determination to focus on the theme of loneliness. The work of these groups is more important than ever as more people experience isolation and access to support becomes more difficult.

It had been my plan to visit as many community groups as possible in person, and, as my year as High Sheriff coincided with the 40th anniversary of the Tyne and Wear Metro, I planned to mark this anniversary by using the network to visit community groups based close to each of the 60 Metro stations across the county.

Although my Metro journeys remain on hold, I've still been able to support the work of groups such as Age UK North Tyneside and Newcastle's Silverline

Memories by finding new ways to replace personal visits. It's clear that technology will be key to the way we operate for the rest of this year, and indeed in subsequent years, so we must all look to fulfil our roles in new ways.

As a result, like everyone, I've attended more online events this year than ever before, including sitting in on Crown Court proceedings and videoing messages of thanks and support for local organisations, including Northumbria Police.

As well as its effect on people's mental wellbeing, the pandemic is having a serious economic impact, none more so than on young people living in Tyne and Wear. For that reason, I'm also supporting the work of voluntary groups which are helping to improve the job prospects of young people and this has become the focus of this year's High Sheriff's Awards for Tyne and Wear.

The awards give recognition and financial support to organisations that help young people develop new skills or overcome personal challenges, and this year we're especially keen to support groups that promote skills development, training and employment opportunities. During this difficult year, I want to use the awards to help young people in Tyne and Wear to overcome the additional hurdles they face as a result of COVID-19.

So, although it's been a very different year from the one I expected, the challenge remains to find new and innovative ways to support those who work so tirelessly to help others – for me that means supporting groups working to alleviate loneliness and to champion those helping young people to find and follow their chosen vocation.



Photo credit: Doug Jackson

The Ocean Youth Trust North is a charity specialising in the personal development of young people and adults and a former winner of a High Sheriff's Award for Tyne and Wear

**◆ Sarah Stewart OBE DL**  
*High Sheriff of Tyne and Wear 2020-21*