



## Bridging the digital divide

**DIGITAL POVERTY** was not a phrase I knew before my shrieval year. Although it certainly existed before COVID-19, the pandemic has amplified its effects. Digital poverty will define my term as High Sheriff of Bedfordshire.

In April last year I was approached by a local charity for help with an issue that was unfolding: children unable to engage in learning from home as they had no access to a digital device. The government began issuing devices to certain students, but it rapidly became apparent that need vastly outstripped supply. The primary aim for my year was determined: to bridge Bedfordshire's digital divide.

Children's Services across the county assisted by identifying students who had no access to a device. I raised money from local trusts, individuals, businesses and rotary clubs. I even held a virtual garden party which was extremely well attended. In return for three cake recipes and two teabags, people generously donated to the cause and to date I have been able to distribute over 1,800 devices across the county – an astounding number only made possible by the generosity of so many different communities across Bedfordshire.



Susan Lousada presents Bedfordshire Hero badges to staff and volunteers at a Bedford vaccination centre



Mark Lewis, Squareshot Photography



**Above:** Susan Lousada with Captain Sir Tom Moore at the unveiling of his portrait  
**Left:** Susan Lousada delivers laptops to a Luton school

I have seen headteachers in tears as they received the devices. In a television interview, the head of a Luton school explained that to deprive a child of a digital device in this world was no different to depriving them of a pen and books. My theme was always going to be keeping children in education, but little did I know just how important it would be this year.

Another highlight included celebrating my 60th birthday with Captain Sir Tom Moore at the unveiling of his portrait. He asked me to explain my digital initiative. As I finished, he flashed one of those rather cheeky smiles and launched into a five-minute speech, probably one of the most powerful I have heard on the importance of equality in education. He ended by telling me how, even today, out of the four army colleges, only one admits girls and how wrong he felt that

was. His death leaves a gaping hole in the hearts of many people across the world; in Bedfordshire we lost our local hero.

In March I received my first dose of the vaccine, which was carried out with such kindness and military precision. Reflecting on this, it occurred to me that many of the people delivering this incredible vaccine roll-out are volunteers and I wanted to thank them. I had 'Bedfordshire Hero' badges made for these wonderful volunteers which included the High Sheriff's badge of Office. Handing out 2,750 badges was a logistical challenge but worth it. Staff and volunteers were so grateful to be recognised and appreciated.

A year without pomp or ceremony was more than made up for by the cheerful volunteers at the vaccination centres receiving their badges and the infectious smiles on children's faces as they received their laptops. Those smiles that crossed the digital divide will stay with me forever.

**◆ Susan Lousada DL**  
*High Sheriff of Bedfordshire 2020-2021*