



A year of kindness in the face of adversity

AT THE end of December I joined the team at my local GP surgery to administer the first doses of the remarkable new vaccines that have become the backbone of our efforts to escape from the grip of the pandemic. The first cohort of patients were the most elderly and many told me that coming to the surgery for their immunisation was only the second or third time that they had left their homes in nine months.

But the sense of hope and relief generated by these vaccines was almost palpable. This was reflected in the conversations that I continued to have with leaders in local government and the emergency services during the early weeks of this year.

And, as the vaccines and lockdown are enabling us to return gradually to a more normal life, there is now a real spring in the steps of charities I have been visiting that have been able to restart their work to befriend and connect in person, rather than on Zoom.

However, the months of isolation have undoubtedly left their mark on many vulnerable people and I have been particularly concerned by the impact the pandemic has had on the residents in my local prisons. Being incarcerated for 23.5 hours a day has been necessary to protect the prison population from the COVID infection, but it is clear that this has had a significant impact on their mental welfare.

During the latter months of my year, I have therefore concentrated on connecting with those charities which provide emotional and practical support to those in prison, such as Spurgeons Family Services at HMP Lewes, and other organisations which have been supporting the men after release.

Of course, the pandemic's impact on the mental health of the wider population is also well described, and it has therefore been satisfying that my projects in the

autumn – a celebration of the work of volunteers through a specific recognition award and a county-wide Zoom conference to highlight the issue of loneliness – have gone on to produce dividends in the spring. Locality-based networks, arising out of these initiatives, are now developing joined-up schemes to support those who have become isolated to manage their anxieties and reconnect safely.

Perseverance and innovation have become key characteristics of many of the organisations involved, and it has been good to celebrate the efforts of sixteen of them through my High Sheriff's Awards. And although a single ceremony has not been possible, visiting each to make the presentation in person has proved meaningful and often moving.

One group that has particularly impressed me has been the West Sussex County Council Youth Cabinet who were worthy runners-up in the Youth Led section of the National Crimebeat Awards.

Their entry was the first from West Sussex for many years – if ever – and I was very proud of them as they presented their excellent campaign to reduce knife crime at the finalists' ceremony.

As High Sheriff, I have been granted a unique and privileged perspective of the experiences of my county during this unforgettable year. However, as we now all mourn the sad passing of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, his exceptional example of service and commitment to the public good epitomises so much of what I have also observed among the many volunteers, charities, public servants and emergency services who have worked so hard for the good of those around them.

It certainly has been a year of kindness in the face of adversity.

◆ Dr Tim Fooks

High Sheriff of West Sussex 2020-21

Below, clockwise from top left: Presenting a High Sheriff's Award to Mark Whaley, CEO of Making it Out, a charity that supports ex-offenders to learn new skills and trades; Outside the main gate of HMP Lewes with Hannah Lane, Governor (left) and members of Spurgeons Family Services; Presenting Special Recognition Volunteer Award to Khristina McCormack for providing daily meals to 80 homeless people in Worthing and clothing and essentials to vulnerable families; COVID vaccine clinic in Pulborough (High Sheriff, right)

