



Ceremonial or strategic?

‘**A**dapt, improvise and overcome,’ said Clint Eastwood in *Heartbreak Ridge*, to which I would add: ‘Enjoy’. That was definitely the case for this Corona-Sheriff in 2020. With more than five months’ worth of lockdown the ‘virtual Sheriff’ was born, in addition to the usual way of getting out and about (when allowed) witnessing what is happening, questioning and learning, and thanking. Yet it was marvellous and absolutely inspiring to see the reaction of our local communities to the pandemic. In every visit to local businesses, charities and community groups, many of which have sprung up from nothing, it was remarkable to see how resilient we all are.

Original ideas and themes were swept aside by the need to concentrate on the here and now. Our West Mercia Local Resilience Forum was experienced at dealing with serious flooding, but COVID-19 was a different dimension. Suddenly

the police and local councils met the NHS, a huge organisation with layers of bureaucracy and ‘their way of doing things’. Yet it was the agility and rapid flexibility of communities and volunteers whose bottom-up approach to helping one’s neighbour showed the public sector how valuable and effective localism could be when free of rules and procedures. Local charities saw demand for their services increase exponentially while their fundraising plummeted. Many older volunteers had to shield themselves but many new volunteers also came forward. The sterling work of the Worcestershire Community Foundation, acting as a very rapid conduit for funds from the National Emergencies Trust plus local and national government grants, has been a critical factor in sustaining this.

The emergency services and front-line NHS staff have been fantastic, yet we must recognise the worrying impact upon the courts, with their backlog of trials, prisons and probation service.

Below: A visit to CAB, Kidderminster





Above: At West Mercia Police headquarters in Worcester

Above right: With West Midlands Ambulance Service in Worcester



I am very mindful of the words of wisdom from Sir Jeremy Stuart-Smith on the High Sheriffs' Association webinar in January: 'Justice delayed is justice denied'. While it may not grab the public's imagination in the same way as the NHS does, it is very important that our government invests properly in the justice system to rectify the cumulative impact of recent years of austerity and now the pandemic. This is an example of the way that the role of the High Sheriff may have been changed by the COVID-19 pandemic from its more traditional ceremonial one to become more strategic, and possibly more relevant. This year has given me an even greater insight into the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and how the lives and immediate expectations of our young people have been affected. A survey of charities in Worcestershire, and a Zoom conference I chaired for very many CEOs of local charities, revealed a financial cliff edge, redundancies and expected closure of more than ten per cent of charities while the increased demand for services is expected to continue. The result was a letter, on behalf of the county's VCS, to all Worcestershire MPs asking them to ensure that support for the VCS was included in the government's recovery planning. Similarly, a one-page briefing paper regarding

future plans for 16- to 24-years-olds, following a doubling of youth unemployment in the county within a few months, resulted in another Zoom conference with our Lord-Lieutenant, local enterprise partnership and county council leadership. In both instances I was very careful to be non-political, yet felt empowered to make these approaches due to the role of High Sheriff and the fact that we are only in office for one year.

We are incredibly privileged to fill such an eminent position, acting as an informed set of eyes and ears – which can help those living in our counties by signposting important issues to those who run and represent those counties. In this capacity the ability to work together and to achieve continuity across shrieval years is important. I have been very lucky to have been supported by my fellow West Midlands High Sheriffs. We established our WhatsApp group at Burghley in 2019; little did we know how incredibly useful it would be in 2020. Similarly, the advent of SINGs, suggested by Oxfordshire in the winter 2020 magazine, is a hugely beneficial step that we have copied.

'Onwards, and upwards!'

◆ Lt Colonel Mark Jackson OBE
High Sheriff of Worcestershire 2020-21

Below, left to right: Evesham Foodbank

With some of the volunteers at Worcester Street Kitchen

Wreath-laying at the Simon de Montfort memorial, Evesham

