



Poverty hurts – my million pound ambition

ON A bright but chilly April Fool's Day, I was sworn in at Durham Crown Court as the new High Sheriff of Durham. Four short (and slightly stressful) days later, with my curtsy perfected, I was meeting HRH The Prince of Wales and Her Majesty The Queen of Spain, as they came to Bishop Auckland to open the Spanish Gallery – part of the remarkable Auckland Project. Little did I know that His Royal Highness would shortly become King Charles III and I'd be reading the Proclamation of Accession from the balcony at Durham Town Hall, just a short distance from where I'd been sworn in and a moment's walk from Durham Cathedral, where we'd so joyfully celebrated Her Late Majesty's Platinum Jubilee.

In between all of this, of course, there have been countless wonderful social, civic and ceremonial engagements – too numerous to list – but in these first few whirlwind and rather magical days of office, I realised two things. To achieve the goals I'd set myself, I was going to have to work out how to achieve the balance between the proactive and the reactive; the ceremonial duties and the personal aims; the visiting and the doing!

I'm my own worst critic, and my biggest fear as High Sheriff was looking



HRH The Prince of Wales and Queen Letizia of Spain meeting school children after the opening of the Spanish Gallery in Bishop Auckland

back and thinking – what did I really achieve? Whose lives did I impact? What did I change?

Luckily, the second light bulb moment I had in those intrepid first few days of office was that, as High Sheriff, I could really make a difference to the county I'm passionate about. After all, I'd met my future King and The Queen of Spain by noon on day four!

My realisation was also helped along by the fact that most of the local school children thought I was The Queen of Spain. For one wicked moment, I did wonder whether to confess – seeing their little faces crumple with disappointment, especially after they'd braved the bitter north-east wind, was not one I relished! To their credit, they took the news stoically and happily chatted to me anyway!

Building back stronger communities

Recovery from the pandemic and those most adversely affected by it could clearly not be ignored and working towards stronger, safer communities aligns with both my Chief Constable and Police and Crime Commissioner's strategic objectives. Working with County Durham Community Foundation, we quickly agreed an appeal was urgently needed – the question was, what should the ambition be?

The poverty headlines in our county are immensely worrying and it saddens me that in 2022 the North East is the child poverty capital of the UK. In areas such as Bishop Auckland, the statistics are even worse, with 40 per cent of children living in poverty yet most have a working parent. With the cost of living spiralling, there is worse to come. We've gone from

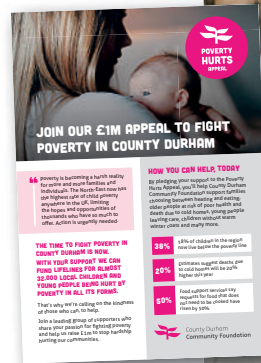


Image: Katy Melting Photography

High Sheriff Shona Harper-Wilkes with husband John and daughter Juliette outside Durham Cathedral after Matins for the Courts of Justice

second top of the table in terms of child poverty to the very bottom in just eight short years – the fastest rate of change in any region in the UK.

Added to this, we have a horrifying forecast of excess winter deaths due to soaring energy costs and of food banks receiving in recent weeks an uplift of 50 per cent in requests relating to food that does not need to be cooked. Imagine – those same families who can't afford to heat their homes not having hot food either.

In light of these needs and ever-worsening headlines, we set our sights on raising a whopping £1m. I feel passionately about helping those who need it most in these extraordinary times. Our launch is planned for 4 November where we'll be displaying especially commissioned striking documentary-style images of the issues our county is facing. I'm pleased to report that we've already reached over £350,000.

While the needs of our county are not something to shout about with pride, the kindness, compassion and generosity of our donors most certainly are!

Shona Harper-Wilkes
High Sheriff of County Durham 2022-23