

It's a volunteering thing!

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High Sheriff of Devon 2022-23

Being unpaid, High Sheriffs are volunteers and indeed need to dip into their own pockets to fund their shrieval year including, typically, a legal service, garden party and hospitality for visiting High Court Judges, not to mention motoring costs especially in large counties like Devon.

This gives us a natural affinity with the many volunteers who are crucial to the efficient functioning of the services comprising 'law and order broadly expressed' which we as High Sheriffs support and encourage.

This starts with the courts where the charities CASS+ and Victim Support respectively help defendants, and victims and witnesses negotiate the criminal justice system; and magistrates, whose courts deal with 95 per cent of criminal cases, are themselves volunteers.



Community First Responder Geoff Edwards receiving a High Sheriff's Award



With Keith Dare-Williams, HM Coastguard's longest serving officer with 57 years of volunteering for the service, for which he received a Queen's Jubilee Medal from then Prince and now King Charles



With St Petrock's Kitchen volunteers

In my experience, magistrates try to reflect the views of their community in how they dispense local justice by combining both justice and mercy, the two qualities represented by the sharp and blunt swords depicted on a High Sheriff's badge. As well as enforcing the law as they should, they also show considerable compassion to those who appear before them.

Our prisons also rely heavily on volunteers – with vital scrutiny from the members of Independent Monitoring Boards – and much needed support for prisoners and their families from a wide range of charities including Story Book Dads, which enables prisoners to record bedtime stories for their children.

Volunteers play an important role in the probation service and I was delighted to give a High Sheriff's Award to Circles South West, which helps sex offenders address their harmful behaviour and make a safe return to the community.

Important support is also provided to the police through volunteer Special Constables and most High Sheriffs gain, as I did through my excellent cadets Adam Watts and Amelie Hands, a valuable insight into the work undertaken by Police Cadets.

Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service relies on volunteers to provide its service on Lundy and at Kingston in the South Hams. Crucial support to fire fighters for both physical and, increasingly, mental health issues is given by The Fire Fighters Charity at their Harcombe House residential centre near Chudleigh.

Ambulance services rely heavily on the voluntary work undertaken by Community First Responders and I was delighted to give a High Sheriff's Award to Geoff Edwards who has saved many lives in Barnstaple with his defibrillator as well as providing much needed care and comfort to patients before the ambulance arrives, especially important when, as has happened recently, the service has suffered from significantly delayed arrival times.

Volunteers comprise the vast majority of HM Coastguard Officers enabling those employed to leverage their skills to provide the vital assistance contributed by this the least prominent of the blue light services.

Both of my nominated charities rely heavily on volunteers: Dartington-based LandWorks, which provides a supported route back into employment and the community through developing skills in woodworking, market gardening, landscaping and cooking; and St Petrock's, the Exeter-based charity providing healthy meals and support for the homeless including many ex-offenders to reduce the risk of re-offending and thereby support the emergency services.

So in conclusion, during my year I came to appreciate just how important a role the voluntary sector plays in the broad law and order ecosystem and that High Sheriffs should ensure they support and encourage volunteers as well as more obvious paid members of staff.