

Finding a balance



Nicholas Alston CBE DL

High Sheriff of Essex 2022-23

All High Sheriffs in 2022-2023 had the extraordinary privilege and responsibility of helping celebrate the Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the sharing in the grief and mourning at her death, and then the Proclamation of the Accession of His Majesty The King. Balancing the many associated special events with the other engagements in the normal round for a High Sheriff was a particular challenge in the late summer.

Finding the right balance of activities for a High Sheriff is, however, a challenge presented afresh to each High Sheriff as they take over the reins in their county. As every new High Sheriff brings their own perspective and enthusiasms to the role, each year and in every county there will be welcome differences, together with some familiar themes.

I approached the year with the simple theme of 'volunteering', trying to balance three main areas of focus: supporting those directly engaged in criminal justice and community safety; the community and voluntary sector more generally; and recognising and supporting those in civic and military roles across the county. To project a little of myself on to the role I also chose to promote amateur music and the role it plays in enriching community life.

Around one third of my engagements were with the traditional area of the courts, the police, the probation and prison services and the many volunteers directly supporting those areas. I could

Inspecting new officers joining Essex Police

easily have given more time to this, but I was able to meet and thank many across Essex and to learn about the issues, many common, faced by all those administering justice after a period of austerity and the disruption caused by Covid. I am hugely grateful to all those who made me welcome and gave me so much time.

All High Sheriffs now focus closely on the community and voluntary sector, and I found it as rewarding as others have done. With around 5,000 charities registered in Essex, and probably a larger number of other community and voluntary organisations, there was no shortage of groups to visit. Trying to get the balance right was tricky: a good geographical spread; well established – or newer; small and large; and a range of areas of activity, though with a bias toward those impacting community safety. I made 133 visits to such organisations during the year and was continually impressed by the commitment and professionalism of staff and volunteers alike.

In a large county, with three top tier authorities and 12 other districts, including three cities, a High Sheriff could spend much time supporting civic events, and avoiding giving offence when unable to do so. With a large garrison and a second military base too, formal events could easily dominate the calendar. This was particularly so in 2022 with the many events associated with the Jubilee, the death of Her Majesty, and the Accession of His Majesty The King. Finding the balance was even more difficult than in a less exceptional year.

Finally, I felt that it would be a missed opportunity not to celebrate the excellent amateur music across the county. During the year I helped promote and attended 17 enjoyable concerts. This gave me the chance to thank those who have kept our choirs and orchestras going through the difficult Covid years and who enrich our community life. By encouraging them to team up with local charities, it also delivered some useful local fundraising and gave me the chance to speak a little about the role of a High Sheriff in well-received interval talks.

I can't be sure if I got the balance 'right', but looking back now I feel I achieved broadly what I set out to do. The delight is that my successor, and others around the country, will approach their year in office with new and different ideas and find the balance that is right for them and their counties.



An interval talk at the Christmas concert of the Hutton and Shenfield Choral Society, raising funds for the Brentwood charity SNAP



Presenting a High Sheriff's Certificate to Amy Owens-Deboo at the Wickford charity, Kool Carers