

'He who opens a school closes a prison'

Ina De

High Sheriff of Greater London 2023-24

It has been an exciting first six months as High Sheriff of Greater London (HSGL), covering a population of nine million people in 32 boroughs across 600 square miles. We have numerous courts, eight prisons, the largest police force in the UK and, a surprise to me, the busiest RNLI station in the country. All in all, a daunting prospect, had it not been for the support of past HSGLs, particularly Lynn Cooper, HM Lord-Lieutenant Sir Kenneth Olisa OBE, and the informative day at Burghley.

My Declaration was at the Royal Courts of Justice in front of Baron Burnett of Maldon, then Lord Chief Justice, the King's Remembrancer Barbara Fontaine, and other senior judges. My old friend Lady Justice Whipple kindly agreed to be my supporting judge. Declaring in the High Court that I would 'behave myself' caused more than a few smiles among family and friends. My predecessor, Heather Phillips, literally passed on the mantle of HSGL. She had the excellent idea of commissioning a cape designed by London College of Fashion students. Fine Cell Work and Making for Change stitchers embroidered and assembled what has proved to be an invaluable ice-breaker.

Court visits have of course been a key focus. Eight Crown Courts have warmly welcomed me and my Under Sheriff, as have Magistrates' and Family Courts, and – a first for the HSGL – a tribunal. Thanking hidden heroes working hard to keep justice functioning, despite cuts and staff shortages, is nothing short of humbling.



Her Honour Judge Karu kindly hosted my first Justice Awards at Inner London Crown Court where we recognised those going beyond the call of duty. We included Special Recognition Awards for young people going the extra mile serving their communities in London, all of whom are similarly inspiring.

Westminster Abbey services have been another highlight. The one held for the 75th anniversary of the NHS was particularly poignant and memorable. An Abbey service also marks the start of the legal year and included an impressive procession of judges. Dame Sue Carr had been officially appointed only hours earlier in a packed court at the Royal Courts of Justice. It was indeed an honour to

Below left: At my Declaration at the Royal Courts of Justice April with Lady Justice Whipple, Baron Burnett of Maldon and Lady Justice Thirlwall
Below: Visiting the Marine Police Unit with my Chaplain, the Revd Raymond Baudon



Westminster Abbey service with London mayors

witness the very first Lady Chief Justice of England and Wales being sworn in.

I've been struck by the commitment of so many people working across our criminal justice system, be it in courts, prisons, the police or supporting charities. The London Prisons Group invited me to present an award at their inaugural awards ceremony, recognising a truly inspiring group of people. Wormwood Scrubs, my first prison visit, was organised by PACT, who provide advice to prisoners and help maintain family connections. It was a delight to present their long-standing chairman Phil Taylor with a High Sheriff's Award at their AGM.

Literacy and numeracy are key themes for my year, considering that half of the prison population have the reading level of an 11-year-old. Shannon Trust organises peer-to-peer learning, training those who can read to coach those who can't. The National Literacy Trust runs programmes for more advanced readers. Both are doing great things by improving confidence and raising aspirations in prisons.

Victor Hugo said, 'He who opens a school door closes a prison,' and addressing literacy and numeracy early in life is a priority. It's been a pleasure to work with charities focusing on improving outcomes for children, including Coram Beanstalk, who organise hundreds of reading helpers in primary schools. Presenting long service High Sheriff's Awards at their 50th anniversary felt very special.

It has been wonderful to realise the number of doors that open for a High Sheriff and how thanking, convening and connecting can be a powerful force for good.