

Intervention to improve childhood literacy

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High Sheriff of the Isle of Wight 2023-24

This time last year, rather depressing primary school results for the Isle of Wight were published. One-third of all Island children moving up to secondary school were not at their chronological reading age, compared to one-quarter nationally. At the same time, I was reminded of the recent Ministry of Justice report which cited 57 per cent of prisoners today had the reading age of an 11-year-old or under. Keen to have a theme for my shrieval year that was law and order related, I realised literacy in primary schools had to be my focus.

One of many wonderful things about the Isle of Wight is the strong sense of community and readiness to volunteer when asked. Within months of taking office and in partnership with the nationwide charity Schoolreaders, I have over fifty volunteers now supporting reading in half of the island schools. Post-pandemic this is now more important than ever; 100 days at school were lost to lockdown, which equates to half a school year. Research shows that just ten minutes' focused reading support twice a week makes a measurable difference after six weeks.

Beyond schools, I have been fortunate enough to walk the streets of Ryde and Cowes with uniformed police to see first-hand how wise and compassionate our local force is today. On one visit, they took me to the Veterans Hub which offers invaluable emotional support to our ex-forces residents. Almost 10 per cent of Islanders have a military background which made for a well-



Promoting my chosen charity Schoolreaders at The Big Give

We must do more as society to tackle addiction, for without doubt this is at the heart of most of the crime in our county.

The Coronation weekend was a joy and I was thrilled to join tea parties, open celebratory gates and attend concerts. Singing 'God Save The King' felt awkward at first, but quickly we have all adjusted to the new chapter and reign. A highlight was a tea party for Sight for Wight, the island's oldest charity at 128 years

attended and lively Armed Forces Day, where I chatted with D-Day soldiers beneath the dazzling Spitfire display.

Court visits have been of great interest to me as well. Both the Magistrates' and Crown Courts are working hard to clear the backlog and the professionalism of those who work and volunteer in the courts is impressive. I am struck by the regret and remorse of those in the dock, so often in the grip of an alcohol or drug addiction.

old where I met some truly inspirational people living very active and rich lives despite their loss of sight.

The Big Help Out on the Coronation weekend, a volunteer recruitment drive led by HRH King Charles III, proved fruitful and I secured several new reading volunteers via my stand at East Cowes Town Hall. The hat attracted the required attention!

Citizenship ceremonies with individuals who have successfully applied to become British citizens have been heart-warming occasions. I was honoured to welcome several families, bringing world-class expertise to our island in their respective fields of alternative energy and composting. It is on these occasions that I am reminded of the importance of ritual to human beings.

As my shrieval year ticks on, I am keen to support the community in every which way I can while establishing a lasting intervention to improve childhood literacy. As I sit and read with seven-year-olds in one of the most deprived UK postcodes, I ask myself: how can my words of encouragement and guidance today set each child on a brighter path for their future?



At the County Show to award prizes



Reading with children in the Literacy Tent at the County Show