

I could not be prouder



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High Sheriff of Hampshire 2023-2024

I have seen a lot in my shrieval year but really it has only been a snapshot. In that time, I have learnt about the challenges and long-term risks emergency service workers face. I have met people who habitually fight the natural urge to flee and instead run towards danger. These people are not exceptional in their own minds; they are just doing their jobs. Jobs the great majority of us could not even consider doing and are barely aware are being done daily on our behalf.

The British criminal justice system is a jewel but a sadly undervalued one. Wander into a courthouse and tell me you really think the criminal law is a valued institution. I'm not sure I've ever been in a courthouse, a prison or a police station that doesn't have a stock of metal bins to catch the water coming through the stained ceiling tiles.

Commentators describe the criminal justice system as broken. It's tired but it's not actually broken and won't be until the current pressures result in the undermining of its fundamental principles balancing the protection of society and individual rights; all defendants

are innocent until proven guilty and should receive a fair trial, with the high burden of proof beyond all reasonable doubt shouldered by the prosecution.

There's a risk we take the criminal justice system for granted because, if we are lucky, we will never come into contact with it. Unless you are unfortunate enough to be a victim, witness a crime or offend you are happily unlikely to be touched by it.

When Legal Aid was cut there was some spurious reasoning that habitual offenders shouldn't be financially supported by the taxpayer – although the taxpayer pays for custody – despite the fact that everyone enters the dock for an offence innocent until proven guilty. In reality Legal Aid is for the victims not defendants. How else do the two per cent of adults who are victims of crime every year move on and reclaim their lives if they have to wait years for the catharsis of a trial?

The inevitable consequence of delays in trials is long remand times – in effect imprisoning the innocent, flying in the face of the preciously held principle of innocent until proven guilty. We are at a 50-year high in the number of those on remand. These people remain unconvicted but incarcerated sometimes for as long, or longer, than they would

With recipients of a High Sheriff's Award at the Wessex Learning Centre near Winchester Cathedral Photo: Joe Low

be on conviction and sentencing – 17 per cent of all imprisoned men in England and Wales are on remand.

I started the year interested in the many volunteers contributing to the criminal justice system. These volunteers do extraordinary things and make a real difference to people's lives. But what I had failed to understand was quite how many unsung heroes also exist in public service away from the front-line roles.

There is no question that the criminal justice system needs some care and attention. More significantly those working and volunteering in criminal justice deserve recognition by society and a greater acknowledgement of the service given and received.

However, despite all the challenges I have been blown away by the people I have met in the criminal justice system – ordinary public servants and volunteers doing extraordinary things for us, the public.

For me the high point of my shrieval year was the opportunity to recognise a very few of these people with a High Sheriff's Award. I could not be prouder of either the criminal justice system or my county.