

# No ordinary court

**Dr Eamonn O'Neal DL**

High Sheriff of Greater Manchester 2024-2025

This was no ordinary court. After a couple of defendants were found guilty and some were judged to be innocent, they all gathered with the witnesses, magistrates, barristers, and court officials to tuck in to their packed lunches and discuss how the day had gone.

This was the annual Year 6 Mock Trial Competition organised by the Greater Manchester branch of the Magistrates' Association (Magistrates in the Community) and it was an incredibly special day. There were 150 students from 16 schools in attendance, populating two virtual court rooms, running in parallel. The theme was knife crime. The young people had been provided with a detailed script in advance, had designated roles, which they had rehearsed, and, on the day, they acted out the scenarios 'in court' with impressive aplomb. The event was overseen by sitting magistrates and there was significant support from partner organisations including Crimestoppers, Greater Manchester Police, BTP Travel Safe and Salford Fire and Rescue Service.

I was struck by just how much effort these 10- and 11-year-olds had put into the competition, and it was clear how impactful it had been. I think a career with the judicial service beckons for many of them.

As I have been a broadcaster and journalist for most of my career, it seemed an innovative idea to try and blend elements of my activities as High Sheriff with the 'day

job'. Consequently, I have been delighted to produce a monthly High Sheriff's audio diary, which is broadcast on BBC Radio Manchester.

Of course, it is important that I remember to record some soundbites and audio actuality when I am at an event. If this were 20 years ago, I would have to be carrying some bulky recording equipment but luckily, these days, everything can be recorded and edited on a smart phone.

This is an excellent way of sharing, with a wide audience, the work of the vast number of impressive individuals and organisations in the county. It is also proving invaluable for constantly reminding people of the role of High Sheriff itself.

Every second Wednesday through the entire year, veterans gather in the Regimental Chapel at Manchester Cathedral for the 'Turning of the Leaves' ceremony. This honours those who fought and died serving monarch and country in The King's



In the BBC Radio Manchester studio



At the 'Turning of the Leaves' ceremony, Manchester Cathedral

Regiment and its precedent regiments across several wars and conflicts.

Within the chapel there is a polished display cabinet containing six volumes of detailed books, filled with the names of those who served. Every fortnight, flanked by standard bearers and with prayers from a cathedral canon, the leaves of the large books are turned by veterans, mayors and, in this case, the High Sheriff. The leaves of the books are turned in order that a new selection of names is visible to – and noted by – visitors during that two-week period. In this way, every name is honoured through the year. It is a simple, respectful ceremony, which I have been proud to attend.



'In court', and with pupils from Whittaker Moss Primary School in Rochdale, the winners of the mock trial competition