

# The human touch

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High Sheriff of Northumberland 2024-25

Northumberland is the most sparsely populated county in England and visits can easily be 80 miles apart in two days. The legacy of the old mining towns and villages at the southernmost end and the isolation of the rural hamlets in the Cheviot Hills bring out different stories, but the astounding breadth and depth of the volunteering world has really been brought home to me over the last six months.

Making connections among different groups has been a real motivation, although these are not great headline actions. Very small steps that have emerged have been: confirming that a Turkish refugee involved in the inter-faith social cohesion charity The Dialogue Society has met the Dean of Newcastle Cathedral; a successful cookery book writer has been introduced to the local high school food tech teachers; and making the suggestion that a primary school applies for funding from our High Sheriff's Fund for transport having found out they go to a dementia club I visited; or a charity that supports prisoners' families is now in touch with a nearby forest school. I feel it is in these small, practical ways that a High Sheriff can be relevant.

The human touch of Nepacs charity (North East Prisoner After Care Society, est. 1882) involved in the justice system in the North East has been enlightening to witness. In many areas Nepacs' interventions could be replaced with vending machines, leaflets and tick boxes. Their visitor centres, tea bars, family support teams, early days and custody teams allow the families and those in prison to have practical, experienced and



At a meeting of Blyth Rotary Club with Wendy Atkinson from Newsham Primary School who has set up The Lighthouse Hub, supporting her school's families



empathetic assistance. When organisations have given up time to talk to me I am very moved by the scope of their work and its indefinable nature. In a similar vein being asked to describe the role of a High Sheriff is difficult to sum up succinctly. One day I will be wearing a head torch and waterproofs, the next a feathered hat and lace jabot.

Taking on the role of High Sheriff has allowed me to ask questions and be shown round such a variety of places. I have visited prisons, police stations, alternative provision for education settings, domestic abuse charity headquarters, boxing clubs and youth centres, schools, art studios, a local radio station, colliery band concerts, and have taken part in the historic legal



With John Hollingsworth and Michelle Hardie of Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland, who administer the fund for the High Sheriff of Northumberland, and the Rt Hon Alan Milburn, former Secretary of State for Health, who spoke at an event in London

At a 'tea party' afternoon with school children and the local community with Katherine Williams (chair, third right) and other trustees of the charity Boost, which supports the Duchess's Community High School, Alnwick

services and the miners' picnic, karate on the beach, the awarding of MBEs and BEMs, Rotary Club meetings, the swearing-in of magistrates, cadet gatherings, voluntary award evenings and mountain rescue searches. And I return home after each very different event buoyed up by those who never lose hope in people. How many cups of tea, pieces of toast, and biscuits have soothed those who need time before being able to build trust and confidence, or just be given a boost? There is an anonymity in being High Sheriff that allows people to talk to us without any concerns around prejudice, assessment or financial justification. We may have invited ourselves or been introduced through another organisation, but we are predominantly there out of interest in seeing good ideas being put into action.

The one occasion I was expecting the anonymity to be certain was during the general election, with the focus being on the parliamentary candidates. However, the High Sheriff's hat proved to be an interesting distraction at 11.30 pm while there was little else to comment on. As returning officer in Northumberland there were four election results to read out, all based at Blyth Leisure Centre, which I became very familiar with after the nine hours I spent there. I wasn't aware in my Blyth bubble that 'the hat' had gone viral and was commented on by Laura Kuenssberg and others, but I hope it might have given many people good reason to investigate High Sheriffs and read something of the fascinating history.