

# Investing in young people



## Kurshida Mirza BEM

High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire and the City of Milton Keynes 2024-25

The Office of High Sheriff, as we know, dates back to Saxon times, when the 'Shire Reeve' was responsible to the King for the maintenance of law and order within the shire, or county, and for the collection and return of taxes due to the Crown. While the duties of the role have evolved over time, supporting the Crown and the judiciary remain central elements of the role today.

This overarching responsibility offers High Sheriffs a unique opportunity to provide a platform to engage those in the justice system with key issues for our communities and county. I wanted to shine a light on the importance of social inclusion, building partnerships and collaboration.

It was a privilege to host a symposium in February 2025 to open a conversation on school exclusion and its relationship to criminality. We know – and research shows – that young people excluded from school are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system.

Early in my year, with the support of Milton Keynes Community Foundation, I facilitated a number of workshops with a wide range of stakeholders to hear the challenges around the issue of school

With contributors to the High Sheriff's Symposium on School Inclusion and Crime Prevention: Simon Sims (Head of School Service, MK City Council), Amy Langford (Group Director – Inclusion, MK College Group), Mac Heath (Director of Children Services, MK City Council), Her Honour Judge MacLachlan (MK Family and Civil Court Centre), Dr Claire Hodgskiss (Project Director, Sieve MK Gateway), Jade Barnett (Power2Prevail) and Matthew Barbar (Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner)



Kurshida Mirza with her multi-faith chaplaincy: (back row) Imam Shehzad Hussain (Muslim chaplain), Revd George Mwaura (Christian chaplain), Glen O'Halloran (Buddhist chaplain) (front row) Frances Gordon (Jewish chaplain), Tarsem Singh Ubhi (Sikh chaplain), Suresh Nesaratnam (Hindu chaplain) and Roya Azordegan (Bahá'í chaplain)

inclusion/exclusion for our city and county. Subsequently, I was able to bring together a planning group to work with me to host a School Inclusion and Crime Prevention Symposium. The planning

group comprised both unitary councils in my county along with Thames Valley Police (TVP), MK College, MK Community Foundation, Sieve MK Gateway, the Safety Centre and Bletchley Park.



Chaired by Her Honour Judge Maclachlan of the Milton Keynes County Court and Family Court, the symposium provided an opportunity to raise awareness, share the experience of young people, celebrate good practice and recognise the importance of partnership and collaboration for future dialogue and a call for action so that no child is left behind.

The Directors of Children Services at Milton Keynes City Council and Buckinghamshire Council provided a high-level overview of the rising national issues and challenges in relation to school inclusion. They talked of the increasing pressures and expectations on local authorities and schools – including funding and workforce pressures – reflecting on the risk factors that can lead to exclusions and exploitation.

Jade Barnett, co-founder of Power2Prevail, used video testimonies of personal stories from young people across our county to share the lived experience of the difference culturally appropriate, collaborative and sensitive interventions can make in creating positive outcomes for young people on the edge of exclusion.

The symposium finished with a focus on learning and sharing of good practice. This included: the Milton Keynes Inclusion Partnership which brings schools to work together to keep young people within the school system; the School Navigator – an innovative project by TVP; Youth Justice Service; the Virtual School; and Restore Hope.

A key message going forwards is how the community and voluntary sectors can support schools, colleges and the justice system by providing valuable respite and activities to divert young people from criminality.

To quote our two Directors of Children Services, Mac Heath and John Macilwraith: 'The question of responsibility for these children is a collective one, requiring a coordinated effort from all stakeholders.'

This symposium was more than a networking opportunity – it was a call to action. It was about saying, 'I don't have all the solutions, no one size fits all, but I make the intention to learn, share and work to bring positive change to create a better future for our young people.' Our collaboration will continue as part of the new Youth Inclusion and Crime Prevention Collaborative.

My Justice Dinner in February provided a further platform to continue the

dialogue. Young people from MK YMCA shared their powerful lived experience. His Honour Judge Perusko and His Honour Judge Jonathan Cooper spoke profoundly about how both the criminal and family courts have evolved over the years to better empower young people and involve them in the justice process, so giving them agency.

It was important to me to not only give voice to young people by inviting them to speak at the Justice Dinner, but also to include other young people seldom heard or seen in the guest list of 50. They were sitting in the Bletchley Park Mansion ballroom alongside influencers and policy makers as equals. The meal was cooked and served by MK College Catering and Hospitality students who worked with me to fulfil my culturally and faith specific menu.

I had appointed High Sheriff's College Champions for my year in keeping with my passion to include, inspire

and empower young people. Eight students from the Buckinghamshire College Group and MK College worked with me throughout my shrieval year accompanying me to numerous visits and engagements. They were also able to benefit from the experience of meeting and talking with the judiciary as well as working with TVP on their projects to tackle crime focusing on violence against women and girls and domestic abuse. I was especially proud to nominate my Bucks College Group for a National Crimebeat Award, as we have not had an entry from Buckinghamshire for some time now.

It is a credit to the Office of High Sheriff how it opens doors and gives High Sheriffs a unique platform to focus on key issues, shining a light to readdress imbalances within their county. I am indebted to that office to be able to do this in my year. It has been an honour and privilege.



With the planning group of the High Sheriff's Symposium on School Inclusion and Crime Prevention: (top row) Zion Johnson (Philanthropy Officer, MK Community Foundation), James Fowler (Education Entitlement Manager, Buckinghamshire Council), Simon Sims (Head of School Service, Milton Keynes City Council), (centre) Amber Wright (Philanthropy Manager, MK Community Foundation), Amy Langford (Group Director – Inclusion, MK College Group), (bottom row) Maya Joseph-Hussain (CEO, Safety Centre) and Dr Claire Hodgskiss (Project Director, Sieve MK Gateway)