

Support for our care leavers



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High Sheriff of Suffolk 2024-25

The role of High Sheriff is a great honour and, importantly, an opportunity to help others. I underestimated the full implications of carrying out the role and its duties, particularly when doing so alongside a full-time role in our business, running The Mason Trust and chairing the industry partner group at University Technical College Norfolk. Four am starts and very late finishes were not unusual and I relied heavily on family and colleagues to provide the extra support needed to make it all work.

In 18 years of running a charitable trust we had supported and helped many thousands of young people, principally in helping them achieve their ambitions. In all those years we had never knowingly worked with young people in the care system and quite simply had not had visibility of and did not understand their plight or needs. The then High Sheriff of Norfolk brought this to my attention as I

At the groundbreaking ceremony of the expansion of HMP Highpoint – set to become the UK's largest prison – with Sachia Thompson (Deputy Director, Prison Supply), Cllr Liz Harsant (Chair of Suffolk County Council), Tony Hampson (Head of Projects, HMP Highpoint), Cllr Donna Higgins (Families & Communities Portfolio, West Suffolk Council), Linda Kennedy (Executive Director, Prison Supply) and Cllr Nick Clarke (West Suffolk Council)

prepared for the role and I felt compelled to try and help our Suffolk young people who found themselves, through no fault of their own, in that situation. Recognising that the problems came when the young people were in the 'care leaver' category, this became my focus and the research and 'nemawashi' began!

In talking with our Chief Constable, Rachel Kearton, and trying to understand the current issues within the county it was shocking to hear of the prevalence of domestic abuse, which in turn very often propelled children into the care system for their own safety. Conversations with our police colleagues 'on the beat' and in their operational briefings showed that young people from the care system featured high on their daily activities and gave continual cause for concern. Visits to the prisons soon found many care leavers.

With the permission and support of

'the corporate parent' I began the quest to help and along the way have found and worked with many wonderful people, working hard and doing their very best for the care leavers. However, with heads down and their own key focus and



With members of the National Coastwatch Institution at Woodbridge (National Coastwatch is a charity staffed and managed by volunteers whose mission is to help save lives at sea and around the UK coastline)



With Cllr David Smith (Town Mayor) and High Sheriff's cadet Lewis Fox at *The Knife Angel* in Haverhill

targets, broader conversations with other colleagues and agencies were not being had and there seemed to be a particular 'gap' when it came to supporting young care leavers in their career choices, training needs and work opportunities. While the process to meet the need existed, the wider knowledge of opportunity created by economic development, our extensive infrastructure projects and the tiered supply chains that they naturally created was a whole new language to most that I met. Finding contacts in these companies was also a challenge, particularly in our current world of online communication. This is where my background in industry

and previous work on the Local Enterprise Partnership came into its own and many a phone call was made to old friends.

'How can I help?' is a daily mantra and has been for many of my 65 years. I hope to have brought a global outlook and positive energy to every meeting held and given others the confidence to ask more questions, break down barriers, work together and see what is possible and achievable. Knowing what is possible and seeing the need for vision, open and frank conversations, collaboration and cooperation has driven me throughout the year.

Our care leavers group was born and

over the months expanded to encompass all the organisations and agencies which touch their lives. As High Sheriff we have a very privileged 'helicopter view' born of the many visits and meetings from education to public sector to all elements of the criminal justice system. It became clear where the issues and blockers were and by simply introducing people and supporting conversations we have broken down many barriers and opened up opportunities which will benefit our care leavers.

Working alongside The Family Business, Suffolk County Council's wonderful initiative – hugely supported by Julia Nix, our regional DWP manager – and using our own ICANBEA system, we are finding futures and generating significant goodwill and support for our care leavers. From infrastructure projects to local plumbers, doors are being opened.

Accommodation is a fundamental issue; quite simply there is not enough and affordability of what is available when the care leavers are on entry-level packages makes the journey into the workplace particularly difficult. We are working to bring accommodation combined with training into the county, effectively removing barriers and providing a skills pipeline of untapped talent into the workplace all while providing a supported environment to live, learn and be guided into work.

We have many success stories and buoyed by this – and with support from our wonderful Lord-Lieutenant, Clare, Countess of Euston, to continue this work as DL post my year in office – we are setting up The Suffolk Care Leavers Alliance. As our county councils approach devolution we are already in open communication with our friends in Norfolk and what is piloted and learned in Suffolk will be shared.



Celebrating Suffolk Day in Haverhill