

# Connecting people with nature

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High Sheriff of Wiltshire 2024-25

Through the charity I founded called Horatio's Garden, I have developed a special interest in gardens and health, so during the course of my shrieval year I tried to visit as many charities as possible across the county which use nature as therapy in many different ways – many of these are connected to long-term crime prevention.

I've been so pleased to get to know many of the charities both small and large working in this sector and my abiding memory is that every visit to an outdoor project brought me in contact with happy people – beneficiaries, staff and volunteers – even when the weather was dire!

Wiltshire's prison, Erlestoke, has an incredible horticulture programme run by Mike Angell. Mike leads a thriving prison garden – every spare meter of ground around the site is beautifully planted and tended by prisoners who develop life-long hobbies or skills they can use to find employment on release. I was delighted to present Mike with a High Sheriff's Award.

Another highlight visit was to a forest school on the wettest, muddiest day imaginable and seeing children with complex neurodivergent traits happy and engaged while leaping about in the mud. The facility of the forest school enables this group of children to attend mainstream school thus improving their life opportunities.

I have been so excited to see nature being harnessed brilliantly in Wiltshire. This year Coronation Orchards have been planted in 29 communities around the county; I've seen schools creating calming gardens; churches reimagining their graveyards into community sanctuary gardens; young people not in education finding new purpose; and elderly care settings where residents are getting involved with growing.

I hosted a Connecting People with Nature seminar in June and invited people working and volunteering in the sector across the county to attend. We listened to inspiring speakers, shared ideas and practices and even did a group garden-based Qigong session!

The evidence that nature is good for us all is overwhelming and in these cash-strapped times, the health, economic



At my summer party in Horatio's Garden, Salisbury with Mohammed Makram Ali DL and police cadets

and crime prevention arguments are compelling – I hope the seeds of change are here to stay in Wiltshire and I have been grateful to be able to connect the many people who are driving the nature-based initiatives forwards across the county. I hope these connections will continue and will be pursuing this year's foundations going forwards. One of these initiatives is working with Wiltshire Police to create a garden for their workforce to support and prevent mental health difficulties.

The year also gave me the opportunity to hear from many of the smaller diverse charity chairs and I was struck by how many spoke of the loneliness of facing countless operational and governance challenges and their worries about succession. As a result, I formed Wiltshire Charity Chairs Network as an inclusive group to facilitate more contact with peers, to create networking opportunities, learning and mutual support. We've had three face-to-face meetings and already have a membership of 80 chairs from across the county... and growing. I will be ensuring that this is a sustainable group beyond my year in office with the intention of supporting and encouraging charity



At Salisbury park run



At a dance celebration in the Hindu temple, Swindon

chairs who are so vital to our communities.

The year has given me a small insight into the goodness of people in our county. There are so many unsung heroes who work and volunteer for the good of others whether supporting people directly or indirectly. We are so fortunate to have such dedication and our communities thrive because of them.