

Supporting parents and families

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I decided the theme of my shrieval year would be supporting parents and families, which ties in well with my ongoing role as Chair of the National Childbirth Trust (NCT). I have been visiting and supporting projects and charities that are helping parents across Cheshire through Cheshire Community Foundation, who understand the specific landscape of our community and the challenges that people here face.

We know that if children have happy and supportive families, they are more likely to succeed later on in life. So, helping struggling families helps us all and the earlier we can offer that support, the better. But the funding landscape for small local charities is challenging at the moment and I came up with the rather crazy idea that I would walk a marathon to raise funds to be distributed by the community foundation to support these vital local charities working with families. These organisations provide essential services such as mentoring, parenting support, mental health assistance and early intervention programmes which help families stay strong and resilient. Things snowballed and it turned into a community event at the iconic Chester Racecourse; families (including children, grandparents and dogs!), community groups and workplace teams signed up to walk together in support of local families facing unexpected challenges. Some joined my husband and I walking the full marathon

distance, while others signed up for a half marathon or just a few times round the beautiful course, the oldest operating racecourse in the world.

I took the theme of supporting parents and families into my interaction with the police and courts. I attended a full interactive Protecting Vulnerable People CPD training day with police constables from across Cheshire Constabulary, who primarily work on response, and area investigation teams on the front line. This gave me further understanding of how the force protects children and vulnerable people when carrying out their duties, supports victims and brings perpetrators to justice. Following this into the Magistrates' and Crown Court has been a sobering experience and I also asked to attend Family Courts across the county. Here I sat in on cases involving family breakdown – including disputes over child arrangements, financial settlements after divorce and cases where children were at risk of harm. All of which helped me understand that the need for early and practical support for families has never been greater... before small problems grow into larger crises.

This may sound like a very disciplined and focussed year, which it certainly has not always been as I've responded to requests to speak at dinners, hand out awards, open events, visit hospices, judge at shows, attend a royal visit and investiture ceremonies, serve as returning officer in a by-election, lay wreaths at memorials, lead parades, swear in new British citizens and



With Stephen Walton JP, Patricia Peters JP and District Judge John McGarva in Warrington Magistrates' Court

so many other engagements.

Halfway through the year, I've already covered 10,000 miles zig-zagging the county meeting people. At the end of the day, that's what this hugely privileged role is about: people. I've laughed and cried with people. I've celebrated and mourned with them. I've served tea and danced with them. And what will I take away: the kindness of people in our community for those around them in need. The people who give so generously of their time and talents – in many different ways and often over many years – to make life better for those in their community. Even small acts of kindness change lives.



Presenting a High Sheriff's Award to Bells Lewers in Chester



Time with the Cheshire Buddies Saturday Club in Sandbach