

Hearing the young unheard: the power of convening

John May CVO OBE DL

High Sheriff of Oxfordshire 2025-26

When I was preparing for my year as High Sheriff, I was advised to choose a theme. At first, I wondered if it might be an unnecessary extra. In fact, it has proved invaluable. With the many calls on a High Sheriff's time, having a clear theme has helped me to prioritise how I spend my days and know where I can bring most value.

My theme is Hearing the Young Unheard. Many young people in Oxfordshire are flourishing – in their families, schools, on the sports field and in creative spaces. But others are not.

Some feel invisible. Some feel silenced. Some have been told – by systems or by society – that they do not belong or do not matter.

The theme is simple in its phrasing but urgent in its intent. It is about listening – properly listening – to young people, whose voices are too often overlooked, and to the organisations working hard to support them. Most of all, it is about listening early, before difficulties harden into harm and before young people drift into negative encounters with the police or the justice system.

To put this into practice, I have convened a series of 'breakfast conversations' across the county. Each one has gathered youth workers, teachers, councillors, police officers, employers and volunteers – people who know young people well and who have taken time to consult them in advance so their voices could be brought to the table even when they themselves were not present. The format has been deliberately light: no fixed agenda, just the rare chance for people who would not normally be in the same room to meet, to listen and to spot opportunities for working together. Breakfast seems to work well – a moment of community conversation before the ordinary challenges of the day really kick in.

The themes that have surfaced are strikingly consistent. In some places, young people spoke of feeling invisible in their own town centres or of the lack of vocational routes open to them. Elsewhere, we heard about the double-edged role of technology



One of the breakfast meetings in Blackbird Leys. All images: Mark Johnson

– phones as both comfort and cage. In other conversations, the focus fell on the impact of domestic abuse, the hidden burdens of young carers, the challenges of moving from primary to secondary school or the steady decline in work experience opportunities.

For many of you reading this, much of this may feel like blinding glimpses of the obvious. With long service in the judiciary and criminal justice system, you will have seen these patterns time and again. But for me, with only the slimmest prior experience of courts or policing, the learning has been intense – at times humbling and always impactful.

Again and again, I have been reminded of the importance of early intervention. Judges, police officers and youth workers alike have told me: if we want to prevent crime, we must act sooner. Too often, the first time a young person appears on the radar is when they are already in trouble. By then, opportunities may have been lost. Safe spaces, trusted adults, vocational

training and accessible support are not luxuries. They are crime prevention in its most effective form. Listening to the unheard is not only compassionate – it is also about public safety.

Much of this work is small, local, quiet even: a hardship fund for bus fares, a Saturday club, a peer mentoring scheme, or an intercultural arts project. But taken together, these are the threads that hold a community together – and that keep young people connected to it, rather than disconnected from it.

The Office of High Sheriff gives a rare vantage point. One morning I may sit with magistrates in Oxford, the next I hear from teachers, youth workers or police officers standing alongside young people every day. The lesson is clear: prevention depends on relationships and relationships depend on listening.

In March, I will reconvene everyone who has taken part to reflect on what has been achieved and what still needs attention.

My hope is that the habit of convening – bringing unlikely allies together, listening without a script and holding ourselves accountable – will outlast my shrieval year.

For me, Hearing the Young Unheard has become more than a theme. It is a reminder that early intervention is not only compassionate it is also the most effective form of justice. If we act early enough, we can change lives – and help ensure that fewer young people find themselves in collision with the law.



Exploring issues with young people at the organisation Didcot TRAIN Youth Project