

A 'NEET' experience so far

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High Sheriff of Surrey 2025-26

As other High Sheriffs will acknowledge, there is a long lead-in period to taking office which provides time to prepare, to clear the decks of other responsibilities and to settle on a shrieval theme. In my case, I had an extra year as the High Sheriff of Surrey during COVID year, Shahid Azeem, returned ahead of me to fulfil his engagements. There was, therefore, no excuse for not being primed and ready to go; and yet, being High Sheriff has to date been an absorbing voyage of surprise, humbling experience, gratitude and enlightenment far beyond any preconceptions.

In my first six months I have undertaken – in most cases with my wife Suzanne – over 160 engagements balancing the objective of upholding and lending support to the principal organs of the constitution with thanking those working in the charitable and voluntary sector for their individual and collective contributions to our community.

My shrieval theme has been to shine a light on those young people at risk of becoming 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training) encouraging earlier interventions and highlighting alternative career paths to ensure that the hearts and minds of these people are not lost with all the social and economic consequences that entails.

Prior to my Declaration, I commissioned some research from the Centre for Britain and Europe at the University of Surrey to analyse the different cohorts that make up the NEET population in Surrey, recognising that these could be very different to those found in other parts of the country. This discovery work produced insights which, following a series of conferences attended



In front of the iconic Concorde with wife Suzanne and volunteer Surrey Cadets after my summer celebration, held at Brooklands Museum in Weybridge All photos Andy Newbold

by Surrey County Council and other stakeholders in the NEET space, have led to a number of proposed actions aimed at prevention rather than cure and hopefully better opportunities for a number of young people previously at risk of becoming NEET.

The power of a High Sheriff to convene and connect should not be underestimated and the opportunity to affect change should be embraced by all High Sheriffs in nomination ahead of their year in office when considering what cause they may wish to adopt as their shrieval theme.

Highlights of my year to date have been many and varied: from the commemoration of both VE and VJ days, to visiting the largest women's prison in Western Europe, to undertaking a 22-mile walk through the Surrey hills linking five vineyards to celebrate the start of English wine week and raise money for local charities.

Holding my summer celebration at Brooklands Museum with over 250 guests

to focus on my NEET initiative was very special as a number of youth charities and vocational trainers were there to demonstrate how they help young people find alternative pathways. Another memorable event was when Suzanne and I entertained a number of our local judiciary for supper at our house, which until 1852 was Guildford's Third House of Correction, when the town still had a prison. We had reconstructed what the prison looked like on a computer model from old architectural drawings complete with treadmills, parade grounds and infirmary; and we then asked the prison rehabilitation charity, the Clink, to provide the catering.

Despite the number of engagements, time is passing very quickly and there are still so many people and organisations I am looking forward to thanking for their service to the county. I think I have another very busy, but undoubtedly memorable, humbling and rewarding six months ahead.



The High Sheriff and Friends Wine Walk 2025 – a 22-mile walk which raised just over £14,000 for two great charities (High Sheriff's Youth Awards and Guildford Philanthropy)

Left: Next Steps for Neets' conference held at the University of Surrey