

Food for thought

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High Sheriff of Wiltshire 2025-26

In addition to law and order, I chose food – from ‘farm to fork’ – as a focus for my shrieval year. It has turned out to be a powerful way to engage with the county, providing additional perspectives on many visits. It also meant that the food at the events I organised had to be local, seasonal and interesting. For my Declaration and garden parties, I found producers from across Wiltshire whose excellent food and drink we could showcase – including smoked trout, sausages, chutneys, ice cream, gins, wines and whisky infused with local honey.

A tradition has developed here of the High Sheriff taking a picnic lunch to share with the judges and magistrates on court visits. Although such an offering can in no way assuage the alarming levels of pressure in the justice system, providing a good spread is a tangible way to show appreciation. I have, however, learnt that my favourite folding bread knife is not a suitable object to take into a court building...

Elsewhere in the criminal justice system, I have been impressed by Swindon's food programme, Solid Ground, which supports young people who have been affected by serious violence. It builds their confidence, develops their employability skills and helps them integrate into the community. I was also interested to see how food is a central aspect of the work-based learning provided by Fairfield, a specialist college in Westbury for young people aged 16-25 with additional needs, who are taught growing, cooking and hospitality skills in their own market garden, bakery, farm shop, café and pub. And I have seen some great examples of healthy food being served to children, inspired by the Food for Life programme run by the Soil Association (where I am a trustee).



The Big Breakfast Plus in Swindon; the charity provides a free cooked breakfast and support services



Impressive potato crop from the team at the Doorway allotment in Chippenham (Doorway is a charity drop-in centre for adults who are homeless or have complex issues which are likely to affect their tenancy)

I have taken a particular interest in food poverty and have visited a range of impressive organisations across Wiltshire providing support to the homeless and vulnerable. Being able to have a shower, use laundry facilities and enjoy a hot breakfast does not solve the underlying problems, but there is no doubt such services are greatly appreciated and help maintain personal dignity. Similarly, I have had the privilege of seeing volunteers cook and serve hot and nutritious lunches and evening meals, dispensed with real kindness, humanity and humour.

Across the county there are many community fridges and food banks to help prevent food waste and support people with short-term emergency food needs. While providing vital support, food banks do not provide a long-term solution to food poverty. A more sustainable proposition has developed in Salisbury, where organic fruit and vegetables are grown by the volunteers of the F3 Project and donated to the Salisbury Food Pantry, which provides high-quality food at greatly reduced prices to people who are struggling to put food on the table.

'Bags of Taste' is a mentored home-cooking programme that helps the most vulnerable people to improve their diets for the long term. Participants are shown how to plan, buy and cook low-cost ingredients to create healthy and delicious



Mrs Peapell (head teacher) and cooks in the kitchen at Haydonleigh Primary School in Swindon



At Gablecross with the Wiltshire Police and Society Without Abuse teams who deliver the Open2Change programme

meals. It has been very successful elsewhere in the UK and I have helped introduce it into Wiltshire. The programme is on track to support 300 people this year and to continue going forward.

Food has often provided an easy conversation starter in a wide range of settings as something everyone can relate to. Recently I have had inspiring discussions with foster carers about the challenges of getting children to make healthy food choices; with a charity supporting homeless and marginalised people about the remarkable health and wellbeing benefits of growing food on their allotment; and with the chefs at one of Wiltshire's marvellous hospices about what patients request in their final days – cottage pie is apparently very popular.

Naturally, not every meeting has been about food. One of the most impactful for me was a recent visit to the Gablecross Police Station to learn more about the innovative work being done in Swindon to break the cycle of domestic abuse offending. Since January, behaviour change workers from Society Without Abuse's Open2Change programme have been offering individuals in custody a route to change their behaviour. The initial results are encouraging with independent assessment concluding that the interventions offer something very positive, with the potential to be developed further on a national scale. One to watch...