

# HEARING THE YOUNG UNHEARD

THE HIGH SHERIFF'S BREAKFAST CONVERSATIONS AND COUNTY  
CONFERENCE ON EARLY INTERVENTION AND LIFE CHANCES.

## Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>The High Sheriff’s Breakfast Conversations 2025</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Introduction .....	5
Locations and Dates of Conversations .....	6
Key Themes Emerging Across the Conversations .....	7
Belonging and Disconnection .....	7
The Importance of Trusted Adults .....	7
Safe Spaces for Young People.....	8
Mental Health and Underlying Causes .....	8
Technology and Digital Life .....	8
Education and Diverse Pathways .....	9
Work Experience and Employment Exposure.....	9
Local Themes from Individual Conversations.....	10
Commitments and Next Steps .....	11
Conclusion .....	11
<b>The High Sheriff’s County Conference on Early Intervention and Life Chances for Children and Young People – 5<sup>th</sup> March 2026</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Welcome and Framing.....	12
Keynote 1 - Catherine Johnstone CBE – Royal Voluntary Service .....	13
Keynote 2 - Professor Mina Fazel – University of Oxford .....	14
Table Discussions: Stop – Change – Start.....	15
Breakfast Conversation Updates .....	17
Keynote 3 - Matthew Barber – Police and Crime Commissioner .....	17
Individual Commitments: Turning Insight into Action .....	18
Panel Discussion: Reflections from Across the System .....	19
Closing Reflections .....	21
<b>Next Steps for Oxfordshire</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Sustain cross-sector collaboration .....	22
Strengthen youth voice.....	22
Expand volunteering pathways .....	22
Support earlier intervention .....	22
Improve coordination between organisations .....	22

<b>Appendix A - Table Insights: Stop – Change – Start.....</b>	<b>23</b>
● STOP .....	23
A. Exclusion and criminalisation of young people .....	23
B. Systems that do not fit young people.....	24
C. Fragmentation and silo working .....	24
D. Short-term thinking and underinvestment .....	24
E. Deficit narratives about young people and families .....	25
● START .....	25
A. Listening to young people and involving them in decisions .....	25
B. Early intervention .....	25
C. Volunteering, leadership and participation.....	26
D. Better collaboration across sectors .....	26
E. Expanding opportunities for young people .....	26
● CHANGE .....	27
A. The culture of the system.....	27
B. School culture and curriculum.....	27
C. Funding models and investment.....	28
D. Data sharing and safeguarding .....	28
Overall Reflection .....	28
<b>Appendix B - Participants in the “Hearing the Young Unheard” Conversations and Conference.....</b>	<b>29</b>

# Foreword

*John May CVO OBE DL  
High Sheriff of Oxfordshire*

When I began my year as High Sheriff of Oxfordshire, I chose the theme “**Hearing the Young Unheard.**”

Not because young people lack a voice.

But because systems can sometimes become so complex and noisy that their voices are not always heard clearly enough.

Over the past year I have spent time with young people, youth workers, teachers, police officers, volunteers and community leaders across our county. I have visited youth organisations, listened to practitioners and convened a series of **Breakfast Conversations** in communities across Oxfordshire.

What I heard repeatedly was both sobering and encouraging.

Sobering, because many young people face significant challenges – from mental health pressures to social isolation, from disengagement in education to involvement in the criminal justice system.

Encouraging, because across Oxfordshire there is extraordinary commitment, insight and care among those who work with and alongside young people every day.

The purpose of the **Hearing the Young Unheard Conference** was therefore simple.

To bring together the people who shape the environments in which young people grow up – education, policing, youth services, voluntary organisations, community leaders and businesses – and to reflect collectively on one question:

What would Oxfordshire look like if we were genuinely serious about early intervention?

The conversations that took place during the conference demonstrated both the scale of the challenge and the depth of commitment across the county.

Three themes ran consistently through the day:

- the importance of belonging in young people’s lives
- the need for consistency and collaboration across systems
- and the courage required to change how we work together

The discussions were not designed simply to generate ideas. They were intended to encourage action.

Delegates were asked not only what systems should stop, change or start, but also to make individual commitments about what they themselves could do differently over the coming year.

This report captures the insights, reflections and commitments that emerged from that day.

My hope is that the conference will not simply be remembered as an event, but as a marker – a moment that strengthened relationships across sectors and encouraged practical collaboration for the benefit of young people across Oxfordshire.

The work of hearing the young unheard continues.

As ever,



John May CVO OBE DL  
High Sheriff of Oxfordshire



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*“Young people are not silent. But systems can sometimes become so complex and noisy that their voices are not always heard clearly enough.”*

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# The High Sheriff's Breakfast Conversations 2025

Supporting Evidence for the "Hearing the Young Unheard" Conference

## Introduction

During 2025, the High Sheriff of Oxfordshire convened a series of **Breakfast Conversations across the county** as part of the theme for the year, "**Hearing the Young Unheard.**"

The purpose of these gatherings was to bring together practitioners, volunteers, professionals and community leaders who work with young people in different local contexts across Oxfordshire. The intention was not to create another formal consultation exercise, but to enable **honest, cross-sector conversations about the lived experience of young people** in our communities.

Each session was deliberately small and conversational in format. Participants were invited to speak candidly about the challenges they encounter, the gaps they see in local systems, and the opportunities for collaboration that might improve outcomes for young people.

Every session concluded with participants making **personal or organisational pledges** describing what they would do differently as a result of the conversation.

These discussions formed an important evidence base for the **March 2026 "Hearing the Young Unheard" Conference**, and many of the themes explored during the conference were first surfaced during these local conversations.



## Locations and Dates of Conversations

Seven Breakfast Conversations were held between April and September 2025.

<b>Location</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Host</b>
Thame	15 April 2025	Thame Youth Projects
Didcot	29 April 2025	SOFEA
Chipping Norton	7 May 2025	The Branch Trust
Banbury	20 May 2025	Activate Learning
Blackbird Leys	3 June 2025	Activate Learning
Kidlington (Thames Valley Police HQ)	13 June 2025	Thames Valley Police
Oxford	2 September 2025	Oxfordshire Youth



Each conversation brought together representatives from a mixture of sectors including:

- education and schools
- youth organisations and charities
- local government
- policing and criminal justice
- businesses and employers
- community and faith groups
- volunteers and youth leaders
- young people themselves.

These conversations provided an opportunity to examine both **local issues and countywide patterns** affecting young people in Oxfordshire.

## Key Themes Emerging Across the Conversations

Although each discussion reflected its local context, several themes emerged consistently across the county.

### Belonging and Disconnection

Many contributors described young people experiencing a growing sense of **disconnection from institutions, services and opportunities**.

Young people frequently expressed a desire to belong, yet often struggled to find spaces or relationships where they felt valued and understood.

Participants emphasised that belonging is a powerful protective factor. Where young people feel recognised and included through youth activities, sport, arts programmes or volunteering, their outcomes improve significantly.

### The Importance of Trusted Adults

Across all discussions, the presence of **trusted adults** was highlighted as one of the most important influences on young people's wellbeing.

Teachers, youth workers, volunteers, coaches and mentors often play a crucial role in providing:

- encouragement
- guidance
- consistent support during difficult transitions.

Several participants emphasised that youth workers are particularly effective in this role, often building relationships with young people who may struggle to engage within more formal settings.

## Safe Spaces for Young People

A recurring concern was the **decline in informal youth spaces**.

Participants noted that many young people now have limited places where they can spend time safely outside home or school. Youth clubs, community centres and informal recreational spaces have reduced significantly in many communities.

In some areas young people reported feeling unwelcome in public spaces, while the places they gather are sometimes perceived negatively by adults.

Several local conversations discussed possibilities for:

- community youth hubs
- shared use of school facilities
- repurposing unused buildings
- mobile or pop-up youth provision.

## Mental Health and Underlying Causes

Mental health concerns were raised in every conversation.

However, several participants emphasised that what is often described as a mental health crisis may reflect deeper structural issues such as:

- poverty
- housing insecurity
- family stress
- lack of opportunity
- social isolation.

Participants highlighted the importance of **preventative approaches** which build resilience, belonging and connection rather than focusing solely on crisis support.

## Technology and Digital Life

Many discussions explored the role of smartphones and social media in young people's lives.

Technology was recognised as both enabling and challenging.

Participants described concerns about:

- late-night phone use and disrupted sleep
- exposure to harmful content
- social comparison and online pressure
- reduced face-to-face social interaction.

At the same time, many contributors emphasised the need to **work with technology rather than against it**, supporting digital literacy and creative uses of technology.

## Education and Diverse Pathways

A further theme was the need to recognise **different ways in which young people learn and succeed**.

Many contributors felt that current education systems place strong emphasis on academic routes, sometimes undervaluing vocational, technical and creative pathways.

Participants emphasised the importance of:

- expanding vocational opportunities
- strengthening links between schools and employers
- recognising broader definitions of success.

## Work Experience and Employment Exposure

Several conversations highlighted the **decline in part-time jobs and work experience opportunities** for young people.

Historically these experiences helped young people build confidence, responsibility and practical skills. Participants expressed concern that their disappearance may contribute to a gap between education and employment.

Suggestions included:

- rebuilding employer partnerships with schools
- expanding mentoring opportunities
- providing clearer information about employment pathways.



## Local Themes from Individual Conversations

### Thame

Participants highlighted growing anxiety among young people, increased digital pressures, and the need for stronger collaboration between schools, youth organisations and local employers.

Local pledges focused on improving digital safety education, expanding youth provision and strengthening links between schools and businesses.

### Didcot

The Didcot conversation emphasised the importance of belonging, particularly for young people carrying hidden responsibilities such as young carers.

Participants proposed developing a more coordinated place-based youth strategy and improving collaboration between local organisations.

### Chipping Norton

This discussion focused specifically on the impact of **domestic abuse on children and young people**, highlighting the importance of early intervention, education about healthy relationships, and improved professional training.

### Banbury

Participants highlighted a strong sense of disconnection among some young people, particularly around transitions into employment and adulthood.

Several proposals centred on improving access to youth spaces and strengthening links between education providers and local employers.

### Blackbird Leys

The conversation in Blackbird Leys highlighted issues relating to aspiration, digital pressures and the decline of safe spaces for informal youth activity.

Participants emphasised the value of youth work and the need to support parents and families more effectively.

### Kidlington – Strategic Discussion

The discussion at Thames Valley Police headquarters brought together leaders from policing, education and youth organisations to explore system-level collaboration.

Participants emphasised the need to move from discussion to implementation, aligning strategies and sharing resources more effectively across organisations.

### Oxford – Youth Voice Conversation

This meeting focused particularly on hearing directly from young people.

Young participants spoke about the importance of trusted adults, frustration when consultation does not lead to change, and the need for clearer communication and opportunities to participate meaningfully in decision-making.

## Commitments and Next Steps

Each conversation concluded with participants making personal or organisational pledges to take forward.

These commitments included actions such as:

- developing youth spaces and community hubs
- strengthening youth voice initiatives
- improving collaboration between schools and community organisations
- supporting digital literacy and online safety
- improving training and awareness around safeguarding and domestic abuse
- rebuilding employer engagement with schools and youth organisations.

Participants also agreed to remain connected and to share progress on these commitments.

A key next step was the **countywide reconvening in March 2026**, where participants from all Breakfast Conversations were invited to review progress, share learning, and explore opportunities for wider collaboration.

## Conclusion

The Breakfast Conversations provided a valuable opportunity to hear directly from those working with young people across Oxfordshire.

While the issues raised were complex, the conversations demonstrated a strong collective commitment to collaboration and practical action.

The insights generated through these discussions have helped shape the agenda and priorities for the **“Hearing the Young Unheard” Conference**, and will continue to inform future work across the county.

# The High Sheriff's County Conference on Early Intervention and Life Chances for Children and Young People – 5<sup>th</sup> March 2026

## Welcome and Framing

Delegates were welcomed by **Dr Markus Grüneisl**, Chief Executive Officer of **BMW (UK) Manufacturing Ltd**, who hosted the event at the Cowley plant.

The High Sheriff opened the conference by thanking BMW not only for their hospitality but for demonstrating an important principle: that **business has a stake in life chances, belonging and prevention**.

He reflected that the theme “**Hearing the Young Unheard**” does not imply that young people lack a voice.

Rather, he suggested that **systems themselves can become noisy**, making it harder for young people's experiences and needs to be heard clearly.

Drawing on the year's conversations across Oxfordshire, he observed that a consistent message had emerged:

Early intervention is not a programme.  
It is a posture.

The morning therefore set out to move deliberately through three stages:

- **Insight**
- **Evidence**
- **Action**

To support this approach, the conference adopted several design principles:

- Short contributions rather than long speeches
- Genuine discussion rather than passive listening
- Visual capture of ideas rather than formal reporting
- A responsive panel engaging directly with participants' questions



## Keynote 1 - Catherine Johnstone CBE – Royal Voluntary Service

The first keynote was delivered by **Catherine Johnstone CBE**, Chief Executive of the Royal Voluntary Service.

Her central argument challenged a long-standing assumption within public policy and civil society: that volunteering is an optional or supplementary activity.

Instead, she suggested that **youth volunteering should be understood as a form of early intervention in its own right.**



Volunteering, she argued, creates three powerful outcomes for young people:

- **Belonging**
- **Contribution**
- **Purpose**

Research presented during the keynote highlighted the social and personal benefits of volunteering:

- Nine in ten volunteers report meeting new people through volunteering.
- Among young volunteers aged 18–24, **77% report reduced feelings of isolation.**
- **65% say volunteering improves employment prospects.**
- Longitudinal research shows volunteering is associated with **fewer illegal behaviours, arrests and convictions** later in life.

The High Sheriff's Breakfast Co...

Johnstone also emphasised that young people are already highly active in **informal volunteering**, but that systems often make **formal volunteering unnecessarily difficult to access.**

She therefore called for a shift in mindset:

Volunteering should be understood as a necessity, not a “nice to have”.

Embedding youth volunteering within education, community organisations and business partnerships could strengthen wellbeing, build skills and contribute to stronger civic participation across society.

## Keynote 2 - Professor Mina Fazel – University of Oxford

The second keynote speaker was **Professor Mina Fazel**, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the University of Oxford.

Her presentation drew on the **OxWell Student Survey**, one of the largest wellbeing surveys of young people in England, with over **120,000 responses collected across five waves of data collection**.

Within Oxfordshire alone the survey has gathered responses from more than **35,000 students across 97 schools and further education colleges**.



Professor Fazel focused on one central theme emerging from the research: **belonging**.

The data shows strong links between students' sense of belonging and a range of wellbeing outcomes, including loneliness, self-harm and engagement with school.

Students who feel disconnected from their school communities are significantly more likely to report loneliness and mental health challenges.

Conversely, activities that strengthen belonging appear to have a powerful protective effect. These include:

- School trips
- Lunchtime and after-school clubs
- Celebrations and shared school events
- Opportunities for student voice
- volunteering and community engagement

A key insight from the OxWell research is that interventions must be designed with particular attention to **young people at the margins**, including those who struggle to engage with school environments or whose voices are less likely to be heard.

Professor Fazel concluded by emphasising the importance of **networks across schools, services and communities**, arguing that belonging cannot be delivered by a single organisation but emerges through relationships across a system.

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## Table Discussions: Stop – Change – Start

The first structured discussion invited participants to reflect collectively on a deliberately challenging question:

**If Oxfordshire were serious about early intervention:**

- What should we **stop doing**?
- What should we **change**?
- What should we **start doing together that we currently do apart**?

Each table captured three ideas:

- ● One thing to **STOP**
- ● One thing to **CHANGE**
- ● One thing to **START**

Rather than reporting verbally, ideas were captured on flipcharts and displayed around the room during the break, creating a shared “gallery” of perspectives across the conference.

A full synthesis of the flipchart material is included as **Appendix A** of this report.

Several strong themes emerged from the collective reflections:

### *What participants felt should STOP*

Across many tables there was concern about **exclusionary or punitive approaches** affecting young people.

Participants highlighted issues such as school exclusions, the criminalisation of young people’s behaviour and systems that struggle to support young people with additional needs.

Many delegates also expressed frustration with systems that require young people to adapt to structures designed without them, including education systems perceived as overly focused on examination outcomes.

Another widely shared concern was the **fragmentation of services**, with organisations often operating in silos rather than working in coordinated ways.

Participants also raised structural issues such as short-term funding cycles and the decline of preventative services, alongside a desire to move away from deficit narratives that frame young people or families as problems to be solved.



### *What participants felt should START*

Perhaps the most consistent message across the room was the importance of **listening to young people and involving them meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives**.

Delegates emphasised the need to strengthen youth voice within governance, planning and service design.

Early intervention also featured strongly, with participants calling for support to begin earlier in childhood, particularly through primary schools and community-based programmes.

Many contributions highlighted the value of **volunteering and youth leadership opportunities**, echoing the themes raised in the morning's keynote address.

Participants also emphasised the importance of expanding opportunities for young people beyond the classroom through enrichment activities, youth centres, community projects and outdoor learning.

### *What participants felt should CHANGE*

While many participants recognised the commitment of professionals across the county, there was a clear sense that aspects of the system's culture require change.

Several contributions emphasised the need to strengthen **community responsibility for young people**, alongside deeper collaboration between sectors.

Education was another focus of discussion, with suggestions that school cultures, disciplinary approaches and curriculum priorities may need to evolve in order to support a wider range of learners.

Participants also highlighted the need for **longer-term funding models**, fairer resourcing across youth services and improved data sharing between organisations responsible for safeguarding and supporting young people.



### *A shared reflection*

Across all of the table discussions, a common thread emerged.

Participants repeatedly called for a shift:

- from **reaction to prevention**
- from **fragmentation to collaboration**
- from **system-led decisions to youth-centred design**

As one synthesis captured succinctly:

Systems must adapt to young people, rather than expecting young people to adapt to systems.

## Breakfast Conversation Updates

The conference then heard brief updates from the conveners of the High Sheriff's **Breakfast Conversations**, which had taken place across the county.

These included contributions from:

- Paul Cowell – Thame
- Elizabeth Paris – Didcot
- Emma Kennedy – Chipping Norton
- Hannah Thomas – Blackbird Leys
- Richard Greaves - Banbury
- Paul Gresty – Kidlington
- Katie Nellist & Nicola Holmes-Brown – Oxford



Each speaker reflected on progress since their local conversation, the challenges encountered and lessons that could be learned across the system.

These updates highlighted the importance of local relationships and the practical realities of collaboration between organisations with different responsibilities and resources.

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## Keynote 3 - Matthew Barber – Police and Crime Commissioner

After the break, the conference heard from **Matthew Barber**, Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley.

His keynote brought a complementary perspective to the morning's earlier discussions.

While early intervention offers hope, he reminded delegates that the consequences of failing to intervene early are visible every day within the criminal justice system.

The Commissioner emphasised that prevention is not simply a moral aspiration but has **measurable consequences for public safety, communities and public services.**

Early intervention therefore represents not only a social commitment but a practical necessity.

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## Individual Commitments: Turning Insight into Action

The second structured discussion of the morning asked participants to move from reflection to personal commitment.

Delegates were invited to consider a simple but demanding question:

What is one practical action that you, or your organisation, could commit to in the next 6–12 months that would genuinely improve outcomes for young people?

To keep the exercise focused on practical change rather than aspiration, participants were asked to record three elements on individual pledge sheets:

- One action they could commit to
- One partner they would need to work with
- One blocker that might need to be addressed

Participants were encouraged to be concrete and specific.

As the High Sheriff observed when introducing the exercise:

***If it cannot be described in two sentences, it is not yet actionable.***

This exercise marked an important shift in the conference from shared reflection to personal leadership.

Rather than producing collective recommendations, delegates were asked to identify **actions within their own sphere of influence.**

Each participant recorded their commitment on a pledge sheet. Delegates were invited, if they wished, to leave their pledge sheet with the conference organisers. The High Sheriff will write to those participants in six months' time, returning their pledge and inviting them to reflect on what progress has been made.

This simple mechanism is intended to reinforce an important principle that emerged during the morning:

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*Commitment is only powerful if it survives the car park conversation.*

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By capturing individual commitments and revisiting them later in the year, the conference sought to encourage practical follow-through and continued collaboration across organisations.



## Panel Discussion: Reflections from Across the System

The conference concluded with a panel discussion bringing together leaders from across Oxfordshire's civic and professional landscape. Panel members included:

- **Marjorie Glasgow BEM**, Lord-Lieutenant of Oxfordshire
- **Jason Hogg, Chief Constable**, Thames Valley Police
- **Gohar Khan**, Director of Ethos, Ridgeway Education Trust
- **Jodie Lloyd-Jones**, Chief Executive, Oxfordshire Youth

The discussion invited panel members to reflect on what they had heard during the morning and to respond to questions from participants.

Several themes emerged from the conversation.

### *A moment of change*

Panel members reflected that the current moment feels both challenging and hopeful. Across education, youth services and public services more broadly, leaders are grappling with rising pressures on young people, including mental health challenges, post-pandemic disruption and wider social change.

Yet there was also a sense that these pressures are creating a stronger willingness across sectors to work differently.

As one panel member observed, periods of uncertainty can also create the conditions for innovation. When systems recognise that existing approaches are no longer sufficient, it can encourage organisations to collaborate and rethink how they support young people.

Across Oxfordshire, there was a strong sense that the willingness to collaborate already exists, alongside significant expertise and commitment within organisations across the county.



### *The importance of belonging*

The theme of belonging, introduced earlier in the conference, was repeatedly emphasised during the panel discussion.

Panel members reflected that belonging must extend beyond school walls. Young people need to experience belonging within families, schools, communities and wider society.

One panel member described how different young people within the same family may have very different needs and experiences. This underlined the importance of flexible systems that can respond to a wide range of circumstances.

The challenge for schools and organisations is not only to recognise the importance of belonging but to create the practical conditions that allow it to flourish.

### *Education under pressure*

The panel also acknowledged the pressures currently facing schools.

While schools remain central institutions in the lives of young people, many young people experience challenges that cannot be addressed by schools alone.

Behaviour challenges, mental health concerns and disengagement from learning have increased in many settings. These challenges require stronger collaboration between education, youth services and community organisations.

Panel members emphasised that schools cannot carry this responsibility alone.

### *The role of volunteering and community engagement*

The discussion returned several times to the role of volunteering and community participation in shaping young people's experiences.

Chief Constable Jason Hogg reflected on his own background and the influence that volunteering had on his life as a young person. Opportunities to contribute to the community helped build confidence, relationships and a sense of purpose.

He suggested that strengthening pathways for young people to engage in volunteering and community activity could play an important role in prevention and early intervention.



He also highlighted opportunities for collaboration between community organisations and local policing teams, including neighbourhood officers working within communities to support local initiatives.

### *Leadership, risk and innovation*

Another theme raised during the panel was the challenge of risk aversion within public systems.

Many organisations operate within structures that emphasise compliance and caution. While accountability is essential, excessive risk aversion can make innovation and collaboration more difficult.

Panel members reflected that leadership across the public sector increasingly requires a willingness to try new approaches and learn from experience.

Encouraging staff and organisations to act with confidence and initiative will be important in addressing complex challenges affecting young people.

### *The importance of power-sharing*

The discussion also explored the concept of power within systems.

Panel members suggested that improving outcomes for young people requires organisations to think carefully about how power is used and shared.

This includes:

- collaboration between organisations rather than competition
- involving communities more directly in shaping solutions
- and ensuring that young people themselves have a meaningful role in shaping the decisions that affect them.

Creating space for young people's voices within decision-making processes is an important part of building systems that genuinely respond to their needs.

#### *A county-wide effort*

In closing remarks, the Lord-Lieutenant reflected on the extraordinary range of individuals and organisations across Oxfordshire committed to supporting young people.

Deputy Lieutenants across the county work with organisations in areas including policing, education, arts, homelessness and community development. These networks represent an important resource for strengthening collaboration across sectors.

She also highlighted the importance of continued optimism and shared purpose, emphasising that progress depends on the combined efforts of many individuals and organisations working together.

## Closing Reflections

In his closing remarks, the High Sheriff reflected on what he had heard during the year and during the conference itself.

Across Oxfordshire's conversations with young people, practitioners and leaders, three recurring themes have emerged:

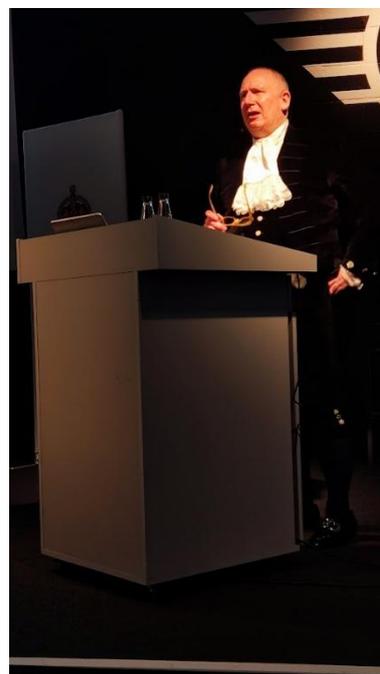
- **Belonging**
- **Consistency**
- **Courage**

The morning reinforced both the opportunities and the challenges facing organisations working with young people.

Three priorities, he suggested, must not be lost as the work continues:

1. **Momentum**
2. **Cross-sector relationships**
3. **The discipline of listening early enough**

He concluded by encouraging delegates not to see the conference as an endpoint, but as a marker within an ongoing shared effort to strengthen early intervention and life chances for young people across Oxfordshire.



## Next Steps for Oxfordshire

The conference was designed not only to share ideas but to encourage practical action.

Several priorities emerged.

### Sustain cross-sector collaboration

The relationships formed through the conference and the Breakfast Conversations should continue beyond the event.

### Strengthen youth voice

Young people should play a more direct role in shaping decisions that affect their lives.

### Expand volunteering pathways

Partnerships between schools, businesses and community organisations can strengthen opportunities for young people to volunteer and lead.

### Support earlier intervention

Delegates emphasised the importance of supporting children earlier through schools and community services.

### Improve coordination between organisations

Clearer referral pathways, improved information sharing and stronger partnerships could help ensure that young people receive consistent support.



## Appendix A - Table Insights: Stop – Change – Start

During the conference, each table was invited to identify:

- **One thing to STOP**
- **One thing to CHANGE**
- **One thing to START**

Rather than formal verbal feedback, participants captured their ideas on flipcharts which were displayed around the room during the break. This created a shared gallery of perspectives and allowed participants to reflect collectively on the emerging themes.

STOP START CHANGE

What follows is a **synthesis of the discussions**, drawing together the most consistent patterns while retaining the **original phrasing used by participants** wherever possible.

### STOP

#### A. Exclusion and criminalisation of young people

Many tables highlighted the damaging consequences of exclusionary practices.

##### **Key themes**

- School exclusions and suspensions
- Social exclusion and “school refusing” narratives
- Punishing SEN young people for not coping in mainstream settings
- Excessive criminalising or demonising young people
- Strict punishment systems leading to detention – suspension – expulsion

##### **Participant phrases**

- “School exclusions / suspensions”
- “Stop exclusion”
- “Punishing SEN young people for not coping in mainstream”
- “Excessive criminalising”
- “Demonising young people”

## B. Systems that do not fit young people

Participants repeatedly criticised systems that expect young people to adapt to structures designed without them.

### Key themes

- Systems that expect young people to fit in
- Decisions made without young people
- One-size-fits-all approaches
- Education systems focused only on exams

### Participant phrases

- “Expecting young people to fit into ‘the system’”
- “Making decisions without young people”
- “Stop generalising – no one size fits all”
- “Exam factories”

## C. Fragmentation and silo working

Many tables noted that organisations still operate too independently.

### Key themes

- Schools and youth organisations operating in silos
- Poor coordination between sectors
- Delays accessing specialist support

### Participant phrases

- “Schools and youth orgs working in silos”
- “Operating in silos”
- “Delay from signposting to securing support from expert external agencies”

## D. Short-term thinking and underinvestment

Participants were concerned that structural issues are driven by short-term funding pressures.

### Key themes

- Short-term funding driving decisions
- Cuts to youth services, sports and enrichment
- Decline in preventative services

### **Participant phrases**

- “Letting short term funding drive change and outcomes”
- “Cutting funding for sports at school”
- “Decimation of the health visiting service”

## **E. Deficit narratives about young people and families**

Several tables challenged the language used about young people.

### **Participant phrases**

- “Stop blaming parents”
- “Assuming young people can’t”
- “Seeing the child in isolation”



## **A. Listening to young people and involving them in decisions**

This was one of the most consistent messages across the room.

### **Key themes**

- Youth voice in governance and decision-making
- Listening systematically and acting on what young people say

### **Participant phrases**

- “Listening to young people”
- “Always involve young people in decisions that affect their lives”
- “Voice of young people included in governance”

## **B. Early intervention**

Participants emphasised the importance of supporting children earlier.

### **Key themes**

- Preventative approaches
- Support beginning in primary school or earlier

### **Participant phrases**

- “Early interventions from Y3”
- “Invest proactively not reactively”

- “Early intervention”

## C. Volunteering, leadership and participation

Many tables saw volunteering as a powerful route to belonging and agency.

### Key themes

- Youth leadership pathways
- Recognition of volunteering
- Stronger links between volunteering and schools

### Participant phrases

- “Creating pathways for volunteer young people – build up young leaders”
- “Put volunteering into the school curriculum”
- “Celebrate volunteers – party!”

## D. Better collaboration across sectors

Delegates wanted stronger relationships between education, youth work, business and community organisations.

### Key themes

- Systems leadership
- Cross-sector collaboration
- Corporate involvement

### Participant phrases

- “Joining up systems”
- “Systems leadership and coordination”
- “Encourage business to get more involved with schools”
- “Connecting voluntary and educational establishments”

## E. Expanding opportunities for young people

Participants emphasised the importance of wider developmental opportunities beyond the classroom.

### Key themes

- Youth centres and community spaces
- Enrichment activities

- Outdoor and practical learning

#### **Participant phrases**

- “Youth centres – more access to young people”
- “More enrichment activities in schools”
- “Funding for practical projects”
- “Identify opportunities to connect without digital devices”



### **A. The culture of the system**

Participants believed that attitudes across sectors need to evolve.

#### **Key themes**

- A renewed sense of community responsibility
- More collaborative working
- Recognition of youth services as essential

#### **Participant phrases**

- “Focus on community and sense of social contract”
- “Continue genuine collaboration between sectors”
- “View of youth services – needs to be seen as essential”

### **B. School culture and curriculum**

Many contributions focused on reforming the experience of school.

#### **Key themes**

- Reforming behaviour and punishment systems
- Greater emphasis on creativity and outdoor learning
- Recognising alternative education pathways

#### **Participant phrases**

- “Renovating the school punishment system”
- “Change attitudes to syllabus – outdoor and creative essential”
- “Recognition of alternative educational options”

## C. Funding models and investment

Participants emphasised the need for structural funding reform.

### Key themes

- Long-term investment
- Core funding for youth organisations
- Fairer resourcing for schools and youth services

### Participant phrases

- “Change funding models – too short term”
- “Investment – funding early years, schools and youth services appropriately”

## D. Data sharing and safeguarding

There was strong interest in better information flows.

### Key themes

- Joined-up safeguarding approaches
- Better use of data across agencies

### Participant phrases

- “Better information sharing”
- “County wide approach to safeguarding and data sharing”
- “More transparency as children move between organisations”

## Overall Reflection

Across all tables, several consistent ideas emerged.

Participants called for a shift:

- **from reaction to prevention**
- **from fragmentation to collaboration**
- **from system-led decisions to youth-centred design**

Above all, the conversations repeatedly returned to one central principle:

Systems must adapt to young people, rather than expecting young people to adapt to systems.

## Appendix B - Participants in the “Hearing the Young Unheard” Conversations and Conference

During 2025 the High Sheriff of Oxfordshire convened a series of **Breakfast Conversations across the county** under the theme *Hearing the Young Unheard*. These gatherings brought together practitioners, volunteers, public leaders and young people to discuss the challenges facing young people in Oxfordshire and to explore opportunities for collaboration and early intervention.

The insights generated through these conversations informed the **Hearing the Young Unheard Conference held in March 2026**, where participants reconvened to reflect on learning, share emerging practice and consider next steps for collaboration across the county.

Across the Breakfast Conversations and the conference itself, **about 170 leaders and practitioners representing more than 85 organisations** from across Oxfordshire’s education, policing, youth, voluntary, civic and business sectors contributed their experience and insight.

<b>Abingdon Bridge</b>	Gary Hibbins	CEO
<b>Abingdon Town Council</b>	Andrew Skinner	Deputy Mayor
	Jan Skinner	Deputy Mayor's Escort
	Nathan Thomas	CEO
<b>Acer Trust</b>	Amanda Cherry	
<b>Activate Learning</b>	Andy Slater	Group Director
	Danielle Sterrenburg	
	Gary Headland	CEO
<b>AFiUK</b>	Hannah Thomas	Group Director - Leys Campus
	Jacqui Gitau	Co-Founder Director
	Millie Khisa	Communities Manager
<b>ARCh Oxfordshire</b>	Elaine Adams	Joint CEO/Founder
<b>Archway Foundation</b>	Angelo Fernandes	CEO
<b>Ark T</b>	Catherine Flutsch	CEO
<b>Aspire Oxfordshire</b>	Nicci Marzec	Chief Executive
<b>Aureus School</b>	Kirsty Rogers	
<b>Banbury High Steward</b>	Sir Tony Baldry	High Steward of Banbury
<b>Banbury Young Homelessness Project (BYHP)</b>	Emma Phillips	
	Linda Slide	
<b>Be Free Young Carers</b>	Reinhard Balfour	Business Administrator
	Sabiene North	CEO
<b>Beyond HR (Thame)</b>	Sharon Smits	
<b>Blackbird Leys Adventure Playground</b>	Sue Price	
<b>Blessed George Napier Catholic School and Sixth Form</b>	Rebecca Russell	LRC Manger, Sixth Form Administrator and Pastoral Support and DofE Manager
<b>BMW (UK) Manufacturing Ltd</b>	Markus Grüneisl	Chief Executive Officer

<b>Body Mind Soul 4 You Community Interest Company</b>	Paula Fontaine	Founder Director
<b>Bullingdon Community Connections</b>	Berny Auton	Community Co-ordinator
<b>BYHP (Tackling the Root Causes of Youth Homelessness)</b>	Gill Joyner	Wee-being Worker
	Liz Stevens	Trustee and Volunteer Grant Writer
<b>Cambrian Learning Trust</b>	Ruth Ash	Trust SEND Lead
<b>Charity Mentors Oxfordshire</b>	Tess Lamb	Executive Director
<b>Children Heard and Seen</b>	Theo Burrows	Families and Young Person Practitioner
<b>Chipping Norton School</b>	Ali Faulkner	Head of Transition
<b>Church of England</b>	Andrew Bunch	Area Dean of Woodstock
<b>Cleenol Group</b>	Steph Reece	
	Richard Greaves	
<b>DA Specialist Consultant</b>	Becci Seaborne	
<b>Didcot Girls School</b>	Georgina Littler	
<b>Didcot TRAIN - Inspiring Young People</b>	Ben Drabble	CEO
<b>Girl Guiding</b>	Liz Manger	
<b>Hope After Harm</b>	Katie Bray	Service Delivery Manager
	Thalia Jervis	Chief Executive
	Naomi Karlake	Chair
<b>In-Spire Sounds</b>	Kingsley Pratt-Boyden	
	Samuel Mansell	
<b>IntoUniversity</b>	Benjamin Ashton-Brown	Centre Leader in Oxford
<b>Justice in Motion</b>	Anja Meinhardt	
<b>Leys CDI (Community Devolvment Initiative)</b>	Kirk Wheeler	
	Felix Vorlaender	Clockhouse & Finance Administrator
<b>Leys Youth Hub</b>	Jen Considine	
<b>Local Criminal Justice Board</b>	Paul Powell	LCJB Thames valley
<b>Lord Williams's School</b>	Debbie Keith	
<b>Lucy Electric</b>	Cristiana Padilla	CSR Manager
<b>Meadwobrook College</b>	Ed Smallwood	
<b>National Association for Primary Education - Oxfordshire branch</b>	Lesley Williams	Chair
<b>OCVA</b>	Jenny Bowley	Deputy CEO
<b>Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner</b>	Gillian Ormston	
	Matthew Barber	Police & Crime Commissioner
<b>One-Eighty</b>	Susie Besant	Founder & CEO

<b>Oxford City Council</b>	Louise Upton Shabnam Sabir	Lord Mayor of Oxford
<b>Oxford Hub</b>	Donna Jewell	Head of Community and Participation
<b>Oxford Spires Scout District</b>	Valerie Butcher BEM William Butcher	Oxford Spires Scout District - Chair OxfordSpires Scout District
<b>Oxfordshire Army Cadet Force</b>	Andrew McLennan	Assistant Commandant - County Engagement
<b>Oxfordshire County Council</b>	Angela McRury Anita Bradley Eliza Marland Gareth Epps Jeremy Day Jessie Dobson Lisa Lyons Paula Callinan Harriet Preedy Jeremy Day	Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer  Future Generations Champion
<b>Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service</b>	Deb Forder	TYSS Oxfordshire County Council Youth Worker Targeted Youth Support manager Education Employment and Training Team Station Manager - Home and Community Safety Prevention
<b>Oxfordshire Lieutenancy</b>	Alison Derham Elizabeth Paris Helen Baker James Macnamara Jane Cranston Marjorie Glasgow Nicola Creed Sara Sara Fernandez Sally Scott	Deputy Lieutenant Deputy Lieutenant Deputy Lieutenant Vice Lord-Lieutenant Deputy Lietutenant / Past High Sheriff Lord-Lieutenant Deputy Lieutenant Deputy Lieutenant Deputy Lieutenant
<b>Oxfordshire Magistracy</b>	Adrienne Duggan	Magistrate
<b>Oxfordshire Mind</b>	Jess Willsher	CEO
<b>Oxfordshire Shrievalty</b>	Anne Gow Emily George Isabella Nicolosi Jacob Allsop John May Julia Colegrave Mark Johnson Moirra Darlington Patrick Eccles Shaun Kendall Sofia Ntege	Chaplain High Sheriff's Cadet High Sheriff's Cadet High Sheriff's Cadet High Sheriff of Oxfordshire High Sheriff in Nomination Chamberlain to The High Sheriff High Sheriff in Nomination Shrieval Remembrancer Shrieval volunteer High Sheriff's Cadet

<b>Oxfordshire Virtual School</b>	Clare Pike Lucy Byford	Secondary Phase Lead - Oxfordshire Virtual School
	Mark Walker	
<b>Oxfordshire Youth</b>	Becky Critchley Christabel Amiakhor Darius Smith	Youth Voice Champion Marketing and communications coordinator
	David Cruchley Eleni Eldridge-Till Eluned Harries Emma Roake Emmy O'Shaughnessy	Trustee Director of Innovation and Growth and Deputy CEO
	Gus Goodburn Hassan Kamal Jess Gilson McGrath Jodie Lloyd-Jones Josie Rea Allan Katie Nellist Mikey Skelly Natalie Yost Nataliia Turban	Youth Voice Champion CEO Youth voice champion Youth Sector Wellbeing Coordinator
	Nataliia Turban Poppy Cooper Sue Hill Taz Hogben Nicola Holmes-Brown	Youth Voice Champion Youth Voice Lead Youth Voice Champion
<b>Ridgeway Education Trust</b>	Gohar Khan Rachael Warwick	Director of Ethos Project Lead
<b>River Learning Trust</b>	Leonard Sackey	River Learning Trust
<b>Royal Voluntary Service</b>	Catherine Johnstone	Chief Executive
<b>SAFE! Support for Young People Affected by Crime</b>	Chloe Purcell	Chief Executive
<b>Sea Cadet Corps/Royal Navy Cadet Forces</b>	Ady Higgs	Cadet force adult volunteer/Chief petty officer
<b>SOFEA</b>	Richard Kennell	CEO
<b>South Oxfordshire District Council</b>	Katharine Keats-Rohan	Chair of Council
<b>South Oxfordshire Muslim Association</b>	Alainah Amer	
<b>St John Ambulance</b>	Becky Morrey	County Commissioner
<b>Street Games &amp; VRU</b>	Chelsea Piggott	Sport and Violence Impact Manager
<b>Sundial Centre for Education on Harmful Practices</b>	Kate Agha	CEO

<b>Survivor Space</b>	Danielle Beaumont	Head of Programmes and Partnerships
<b>Sweatbox Youth Centre</b>	Michelle Rozier	Youth Service Manager
<b>Thame Town Council</b>	Mandy Sturdy	Town Clerk
<b>Thame Youth Projects</b>	Hannah Kape Linda Newton Paul Cowell	Trustee
<b>Thames Valley Police</b>	Adrian Thomas Charlotte Donohoe Emily Rice Gavin Staniland James Hopkin Jason Hogg Russ Massey Ryan Sandalls Sarah Nash	Chief Constable
<b>The Branch Trust</b>	Catherine Spring Emma Kennedy	CEO
<b>The Cherwell School</b>	Chris Price	
<b>The Marlborough Church of England School, Woodstock</b>	Kathryn Bunch	School Governor
<b>The Project PT</b>	Ajaye Hunn-Phillips	
<b>The Targeted Youth Support Service - OCC</b>	Morgan Williams	Senior Youth Worker - City
<b>University of Oxford</b>	Carl Rifino Ellen Froustis Professor Mina Fazel	Student Doctoral student Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
<b>Vale of White Horse District Council</b>	Bethia Thomas	Leader of the Council
	Helen Pighills	Councillor/Cabinet Member
<b>Wantage Town Council</b>	Iain Cameron	Mayor of Wantage
<b>Warriner School, Student Voice and Ethos Lead</b>	Ben Richards	
<b>West Oxfordshire District Council</b>	Rachel Crouch	Executive member for stronger communities at WODC
<b>Weston on the Green Parish Council</b>	Diane Bohm	Chair, Weston on the Green Parish Council
<b>Wheatley Park School</b>	Tim Martin	
<b>Woodcote Primary School</b>	Sarah Peacock	Senior Leader @ primary school
<b>www.oxfordhub.org</b>	Rebekah Sammut	CEO
<b>Youth Challenge Oxfordshire</b>	Jay Smith	
	Annie Robinson	CEO / Project Director
<b>Youth Justice Service and Skills England</b>	Helen Woodward Davies	Skills England Board and Youth Justice Services Volunteer