

## Not that kind of Sheriff

Law, the High Sheriff, and the Power of Civil Society

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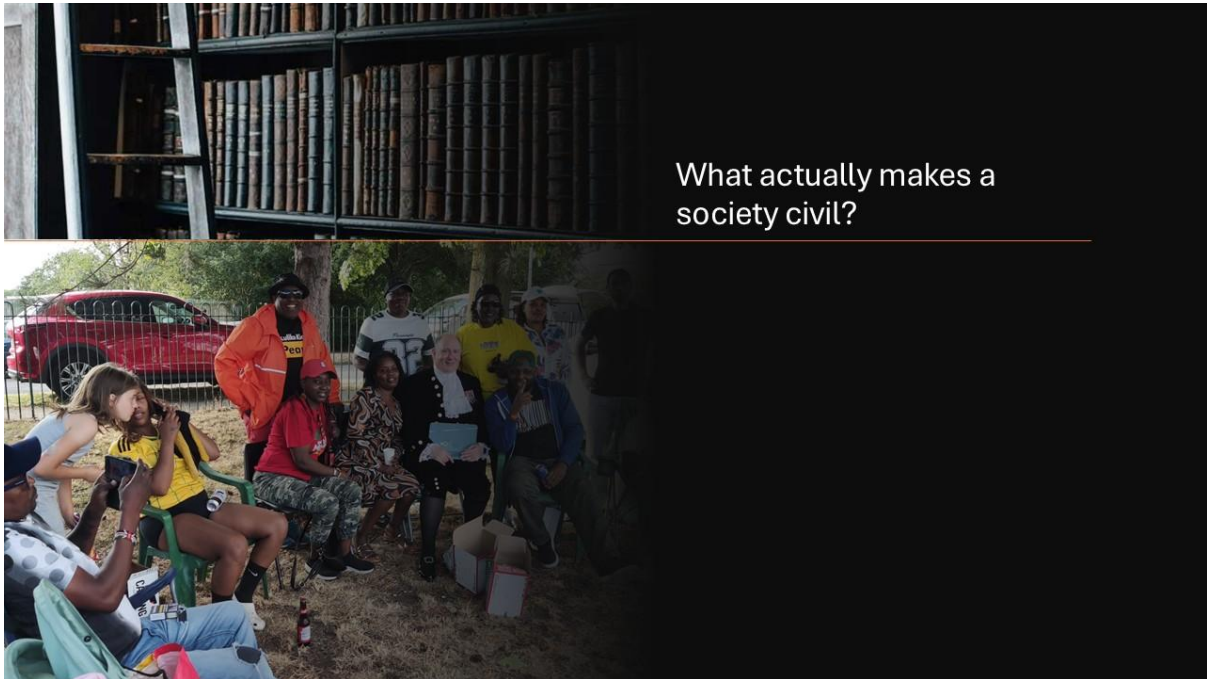
### INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, everyone. It's lovely to be with you — and, if I'm honest, a relief to be talking to undergraduates who've almost certainly had coffee, rather than politicians who sometimes haven't.

By way of introduction: I'm His Majesty's High Sheriff of Oxfordshire for the current year, and I'm wearing the traditional rig — complete with the bicorn hat. It's not just decorative extravagance. It connects the modern holder to more than a thousand years of legal and civic history, back to a time when the Sheriff was the King's key law-enforcer in the county.

This court suit, with its velvet, braid and lace, descends from the formal dress of senior Crown officers. The jabot and cuffs echo what court officials and senior lawyers once wore. And the ceremonial sword — purely symbolic now — harks back to the duty to uphold the King's peace. The rig is a reminder that the office stands in a long line of people whose task was to support justice.

Today, I want to explore a deceptively simple question:



## What actually makes a society civil?

Not what keeps order.

Not what drives the economy.

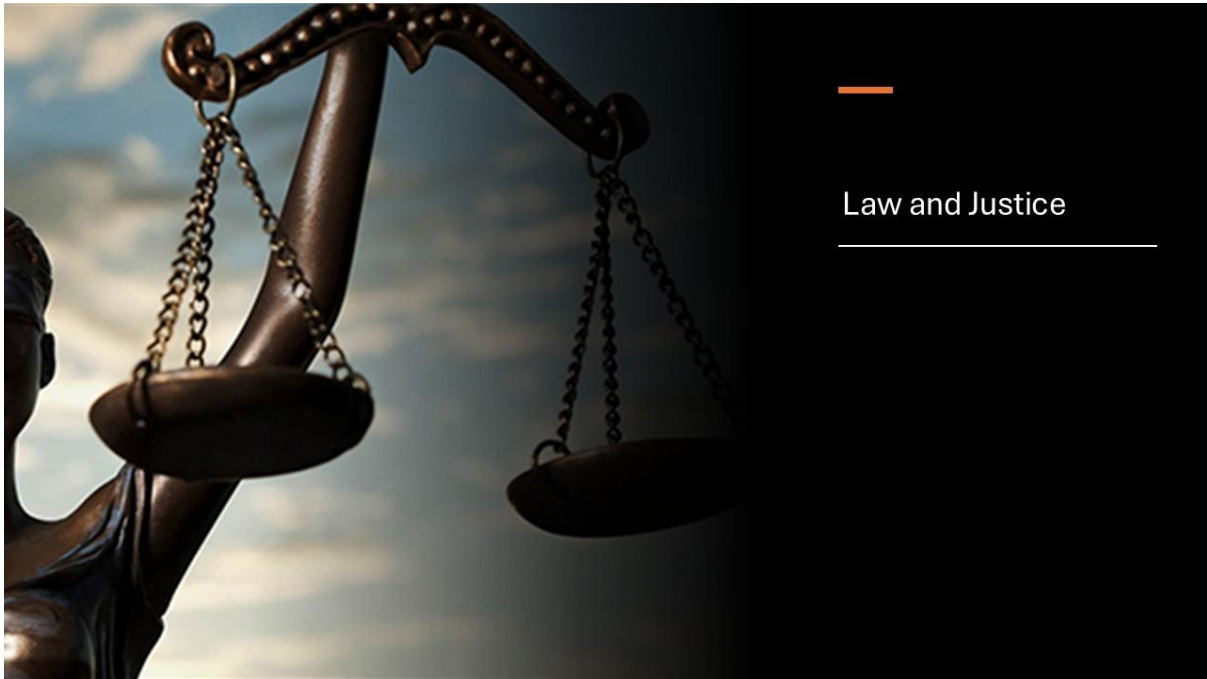
Not what fills the statute books.

But what makes us a society rather than simply a collection of individuals occupying the same stretch of land.

I'll do that through four connected themes:

1. **The law and justice** — not as dusty textbooks, but as living ideas shaped by people.
2. **The High Sheriff** — a thousand-year thread in English civic life.
3. **Civil society and charities** — the organisations that quietly hold the country together.
4. **What this means for you** — the generation who will shape the next fifty years.

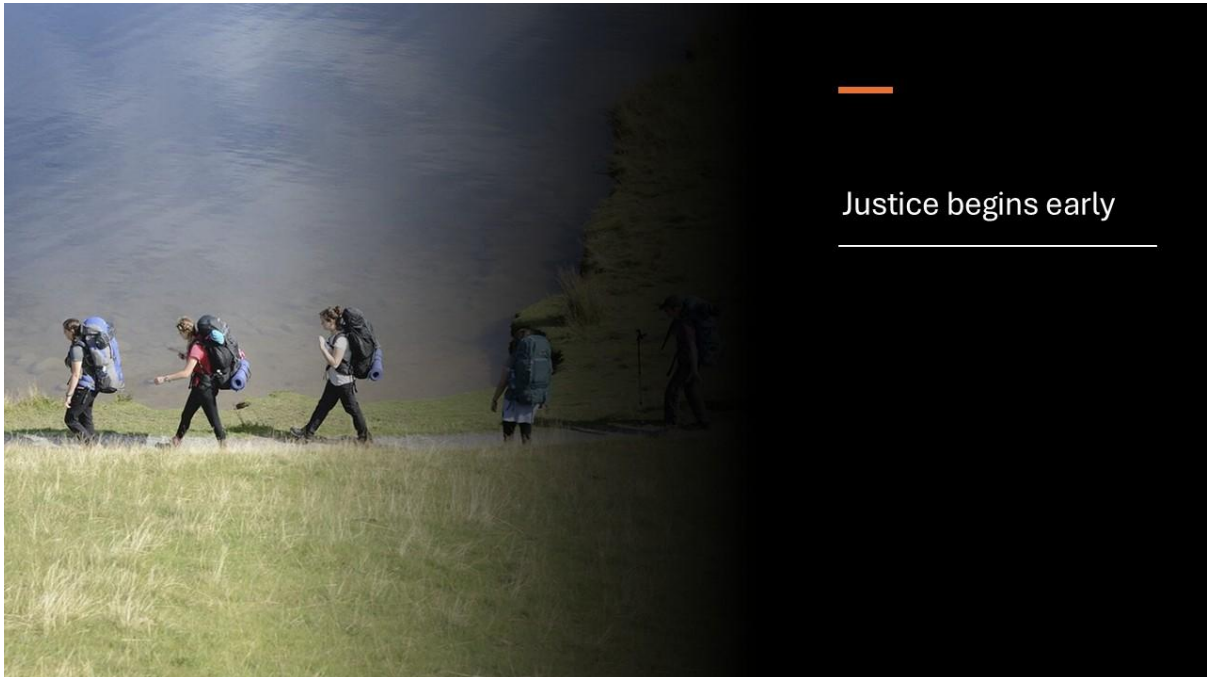
Let's begin.



## PART 1: THE LAW AND JUSTICE AS A LIVING CONVERSATION

When we talk about “the law,” it’s tempting to imagine a rigid, imposing structure: heavy books, ancient cases, language that feels as if it ought to be displayed in the Bodleian under dim lighting.

But when we talk about **justice**, the picture changes. Justice — especially social justice — is human. It’s visceral. It’s the instinct that something is fair or unfair long before we have a vocabulary for rights or constitutions.



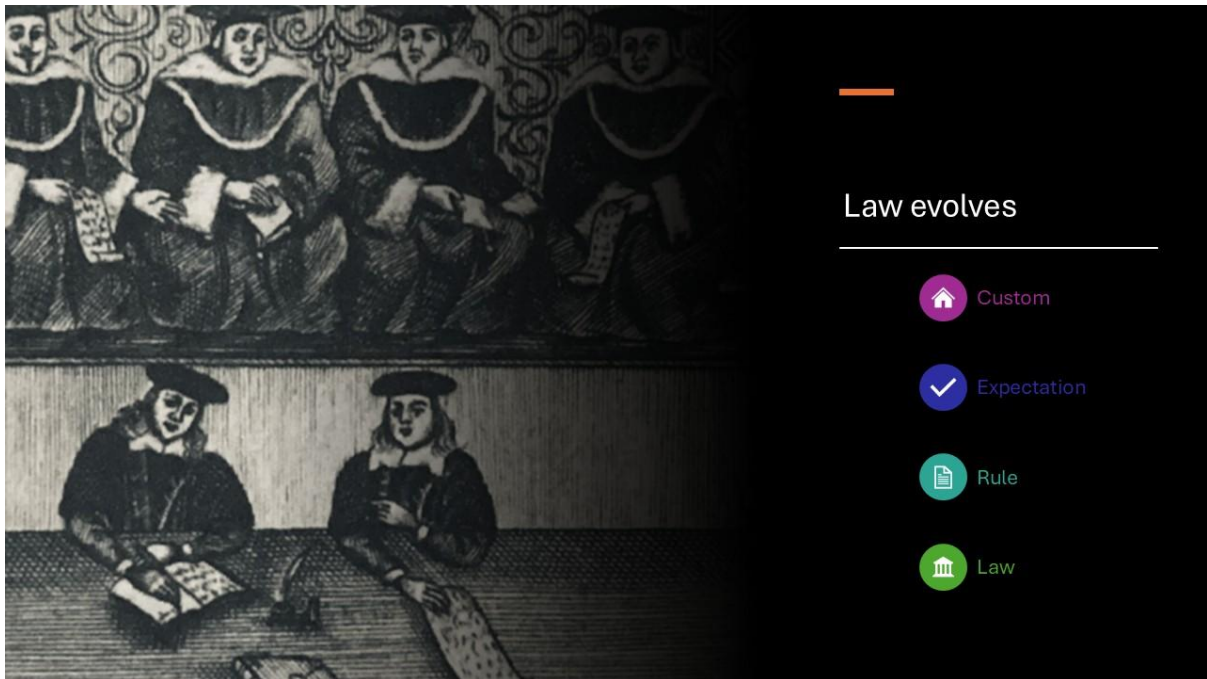
And almost all of us first discover that instinct in childhood.

This is where I pause to tell a little story from when I was a boy — the moment when I first realised what fairness, or unfairness, actually *felt* like.

### *Tell story of Christopher and the DofE hike*

That moment — whatever shape it took — is how justice begins for many of us. Not in statute books, but in playgrounds, dinner tables, classrooms, families. It starts with a feeling that something isn't right, and that feeling refuses to let go.

Neither law nor justice arrived fully formed. They grew — out of disagreements, challenges, customs, and the simple desire of ordinary people to settle disputes without resorting to violence.



Customs became expectations.

Expectations became rules.

Rules became laws.

And the law kept changing because people kept insisting that justice required something more.

Which brings us to an important distinction:

**Law reflects what society currently accepts.**

**Justice reflects what society believes ought to be possible.**

Law is the mirror.

Justice is the map.

And civil society — charities, campaigners, volunteers, youth workers, community leaders — is what keeps updating the map.

But before we get there, let's look at a role that has lived inside this legal–justice ecosystem for over a millennium.

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## **PART 2: THE HIGH SHERIFF — A THOUSAND YEARS OF CIVIC SERVICE**





The office of High Sheriff is the oldest secular office in England and Wales. Older than the judiciary. Older than Parliament. Older — I'm fairly sure — than students oversleeping their 9am lectures.

Originally, the Sheriff (the *shire reeve*) was the King's agent, responsible for:

- Keeping the peace
- Collecting taxes
- Arresting wrongdoers
- Raising the militia
- Maintaining order

It was not a role for the timid.



But as the centuries rolled on, policing became professionalised; taxation became centralised; the judiciary evolved. The Sheriff's powers diminished — but the office did not disappear. Instead, it transformed.

Today, a High Sheriff:

- Supports and celebrates the judiciary
- Encourages the police, probation and prison services
- Champions charities working in community safety
- Connects organisations that rarely meet
- Shines a light on unsung heroes
- Acts as a bridge between justice and the public



We have no political power.  
We pass no laws.  
We adjudicate no cases.

Our influence is quieter — the influence of convening, encouraging, amplifying, and connecting.

And the more time you spend in the role, the clearer one truth becomes:

**A society is only as strong as the relationships between its institutions and its people.**

And no part of our national life strengthens those relationships more effectively than the third sector.

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## PART 3: THE THIRD SECTOR — WHERE SOCIETY ACTUALLY HAPPENS

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Charities create society

Here's a provocative idea:

Politicians do not create society.  
The police do not create society.  
Businesses do not create society.  
Courts do not create society.

All vital. All indispensable.  
But none of them *create* society.

They create structure, order, rights, enforcement.

**Society is created by people acting not because they must, but because they care.**

Civil society.  
Charities.  
Faith groups.  
Volunteers.  
Youth clubs.  
Food banks.  
Advice centres.  
Mentoring programmes.

Shelters.

Environmental groups.

These organisations make life liveable.

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### The three roles



Gap in the  
system



Mirror to power

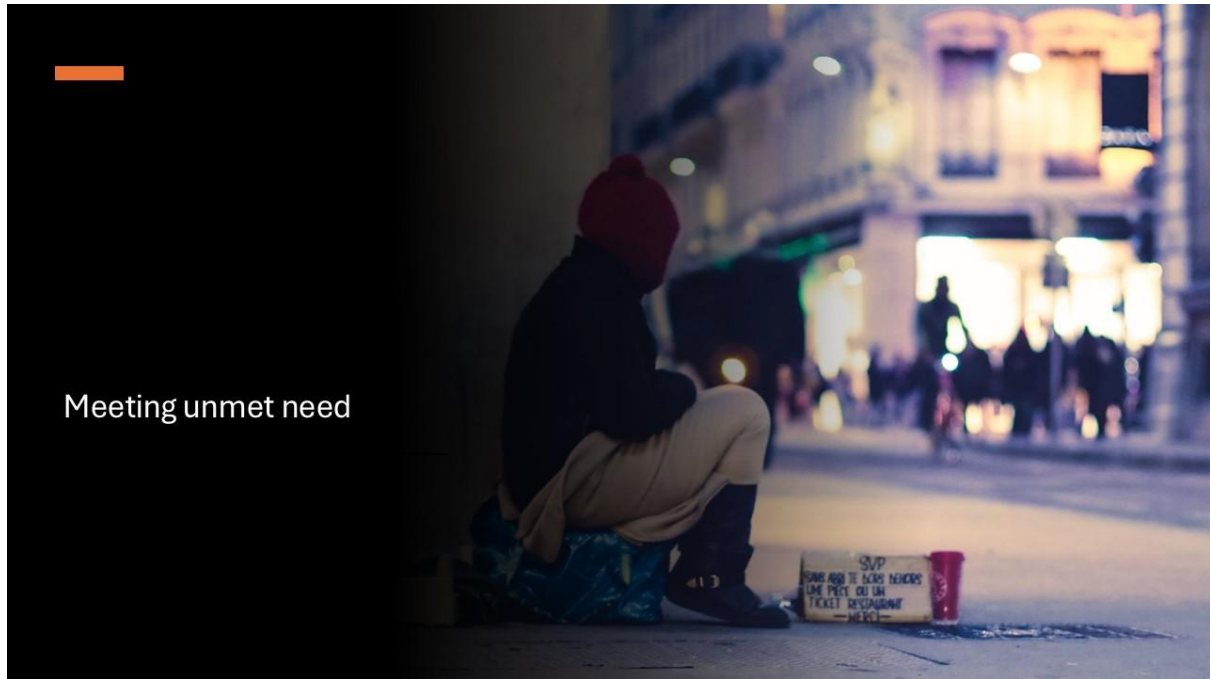


Heart of  
community

They do three things that no other part of the national ecosystem can do.

## 1. They meet unmet need.

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Charities don't wait for legislation.  
They respond to reality.

A young person in crisis.  
A refugee needing safety.  
A family suddenly without support.  
A neighbour isolated and alone.

Charities don't ask, "Is this my responsibility?"  
They ask, "What needs doing?"

## 2. They hold up a mirror to power.

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Charities tell the truth.

Not the convenient truth.

Not the comfortable truth.

The actual truth.

They gather evidence.

They highlight injustice.

They challenge assumptions.

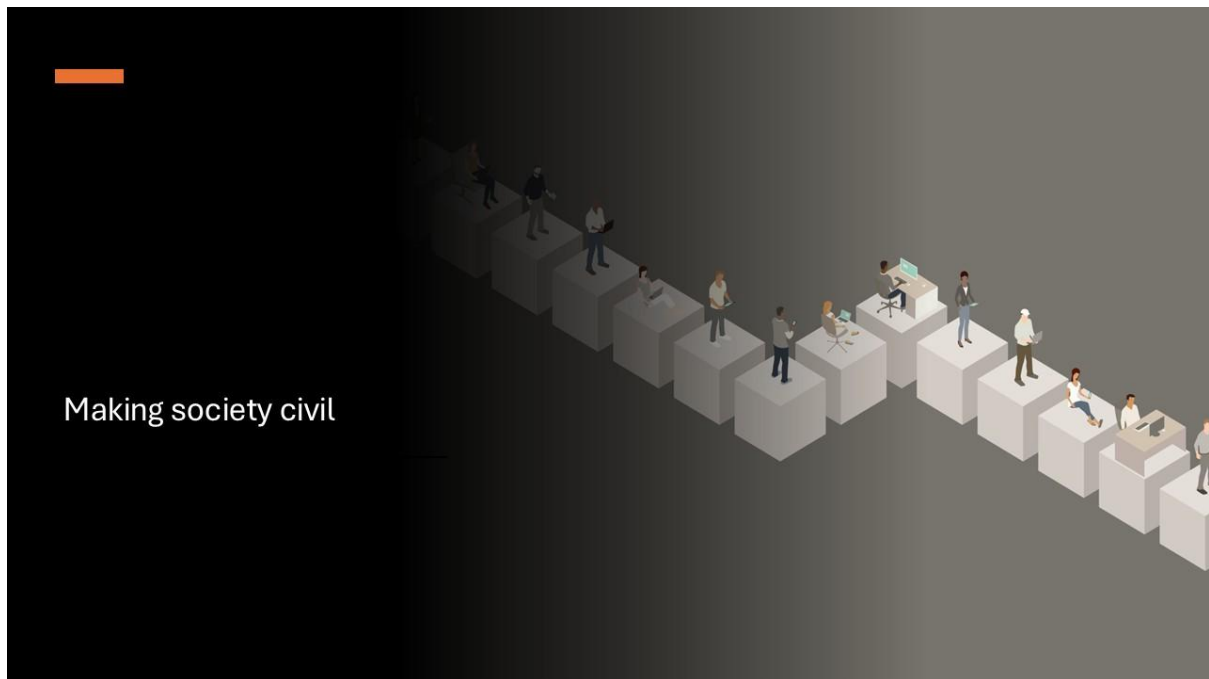
They show when systems are failing.

They speak for people who are unheard.

Charities are part of the checks and balances of a healthy democracy.

### 3. They make society civil.

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Civil as in kind.

Civil as in fair.

Civil as in compassionate, connected, and humane.

Strip away civil society and you strip away the warmth, dignity, and humanity from the national system. You're left with rules, structures, enforcement, process — necessary, but cold.

Civil society is what keeps society human.

## PART 3A (SHORTENED): CHARITY LAW — THE QUIET ARCHITECT OF PUBLIC GOOD

Civil society isn't a free-for-all. It's held up by a surprisingly elegant legal framework: **charity law**.

We won't go through the full detail, but here are the essentials — the shortened version.

### 1. The legal idea of charity is a social mirror.

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What society believes,  
matters

MAKE THIS  
WORLD  
BETTER

The Charities Act 2011 lists charitable purposes: poverty relief, education, health, community development, arts and heritage, environment, animal welfare, human rights, public safety.

It's a legal description of what society believes matters.



## 2. Public benefit is the anchor.

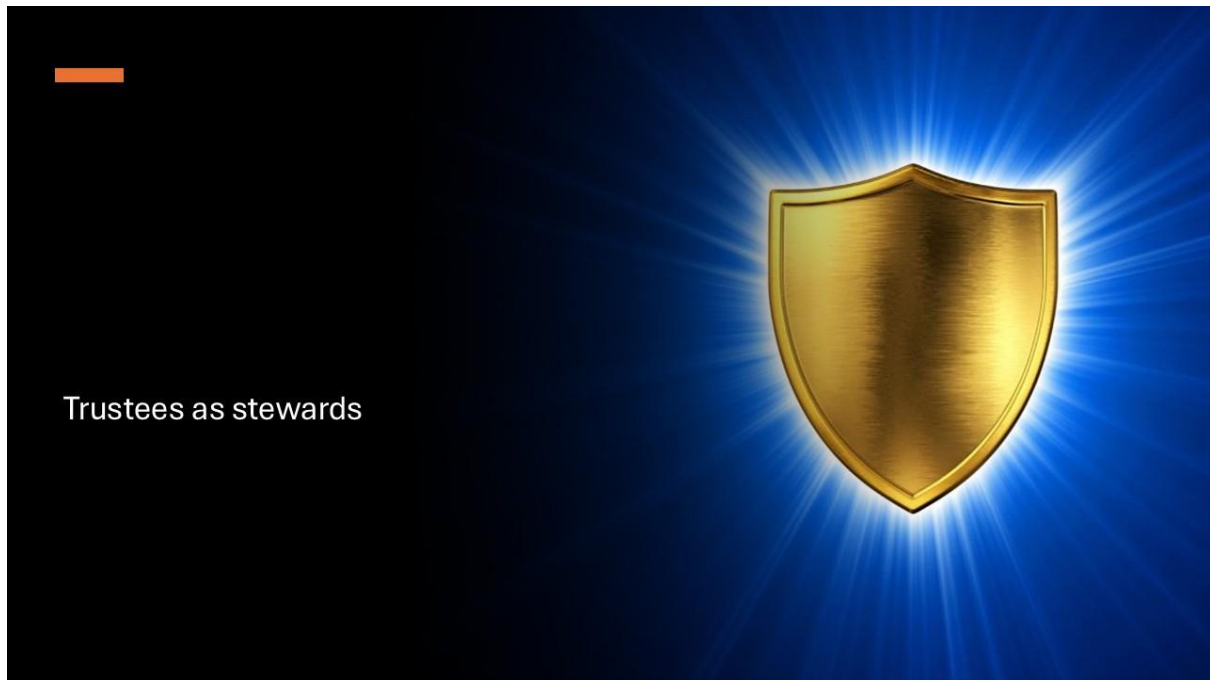
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A charity must exist *for the public*. Not private individuals. Not trustees. Not donors. This protects integrity and trust.

### 3. Trustees are stewards of purpose.

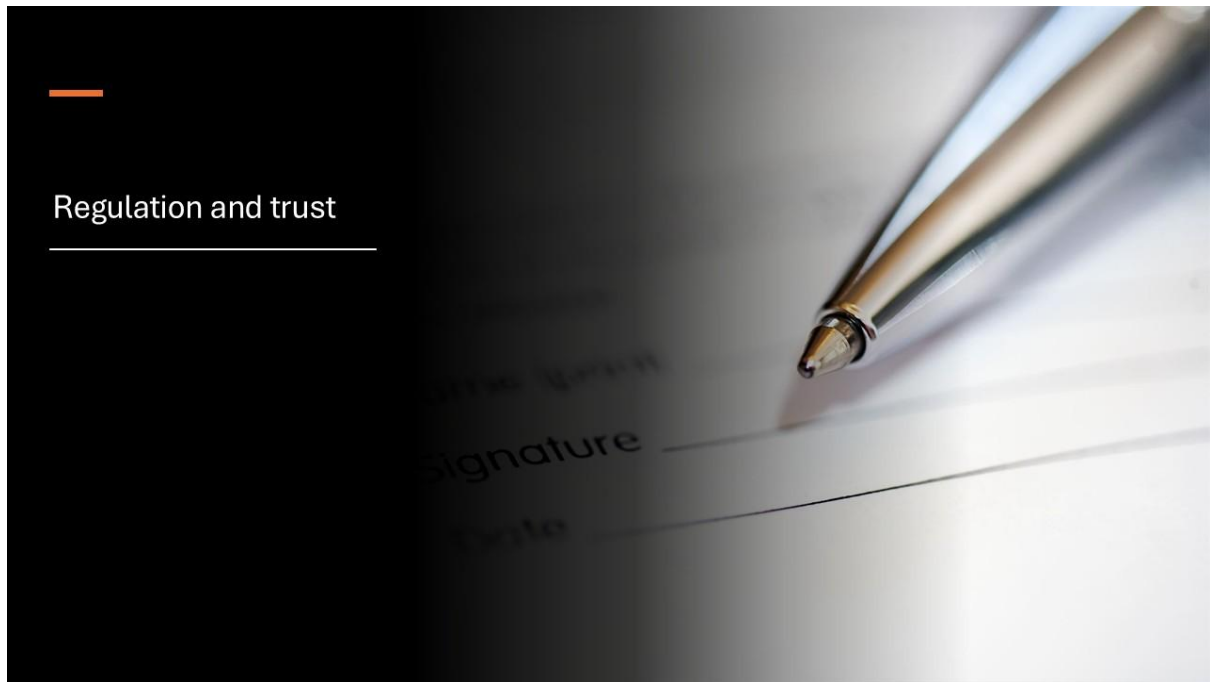
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They must act solely in the charity's best interests and ensure it fulfils its mission. When trustees fail, the law steps in.

#### 4. Regulation protects trust.

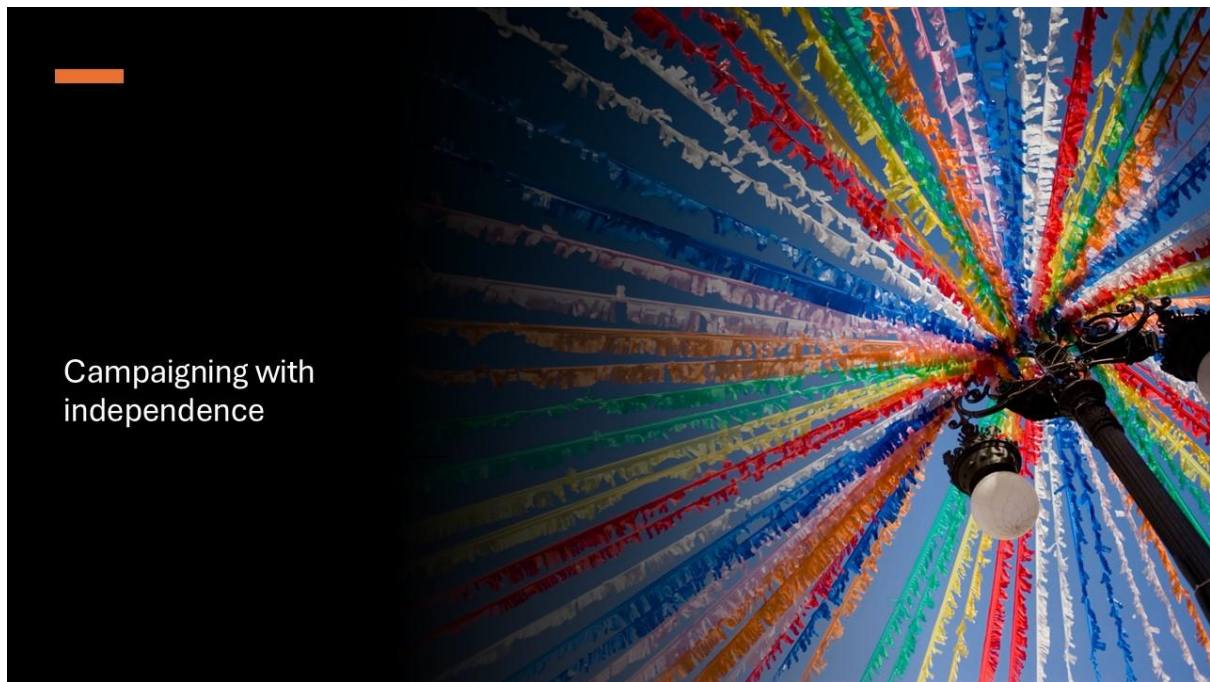
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The Charity Commission safeguards the public interest and interprets the law for modern challenges — campaigning, safeguarding, social media, ethics.

## 5. Charities can campaign — but must never be partisan.

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They may challenge policy.

They must not support political parties.


The law preserves independence.

And that is why charity law matters: it turns compassion into something structured, reliable, and sustainable.

## PART 4: WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

So — what does all this mean for you?

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An aerial photograph of a historic city, likely Oxford, taken at sunset. The image shows a dense cluster of old stone buildings with red-tiled roofs, a large domed church (Christ Church), and a green lawn in the foreground. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. The left side of the image is darkened, and the text 'Looking ahead' is overlaid on this dark area.

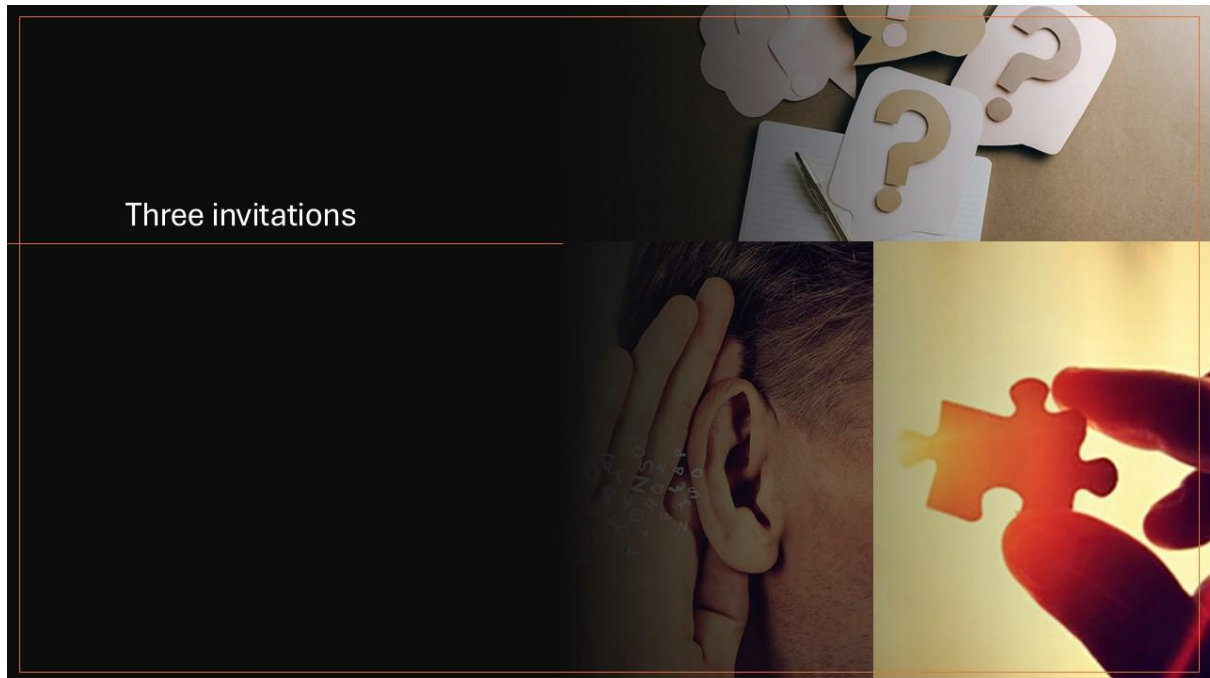
Looking ahead

You are the generation that will shape the next half-century of civic life. Whatever careers you pursue, you will also be citizens. And with citizenship comes choice:

## What kind of society do you want to build?

Let me offer three invitations.

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## 1. Pay attention to the quiet work.

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Most of the people holding this country together never appear on the front pages.

Youth workers.

Mentors.

Support workers.

Trustees.

Community organisers.

People who believe compassion is a verb.

## 2. Challenge systems when they forget people.

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Every system — political, economic, legal — drifts toward process over people.

Civil society pulls it back to purpose.

Ask yourself:

Who isn't being heard?

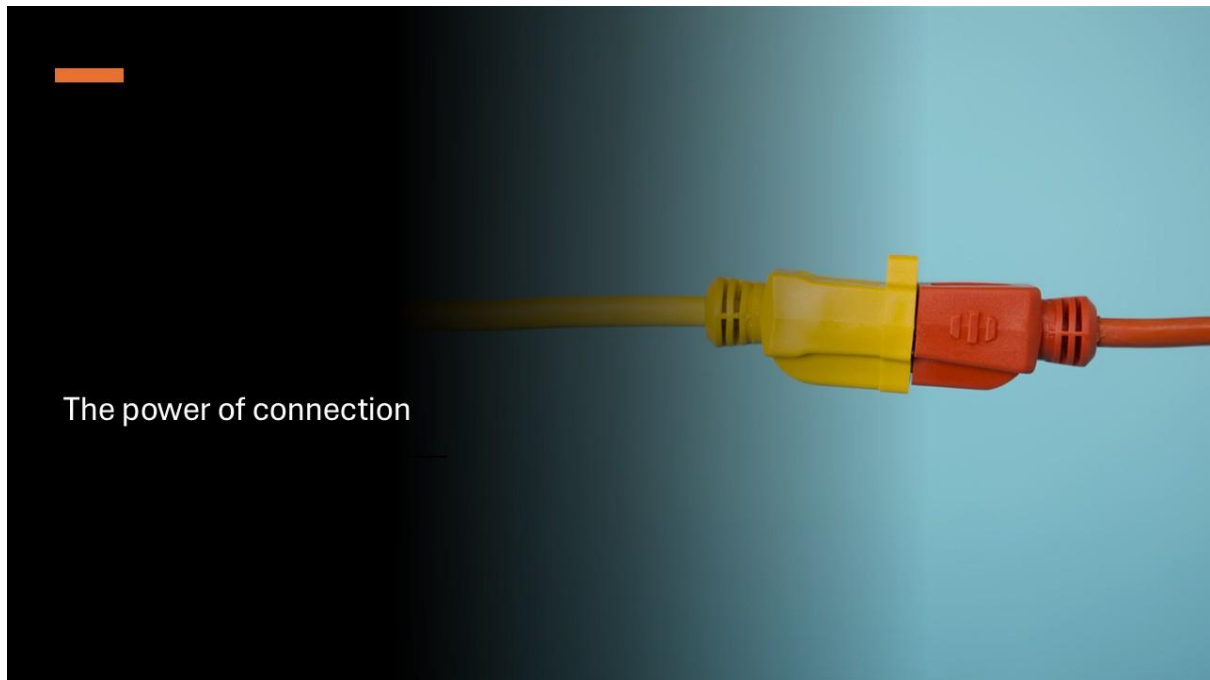
Whose story isn't being told?

Who is missing from the conversation?

When democracy is a muscle, civil society is the physiotherapist.

### 3. Don't underestimate connection.

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Some of the most transformative things I've seen as High Sheriff involve nothing more dramatic than people meeting each other — judges with youth workers, police officers with community organisers, business leaders with charity trustees.

New understanding emerges.

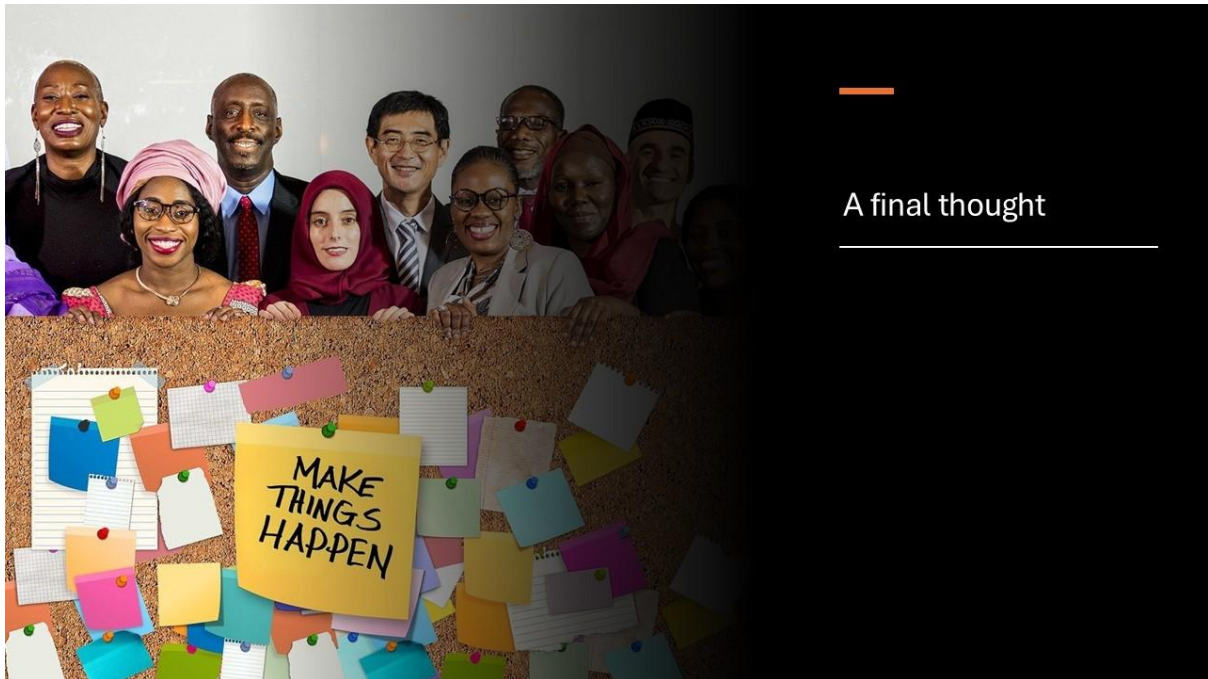
New ideas spark.

New partnerships form.

Civil society is where that happens.

## CONCLUSION

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Let me end with this.

Across a thousand years, laws have shifted, institutions have evolved, and society has reinvented itself again and again. But one truth has never changed:

**Society is made by people who turn up for one another.**

People who act not out of obligation, but out of a belief that we belong to one another.

That is what civil society does.

That is what charities do.

That is what citizens — real citizens — do.

So my hope for you is simple:

Be curious.

Be compassionate.

Be imaginative.

Be courageous enough to make things better.

Because the law keeps order.

But civil society keeps us human.

And if you strengthen that, even in small ways, you will have contributed to something far bigger than yourselves.

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Thank you very much.