

Vera Baird DBE QC, Victims' Commissioner

Soroptimist, champion of change for the better

Vera Baird DBE QC is a British criminal barrister with a distinguished career as a lawyer and Parliamentarian (Labour MP for Redcar 2001-10). Vera Baird QC was Solicitor General for England and Wales from 2007 to 2010. This was followed by her election as Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC).

Writer on crimes against women and of women's experiences in court, Vera Baird QC was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) in the 2017 New Year Honours list, for services to women and equality. She has spent her working life fighting injustice. Her current focus is on improvement in victims' legal representation and in the court system.



Vera Baird QC joined Soroptimist International (SI) of Newcastle upon Tyne club in 2015. She has served as club and SI regional Programme Action Representative and as Club President. Her leadership has pushed Soroptimists outside their comfort zones and forced them to question their assumptions, to look beyond stereotypes, and to engage with the sad realities of life for countless women and children in both local and in wider communities. Dame Vera is unequivocally a champion of change for the better.

Whilst serving as Northumbria PCC, Dame Vera introduced innovative schemes, including:

1. Domestic Violence Support and Assistance Cars – specialist domestic abuse workers from a local charity responding to 999 calls with police on the frontline, to get a range of help to complainants at once;
2. Northumbria Court Observers – a panel of citizens scrutinising 30 rape trials;
3. Workplace Domestic and Sexual Abuse Champions trained to offer support in the workplace.

Following the impact of the Northumbria Court Observers Report, Dame Vera asked SI North of England Region to monitor the work of the Specialist Domestic Violence Courts (SDVCs) which were rolled out across the country in 2005-06 to provide more informed and safer hearings. Soroptimists from SI Newcastle upon Tyne, SI Tynemouth & Whitley Bay, and SI Sunderland were trained by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and Her Majesty's Court Service to become Specialist Volunteer Court Observers.

They learned that domestic violence is all pervading; women are far more likely than men to be victims; 1 in 4 women in the UK experience it; it is 16% of all violent crime; has more repeat victims than any other crime; is the single most quoted reason for homelessness (Shelter 2002) and costs the public £23 billion per annum. Soroptimist volunteer observers familiarised themselves with court environments and procedures, and learned to lobby for change with confidence, using proven research.

The volunteers monitored 170 cases and published the research report ***Specialist Domestic Violence Courts – how special are they?*** which highlighted:

- 1.significant gaps in the system;
- 2.more funding needed to ensure the courts worked as originally intended;
- 3.recommendations to improve SDVC accountability to victims.

Two videos were produced by SI Newcastle to advise future volunteer observers what to expect and what is expected of them. Dame Vera's SDVC observer project won an Advocacy Award at the 2019 SIGBI annual conference. It has been expanded to other Soroptimist clubs and Regions.

In 2019 Dame Vera was appointed Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales. She continues to challenge inequality and injustice. In 2020 Dame Vera transferred from Newcastle to the SI Greater London club* - just ahead of the Coronavirus lock-down. Under lock-down, reports of domestic violence began to escalate whilst victim support became more difficult to obtain. Coronavirus social distancing rules for a time precluded SDVC volunteer monitoring. It resumed when circumstances permitted.

Supported by Soroptimist Parliamentary lobbying, in 2021 Dame Vera proposed amendments to the existing Domestic Violence bill such as designating non-fatal strangulation a crime. The amendment was passed.

Campaigns launched by Dame Vera Baird:

Dame Vera served as Chair of the Fawcett Commission on Women and Criminal Justice, which triggered a number of legislative changes including how women with vulnerabilities are treated in prison.

As chair of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, Dame Vera called for personal, social and health education (PSHE) to become a compulsory part of the national curriculum, to assist in combating child abuse and to educate young people.

With Northumbria Police, Dame Vera launched the **Words Leave Scars Too** campaign to raise awareness of the impact of emotional abuse on victims.

She has pressed for, and continues to work towards, a greater focus on victims in rape cases.

Dame Vera Baird has lectured on democracy, gender and human rights at conferences worldwide. High profile and articulate, Dame Vera is an asset to Soroptimist International's advocacy of the rights of women and girls at local, national and international levels.

*SI Greater London, chartered in 1924, was the first Soroptimist club chartered outside the Americas. SI Oakland of California, founded in 1921, was the first Soroptimist club. Its centenary prompted world-wide celebration.