

**CABINET MEETING – 14<sup>th</sup> March 2024**  
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SHEET – PART I**

**Title of Report:**

HONORARY FREEDOM OF THE CITY OF SUNDERLAND

**Author(s):**

Chief Executive

**Purpose of Report:**

To consider recommending to Council that the Honorary Freedom of the City of Sunderland be conferred upon:

- Kevin Ball

In recognition of the example of commitment and achievement he sets in sport and football, as an ambassador for Sunderland and a role model for young people in the city.

- Gerard (Ger) Fowler

In recognition of the example of commitment and achievement he sets in supporting the city's veteran community, as an ambassador for Sunderland and a role model for young people in the city.

**Description of Decision:**

To recommend to Council that

i) in accordance with the provisions of Section 249 of the Local Government Act 1972

- Kevin Ball; and
- Gerard (Ger) Fowler

as persons of distinction who have, in the opinion of the Council, rendered eminent services to the city, be admitted as Honorary Freemen of the City; and

ii) authority be given for the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to agree all appropriate arrangements for the formal ceremony at an extraordinary meeting of the Council to be held at the earliest opportunity.

<p><b>Is the decision consistent with the Budget/Policy Framework?      *Yes</b></p> <p><b>If not, Council approval is required to change the Budget/Policy Framework</b></p>
<p><b>Suggested reason(s) for Decision:</b></p> <p>The proposal will formally recognise the achievements and contribution of Kevin Ball and Ger Fowler and the respect that the people of Sunderland hold for them.</p>
<p><b>Alternative options to be considered and recommended to be rejected:</b></p> <p>The alternative option would be to not agree the proposal, however conferring honorary freedom is considered to be appropriate in order to recognise the outstanding contribution made by the nominated individuals.</p>
<p><b>Impacts analysed;</b></p> <p><b>Equality</b> <input type="text" value="n/a"/> <b>Privacy</b> <input type="text" value="n/a"/> <b>Sustainability</b> <input type="text" value="n/a"/> <b>Crime and Disorder</b> <input type="text" value="n/a"/></p>
<p><b>Is the Decision consistent with the Council's co-operative values? Yes/No</b></p>
<p><b>Is this a "Key Decision" as defined in the Constitution?      Yes/No</b></p>
<p><b>Is it included in the 28 day Notice of Decisions?      Yes/No</b></p>

**HONORARY FREEDOM OF THE CITY OF SUNDERLAND**

**Report of the Chief Executive**

**1.0 Purpose of the Report**

To consider recommending to Council that the Honorary Freedom of the City of Sunderland be conferred upon

- Kevin Ball

In recognition of the example of commitment and achievement he sets in sport and football, as an ambassador for Sunderland and a role model for young people in the city.

- Gerard (Ger) Fowler

In recognition of the example of commitment and achievement he sets in supporting the city's veteran community, as an ambassador for Sunderland and a role model for young people in the city.

**2.0 Description of Decision (Recommendations)**

To recommend to Council that

i) in accordance with the provisions of Section 249 of the Local Government Act 1972

- Kevin Ball; and
- Gerard (Ger) Fowler

as persons of distinction who have, in the opinion of the Council, rendered eminent services to the city, be admitted as Honorary Freemen of the City; and

ii) authority be given for the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to agree all appropriate arrangements for the formal ceremony at an extraordinary meeting of the Council to be held at the earliest opportunity.

**3.0 Background**

The Council has traditionally honoured those people who have made significant, positive contributions to the reputation and wellbeing of the city and its residents by conferring upon them the Honorary Freedom of the City.

The city's footballing legends hold a special place in the hearts of the people of Sunderland and it has been cause for significant celebration when the Council has previously conferred the Honorary Freedom of the City on the 1973 FA Cup winning team and upon Gary Bennett MBE, Steph Houghton MBE and Jill Scott MBE. Their achievements and their efforts as representatives and ambassadors of Sunderland

have had a very positive impact on the city and its people, and the Honorary Freedom of the City was conferred upon them as a token of the esteem in which they are held in Sunderland and for the enduring example they set.

Similarly, Sunderland has a reputation for being a very welcoming, caring and inclusive place with a strong sense of community spirit. Groups and individuals across the city work tirelessly in the voluntary and community sector to help and support the more vulnerable members of our communities and to provide advice, guidance and opportunities to our residents. The people establishing and leading community-based projects and organisations, providing vital support and services to individuals and acting as champions for under-represented communities, make an invaluable contribution to the city and a positive difference to residents' lives.

Members of the Council have therefore nominated two highly respected figures for consideration to receive the Honorary Freedom of the City as follows:

- Kevin Ball
- Gerard (Ger) Fowler

### **3.1 Kevin Ball**

Kevin Ball is a Sunderland AFC legend with a 32-year association with the club.

Born in Hastings in East Sussex, Kevin began his football career in central defence but eventually moved into central midfield. Joining Sunderland AFC in the summer of 1990, he played 388 games for the club in all competitions, scoring 27 goals. His career took off with a spell at Portsmouth and, after leaving Sunderland in December 1999, he had spells at Fulham and Burnley before retiring from playing in 2003.

In a Sunderland AFC career spanning Roker Park and the Stadium of Light, former club captain, Kevin played in Sunderland's 1991-92 FA Cup Final team and was part of the Sunderland sides that won First Division titles in 1996 and 1999. Kevin was described as 'the player of the 1990's' being named Sunderland Player of the Year in 1990/91 and winning the Supporters' Association award on four occasions.

After hanging up his boots, Kevin maintained close footballing ties with Sunderland AFC including two spells as the caretaker manager, and roles as the assistant academy manager and the senior professional development coach. He became a Club Ambassador at Sunderland in 2014, standing down from the role in 2022.

Kevin's popularity with generations of supporters has earned him a special place in Sunderland AFC's history and as a proud, adopted Mackem he embodies the hard-working and honest spirit of the club and the city.

### **3.2 Gerard (Ger) Fowler**

Born in Sunderland in 1970, Ger served in the 1st Light Infantry from 1986 – 1991 including tours of Northern Ireland. He escaped death in 1988, at the age of 18, when a roadside bomb blew up an army bus he was travelling on, killing eight of his colleagues. Upon leaving the Army, Ger came home to Sunderland and established a bakery in the city which he ran for 10 years.

In his current role, Ger is a member of the Sunderland Armed Forces Partnership and works with partners to improve access to services for veterans. He has been instrumental in encouraging prominent businesses and organisations in the city to sign the Armed Forces Covenant.

Ger has spent much of his life overcoming personal challenges, having suffered from PTSD. He determined that having helped himself he would help others to overcome obstacles in their lives, particularly his fellow veterans.

It was his work at homeless charity, Changing Lives that brought home the plight of veterans and he subsequently took on the role of Veterans Peer Research Navigator at Northumbria University, a research project funded by Sunderland City Council and the Royal British Legion looking at peer to peer support for veterans.

In 2018, Ger established Veterans in Crisis (VICs), a Sunderland-based and focused community interest company (CIC), employing six staff who offer a range of help and support to veterans and their families including mental health support, counselling services, help with substance abuse issues, housing support, fitness training and social interaction. To create a sustainable future for the CIC, Ger established a removal company and house clearance service, creating employment opportunities for veterans.

Since 2020, Ger has been a Senior Lecturer at Sunderland University. He has won numerous awards for services to veterans including a Chronicle Champions Award and an English Veterans Award for Leader of the Year.

#### **4.0 Financial Implications**

The costs associated with this proposal are estimated to be circa £9,000 which will be met from the Council's general contingency provision. This includes the cost of the memorabilia given to each of nominees as well as the cost of the ceremony itself. There are a number of variables relating to the cost of the ceremony and these will become clearer once preparations commence, including potentially to hold a joint ceremony at which the appointments of the Honorary Aldermen and conferring of the Freedom of the City on proposed recipients will take place.

#### **5.0 Current Position**

Given Sunderland's long tradition of conferring the Freedom of the City on those notable individuals who, through their various achievements, have contributed positively to the reputation of the city and are held in high regard by its citizens, it is considered appropriate to recommend the Council to confer the Freedom of the City upon the nominees.

#### **6.0 Reasons for Decision**

The proposal will formally recognise the achievements and contribution of Kevin Ball and Ger Fowler and the respect that the people of Sunderland hold for them.

## **7.0 Alternative Options**

The alternative option would be to not agree the proposal, however conferring the Honorary Freedom of the City is considered to be appropriate in order to recognise the outstanding contribution made by the nominated individuals.

## **8.0 Background Papers**

None