

CABINET

14 OCTOBER 2022

HONORARY FREEDOM OF THE CITY

Report of the Chief Executive

1.0 Purpose of the Report

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

- Gary Bennett MBE

In recognition of the example of commitment and achievement he sets in combatting racism in football and as an ambassador of Sunderland and role model for young people.

- Stephanie Darby MBE (Steph Houghton)

In recognition of the example of commitment and achievement she sets in women's sport and as a role model for young people in Sunderland.

- Jill Scott MBE

In recognition of the example of commitment and achievement she sets in women's sport and as an ambassador of Sunderland and role model for young people.

2.0 Description of Decision

To recommend to Council that

- i) in accordance with the provisions of Section 249 of the Local Government Act 1972
 - Gary Bennett MBE
 - Stephanie Darby MBE (Steph Houghton); and
 - Jill Scott MBE

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 was a cause for significant celebration when in January 2022, the Council conferred the Honorary Freedom of the City of Sunderland on the remaining members of the 1973 FA Cup winning team.

The Council had previously conferred the honour upon team manager Bob Stokoe in January 1974, and in May 2016 upon team goalkeeper Jim Montgomery BEM.

The team's victory had a hugely 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.

Members of the Council have now nominated three further, highly respected footballing figures for consideration as follows:

- Gary Bennett MBE
- Stephanie Darby MBE (Steph Houghton); and
- Jill Scott MBE

3.1 Gary Bennett MBE

In the 2022 New Year Honours list, Gary was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for services to anti-racism in football.

Gary began his professional football career as a defender at Manchester City in 1979 before signing for Cardiff City in 1981.

In 1984, he moved to First Division Sunderland AFC, becoming one of the highest outfield appearance makers during his 11 years playing for the club and cementing his status as a much-loved and respected Sunderland legend.

Moving on to play for Carlisle, Scarborough and Darlington, Gary then made the transition into coaching and management at the end of his playing career, taking over the reins as player-manager and then manager at Darlington FC.

Gary has since held a range of coaching roles including Head Football Coach at the University of Sunderland, where he has helped the men's and women's teams achieve equal success.

Gary was one of the first players in the game to work and campaign to eradicate racism in football and is one of the longest supporting patrons of the Show Racism the Red Card (SRTRC) organisation.

Using his own experiences of racism to help educate others in combatting it, Gary's unwavering support over the past 25 years has been crucial in establishing and growing SRTRC, and he has worked with thousands of young people throughout the North East to help educate them on the importance of being anti-racist.

Gary continues to play an important and inspirational role in promoting sport and football in the community and has mentored many young people working towards coaching and officiating awards, as well as being a hugely dedicated patron and ambassador for local charities and for the City of Sunderland.

3.2 Stephanie Darby MBE (Steph Houghton)

In the 2016 New Year Honour list, Steph was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for services to football.

Steph was first scouted to train with the Sunderland AFC Under 16s side at the age of nine and is a much-admired figure in the city's proud footballing story, having come up through the ranks from local grassroots to achieve international success.

In 2002, she began her senior career with Sunderland helping them win promotion from the Northern Division in 2005-6.

Steph went on to join Leeds United Ladies and was named the FA Women's Young Player of the Year in 2008. She was amongst the first 17 female players to be given central contracts by the FA and helped Leeds win the Women's Premier League Cup in 2010.

Subsequently, she signed for Arsenal and in 2014, completed a move to Manchester City where she has lifted eight trophies and been named Player of the Year twice.

On the international stage, she has made over 120 appearances for England, playing at every level and also represented Team GB at two Olympic Games. At the London Olympics in 2012, Steph scored in all three group matches including the winning goals against New Zealand and Brazil.

In 2014, she was awarded the England captain's armband, leading the Lionesses to World Cup qualification and a bronze medal in Canada.

An inspirational role model and hugely respected pioneer and ambassador for women's football, Steph's MBE was awarded for her achievements and contribution both on and off the pitch.

Showing real passion and determination to come back from two serious injuries during her career, Steph regained her place as an integral player for both club and country, and last season, continued to break records and boundaries becoming the first player to reach 100 Women's Super League wins.

3.3 Jill Scott MBE

Jill was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2020 New Year Honours list for services to women's football.

Born in Sunderland, she is one of the city's much-loved footballing legends, starting at grassroots level from a young age and coming up through the ranks to start her senior career with Sunderland in the 2004-5 season.

Aged 18, in September 2005 Jill was named the Women's Player of the Month based on her performances for both club and country (at under-19 level).

From there Jill has gone on to be one of England's most decorated players and is one of only a few Lionesses to have been capped over 150 times.

She has played in nine major tournaments during her international career and the people of Sunderland were bursting with pride when she played an influential role in helping the Lionesses lift the Euro 2022 winners' trophy this summer.

Making her England debut in 2006, Jill has delivered some unforgettable strikes and displays of skill at key moments including scoring the winner in the Euro 2009 semi-final and the equaliser against Belgium in the Euro 2017 qualifiers.

Shortly after her first appearance for England she was called up to the World Cup squad where in China in August 2007, she scored in the 6-1 win against Argentina.

When starting the England-Cameroon match in France in 2019, it was Jill's 18th World Cup Finals appearance – the most of any England player in history.

At club level, Jill has won every domestic honour with Manchester City, and scored in their FA Cup Final victory in 2017.

Leaving a legacy that will benefit girls' and women's sport for generations to come, Jill announced her retirement after the Lionesses' Euro victory and remains a hugely inspirational role model and record holder in women's football.

4.0 Financial Implications

The costs associated with this proposal are estimated to be circa £12,000 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 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.

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 Gary Bennett MBE, Stephanie Darby MBE (Steph Houghton) and Jill Scott MBE 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 honorary freedom is considered to be appropriate in order to recognise the outstanding contribution made by the nominated individuals.

8.0 Background Papers

None.

