

Non-Executive Report of the:  <b>Council</b>  Wednesday, 13 October 2021	 <b>TOWER HAMLETS</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Janet Fasan, Director of Legal and Monitoring Officer	<b>Classification:</b> Open (Unrestricted)
<b>Freedom of the Borough - Nominations Report</b>	

<b>Originating Officer(s)</b>	Matthew Mannion, Head of Democratic Services
<b>Wards affected</b>	(All Wards);

### Executive Summary

This report presents a number of nominees for the Freedom of the Borough Award. It outlines the policy context for awarding the Freedom of the Borough and explains how the process for nomination and selection was carried out. It asks Council to make a decision on whether the nominees selected by the Freedom of the Borough Panel should be awarded the honorary title.

### Recommendations:

The Council is recommended to:

1. Award the Freedom of the Borough to:
  - Sufia Alam
  - Jim Fitzpatrick
  - Sister Christine Frost fcJ
  - Sir George Iacobescu CBE
  - Abdul Aziz Sardar
  
2. Thank all those who submitted nominations for the Freedom of the Borough.

### 1. REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 The Council is empowered by section 249(5) of the Local Government Act 1972 to admit as Honorary Freemen or Honorary Freewomen of the borough 'persons of distinction and persons who have in the opinion of the Council, rendered eminent services to the borough'.
  
- 1.2 In April 2021, the Council's cross-party Freedom of the Borough Panel began the process of seeking and reviewing nominations with the intention of awarding a Freedom of the Borough. The Panel was chaired by the Speaker

of the Council, Councillor Mohammed Hossain and also included the Mayor, previous Speakers and co-opted Members (including representatives from outside of the Council).

- 1.3 The Panel received many high-quality nominations and, after considerable discussion, determined that five nominations should be submitted to Council for consideration for the Freedom of the Borough.

## **2. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 2.1 The Council could decide not to agree some or all of the awards.

## **3. DETAILS OF THE REPORT**

- 3.1 The award of the honorary freedom does not in itself confer any rights on the recipient but conferring the title of Honorary Freeman or Honorary Freewoman is the highest honour that the Council of a borough can bestow and as such is given only rarely. Those awarded the Freedom of the Borough will also be invited to certain civic events by the Speaker.

- 3.2 In Tower Hamlets, only one such award has been made since 1999. For the future, the Freedom of the Borough Panel have indicated a preference to introduce a routine whereby a nominations process is held once every few years where one or more nominations could be considered.

### **3.3 Criteria for bestowing the honour:**

The Freedom of the Borough must be awarded at a specifically convened meeting of the Council. As the award is rarely bestowed it should be reserved only for the most exceptional persons. The award should recognise exceptional achievement or service by an individual that has, for example:

- Demonstrated exceptional achievements or service to the community.
- Made a real difference in their field of work or their community.
- Brought distinction to the borough or enhanced its reputation.
- Exemplified sustained and selfless voluntary service.
- Demonstrated innovation or entrepreneurship which has delivered benefits to the Borough.
- Carried the respect of and inspired his/her peers.
- Significantly improved the lot of those who have suffered disadvantage.
- Promoted community cohesion
- Contributed to the borough beyond the call of duty in a way that stands out above others.

### **3.4 Process and selection of nominees:**

The Freedom of the Borough Panel met a number of times over the Spring/Summer and oversaw the process for receiving and selecting

nominees. This included agreeing nomination forms, overseeing publicity and then reviewing the nominations.

- 3.5 The Panel received over 100 submissions with many strong candidates reviewed. Following a number of discussions the shortlist presented in this report was finalised.
- 3.6 The Panel would like to thank everyone who submitted a nomination. It should be noted that an unsuccessful application this time does not preclude someone from being considered in the future or for them to be considered for a Civic Award.
- 3.7 Set out below are some of the reasons given in the submissions and during discussions for why the selected nominees should receive the Freedom of the Borough. Council Members are asked to consider this as well as any personal knowledge of the work of the nominees when determining if the nomination suitably meets the criteria for receiving the Freedom of the Borough:

#### **About the nominee – Sufia Alam**

Sufia has been dedicating her time to Tower Hamlets since 1997, starting with the Wapping Women's centre, supporting the development of women from the Bangladeshi community and providing community cohesion on the estate.

She went on to found one of the first Organic community gardens on the Berner Estate in 1999 which brought the community together and encouraged women to leave their houses and engage in educational and recreational activities and programmes. This empowered them to go on to further education and into employment.

Sufia took on fundraising to sustain the women's centre and some of her biggest achievements include securing funding to develop a nursery there and improving childcare and education by making it a sure start satellite hub, even though at that time she was on maternity leave herself.

She has actively worked with the council through the years. In 2007 she supported the council's recycling scheme when she formed the Muslim women's Collective. She encouraged the uptake of recycling and trained eco champions to deliver the message to the community. This improved recycling by 40 percent and as a result the council gave free swimming to the community.

She later supported women's employment in the Nour Pugh and set up a catering social enterprise where they brought the garden produce into the community centre. Local people far removed from the job market were employed to deliver a luncheon club for elderly women who were lonely and depressed, and arranged many trips to the seaside and outside the city to improve their mental health.

Sufia now works at the East London Mosque managing the Maryam centre and the programmes at the mosque, whilst continuing to engage with the council. She represents the mosque on Tower Hamlets No Place for Hate forum, Domestic Violence forum and the tension monitoring group. She also chairs the shared life panel, volunteers time on the domestic homicide panel and is a steering group member for the Tower Hamlets Interfaith forum.

During the pandemic she has been instrumental in getting the safety message across to the community working with imams and other faith leaders. She has been a recognised partner with Barts health and steered discussions to get the vaccination centre and the London Muslim centre.

Sufia lives for her community and she likes to connect the community together welcoming all its diverse members. Her passion has been demonstrated in the creation of cultural diversity courses in the east London Mosque, encouraging more dialogue and understanding of faith and culture.

She is also an organiser for Citizens UK and has campaigned on local and National issues such as living wage and Hate crime. Sufia has trained up 40 hate crime ambassadors in front line community organisations so that women and other vulnerable victims of crime can report hate crime confidently to someone they know and trust.

She is also passionate about mental health and trained as a counsellor. She oversees the flagship counselling service at the Maryam Centre.

She manages the first Muslim Archives at the East London Mosque and is passionate about preserving history.

Sufia's drive and passion to support people and especially women makes her well known and loved in the borough. Sufia has this amazing ability to work across cultures and faiths and is fun loving and humble. She lives in Redbridge, but her heart is in Tower hamlets.

Presently Sufia is training women to become leaders through a project called Women 100 and she is the Head of Programmes and Maryam Centre at the east London Mosque. Her voluntary work still includes Leading the Muslim Women's Collective and Kids Kingdom Nursery. Last year she got a special thanks from the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge for her work on the food bank and counselling during the pandemic.

### **About the nominee – Jim Fitzpatrick**

Jim Fitzpatrick is a former firefighter with the London Fire Brigade and more recently was MP for Poplar and Canning Town and subsequently for Poplar and Limehouse from 1997 to 2019. In June 2019, he announced that he would not stand for re-election to Parliament.

He served in several ministerial and departmental roles including on farming, the environment, rural affairs and transport.

Whilst serving as the local MP he was an active campaigner with some examples of his work include campaigns on leaseholder rights and on justice for the victims of the Docklands bomb. He worked to support delivery of the new Royal London Hospital and on bringing the SS Robin to East London

He has visited Bangladesh, for example, in 2008 when he toured development projects supported by the Canary Wharf Group.

He is known to go beyond the call of duty in serving his constituents. He would invite residents to visit parliament where he would do a parliamentary tour. Many of our young children from local schools benefited from that experience by getting exclusive insight into how our government works. Doing this every Tuesday required a lot of commitment.

It was noted that during his time as MP he was a role model for many elected councillors. He was fully dedicated and committed to serving his constituents with honesty and sincerity. If he confirmed attendance at an event in the community he would always prioritise and do his utmost to attend. He treated and cared for many of his constituents like his family. He treated every resident with respect and care.

Every Saturday he would be out talking to his constituents and not wait for them to come to his surgery. He has set a very high bar earning respect from his colleagues, political opponents and most importantly, his constituents. I am sure there are many more achievements, but I think the greatest testament to him is the affection residents recount about his help and advice for them and communities across Poplar & Limehouse.

Jim has previously received the Freedom of the City of London and has been admitted as a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights (and elected to the Court of Shipwrights Livery in 2017).

### **About the nominee – Sister Christine Frost fcJ**

Sister Christine Frost has worked tirelessly in the borough for over 50 years, setting up SPLASH and Neighbours in Poplar a charity working across Tower Hamlets, where her work is beautifully summed up in the strapline, 'Today we need you, tomorrow you may need us'.

Throughout this time she has continued to defend and support community cohesion and worked with elected representatives, volunteers, NGO's, charities, local businesses and multinationals to ensure the needs of the lonely, the vulnerable and the isolated were met. Her ability to lead and inspire others is legendary across the borough and beyond. Her exemplary dedication to serving those in need has been recognised with the award of an MBE.

In our racially and ethnically diverse borough she works across all the faiths and none and puts inclusiveness front and centre of her work and that done by her volunteers. Her approach is multi-generational, encouraging hope, aspiration and ambition in the young and that vital sense of belonging with elders and those who often live alone or are isolated. She powerfully pursues issues of non-discrimination, inclusion, education, social housing which is affordable locally and adequate infrastructure services especially as the density of building increases in the borough.

She brings people together at St Matthias whether to engage in new skills, to find friends, to socialise, to volunteer, to share a meal, provide a hot dinner or breakfast for the homeless, making certain that people feel they belong.

She is a trustee of local charities but as with everything she does she just gets on with it never seeking recognition but focussed on the outcomes and serving those who need or aspire, hope or face despair.

Her response to Covid has been phenomenal. In March 2020 she brought a small group of volunteers together at St Matthias to see what could be done. She inspired a small army of volunteers and to date she has ensured that over 16,000 hot meals have been cooked and delivered to people's homes across the borough. It was initially three times a week, now it is twice. She set up a food-bank which operates twice a week, telephone befriending service, shopping delivery, collection and delivery of medication, information distribution, ensuring repairs were done, vaccination trips, no job too small or big or ever overlooked.

Her focus is as much on mental health as well as physical and ever more so during COVID. Already she is planning post COVID and post lockdown bringing people physically together through day trips to the seaside and family days, including the frail, elderly, young, and disabled.

Under her leadership Neighbours in Poplar working with SPLASH will launch the 'Digital Inclusion' programme recognising that many people young and old are digitally excluded. It will encourage and train young IT 'experts' to work with others, to visit. and teach elders the art of social media and connection so that they can operate effectively and safely online and maintain contact with family and friends.

Sister Christine is determined to ensure that the weaknesses and short comings which COVID has exposed throughout our community, especially in our Community Care System, must be addressed to ensure we find better ways of caring and serving those in need. As she says volunteers can play their part magnificently but Social Services, Councils and the government must play their vital part.

I can think of no other living individual who has served this borough so selflessly or better. She is an inspiration and a hero of our time - even though she has been doing it for over 50 years.

## **About the nominee – Sir George Iacobescu CBE**

Sir George Iacobescu came to Tower Hamlets in 1986 as the Vice President of American Developer Olympia and York, to look at a potential development on the West India Docks. In the 36 years since then he has been the most important person in the delivery of the Canary Wharf project.

At the age of 75 years he has decided to step back from his role as Chief Executive and has become Chairman of Canary Wharf this year. He has had a truly remarkable career and the freedom of the borough will be a fitting recognition for what he has done for the Borough during his leadership of Canary Wharf Group.

There is no doubt that Canary Wharf represents the biggest physical change to the Borough of Tower Hamlets for perhaps 200 years. It has generated many £billions of growth, created tens of thousands of jobs and transformed an industrial wasteland into one of the world's top business locations.

The positive impact of Canary Wharf on Tower Hamlets including all the housing, jobs and infrastructure delivered, the three big transport projects of DLR, Jubilee Line and Crossrail which would not have happened without the leadership of Sir George.

However during the process, Sir George has gone way beyond what might be expected of a developer to ensure that local residents are at the heart of the development and has promoted and funded many charitable activities.

Employing Peter Wade, one of the original community leaders concerned about Canary Wharf, as the company's first Head of Public Affairs, ensuring a strong independent voice for the community inside the company from the start of the project, and this tradition has continued. The community teams under Peter Wade and then Zakir Khan at Canary Wharf have done a huge amount of work but all under the patronage and direction of Sir George who takes direct interest and signs everything off personally.

It is difficult to list all of the things Sir George has done, driven or overseen in terms of charity and community work, and often he has specifically asked that his actions are not publicised.

Throughout the past 36 years Sir George has been true friend to the borough and one of its greatest ambassadors. He has been a constant promoter and supporter of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the Council, and local good causes. In his dealings with central and London Government he has been one of the biggest supporters of East London and has spoken many times about how proud he is that Canary Wharf is a Tower Hamlets based company.

His personal story of escaping communist Romania, working his way up from construction sites to the boardroom and supporting many charities outside of the Borough, as well as public service to Government on many boards and

committees is as an example of working hard to do good in all aspects of his life.

### **About the nominee – Abdul Aziz Sardar**

Abdul Aziz Sardar (known as Sardar) has provided leadership in, and served the local community of, Tower Hamlets for several decades. He has been a tireless ambassador for the residents of the borough. The range of work, commitment and energy demonstrated by Sardar is inspiring and typified by his long service as a local councillor, a school governor, a community leader, human rights campaigner, and supporter of charitable causes.

He was an elected councillor from 1998 to 2010, serving all the residents of Tower Hamlets and particularly the area of Bromley by Bow with total dedication and commitment. During this time, he served as Mayor of Tower Hamlets in 2003 and in various other roles within the Council, taking responsibility to improve services – particularly in terms of the community relations, including with the Police. During his time as Mayor he supported many local organisations and attended hundreds of events.

One such organisation, Bromley by Bow Community Organisation (BBCO) has praised Sardar's commitment to supporting young people in the borough, diverting them from gangs and anti-social behaviour and supporting work which engages them with positive activities within youth organisations. Sardar has also been a great supporter of the Bromley by Bow Centre, a locally based charity which provides a range of services and projects which help improve the health and wellbeing of residents in one of the most deprived areas in London. Sardar has helped to shape the organisation and has previously served as a trustee.

Reflecting his commitment to ensuring people live in good quality housing and neighbourhoods, Sardar has also been involved with the work with Poplar HARCA. He was a founding director of Poplar HARCA and helped the organisation to grow from small beginnings to a significant housing association in the borough, leading on improving housing and a range of social and economic regeneration activities.

One of Sardar's most significant contributions to the local community was the establishment of the Tower Hamlets Council of Mosques in 2001, bringing together all the mosques in the borough into one platform and creating a partnership with the local authority and the Interfaith Forum. He was elected the first Chair of the Council of Mosques and served in that position for 8 years. As Chair of the Council of Mosques he worked tirelessly to bring all faith communities together to work in partnership to discuss some of the most important issues facing the borough and its residents. His leadership of this group was really tested during the difficult times following 9/11 attacks in New York and the 7/7 attacks in London.

Following the 7/7, when a large section of the Muslim community could have been tempted to go 'into their shell' and disengage from the mainstream



community, especially with the media frenzy around Muslims in Britain, Sardar was one of the few leaders who stood up with the local Bangladeshi Muslim community to ensure that this community engaged fully with the police, other authorities and supported all the local initiatives in making sure that strong community relations survived and thrived.

In 2006 Sardar established the charity Thesis Trust UK with Canary Wharf Group and local residents. It was founded following Sardar's visit to Bangladesh whilst Mayor of the borough. He was struck by the poor provision for women and girls within the city and district of Sylhet. The trust has provided a bridge of friendship and exchange between the East End of London and North East Bangladesh. The Thesis Trust gained charitable status in 2009 and has fundraised for a range of projects, including to create a women's hostel for safe and secure accommodation at Madan Mohan College to enable girls and young women from the villages around the area to access high quality education. His commitment to social justice and human rights led him to establish Voice for Justice UK.

Sardar has proven himself to be a dedicated community worker who believes in a multicultural and multi-faith Britain and has worked tirelessly to progress these ideals in the most difficult of times. In all his voluntary engagements he has been exemplary in showing the way in how to engage with all the communities and serve people without exception here in Tower Hamlets. He has served across a number of roles and made a distinguished contribution to improve the lives of residents in the borough in so many ways over a sustained period.

- 3.8 **Process for making the Award:** It is for the Council to determine who should be awarded the Freedom of the Borough.
- 3.9 It is proposed that the Speaker of the Council, as Chair of the Freedom of the Borough Panel, will introduce the nominations as a group. The debate will then be opened up to any Member who wishes to speak on any or all of the proposals.
- 3.10 When Members have debated the nominations the meeting will move to a combined vote on all nominations (unless Members request individual votes). Each nominee needs to secure a two-third majority of those present and voting to be accepted for the Award.

#### **4. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 The Panel conducted an open nominations process. All nominations received were considered by the Panel and shortlisted based on predefined selection criteria.
- 4.2 The Panel took particular note of the importance of ensuring award nominees had worked across, or provided support to, the whole Tower Hamlets community.

## **5. OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:
- Best Value Implications,
  - Consultations,
  - Environmental (including air quality),
  - Risk Management,
  - Crime Reduction,
  - Safeguarding.
  - Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.

5.2 None specific to this report.

## **6. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER**

- 6.1 There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations within this report.

## **7. COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES**

- 7.1 The title of honorary freeman or honorary freewoman may be granted by a London borough council under section 249(5) of the Local Government Act 1972 to persons of distinction and to persons who have, in the opinion of the authority, rendered eminent services to the borough.
- 7.2 Under section 249(8) of the 1972 Act, the title can only be given by a resolution of full Council, at a meeting specifically convened for the purpose and the resolution must be passed by not less than two-thirds of the members who vote on it.
- 7.3 Under section 249(10), the admission of a person as honorary freeman or honorary freewoman is purely ceremonial and does not carry any rights.

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## **Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents**

### **Linked Report**

- None

### **Appendices**

- None

**Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended)**

**List of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report**

List any background documents not already in the public domain including officer contact information.

- None

**Officer contact details for documents:**

N/A