

Last week I was honoured to take a proposal to council to award our local St Helens and Knowsley Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust the Freedom of the Borough. I want to thank Cllr Seve Gomez-Aspron for seconding the proposal and to all those who spoke and voted to support it.

The NHS is one of the greatest achievements of any government. Care for those who need it, free at the point of need, staffed by people who day in day out go above and beyond the call of duty even in so-called normal times. Of course the last year has been anything but normal, and the pressure on the NHS has been immense.

Our local NHS Trust performed an outstanding service throughout the pandemic, caring for those suffering from Covid and other illnesses. Working together with our council and others they set up community testing across the borough and a vaccination programme which established the region's first mass vaccination site at Saints, helping St Helens achieve the highest vaccine take-up in the city region with around 100,000 people now having received at least one jab.

It's an astonishing achievement, and that's why they deserve the highest honour we can give.

Of course we can't – and won't – forget the absolutely crucial work of all keyworkers. The pandemic has shown us all what really matters and the people and services which are really vital to a caring, functioning and healthy society. Postal workers, shopworkers, delivery drivers, the logistics industry, schools, colleges and nurseries, taxi drivers, police and fire and rescue services, council staff, care home workers and many more – these are the keyworkers our society cannot do without and we thank each and every one of them.

I hope one of the biggest lessons we all learn from the past year is the depth of feeling people have for our communities and each other. Hundreds of volunteers, businesses, charities and community groups old and new all stepped up and did what was needed. And they still are.

We've all been blown away by the work of Stephen Mousdell who – with the help of fantastic generosity from local businesses – has been planting flowers around St Helens. He really is a hero. Cllr Anthony Burns, Cabinet member for Wellbeing, Culture and Heritage, met with Stephen last week to see what support we can give.

This week at Cabinet we agreed a new strategy to support and work with the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector, and this is a great example of #StHelensTogether and the new approach we're bringing to the council. We'll do all we can to work together with residents, businesses and community organisations to help St Helens build back better and recover from a very difficult year.

Best wishes to all Star readers.