

Everyone in St Helens Borough is immensely proud of the England men's football team and what they have achieved in representing our country both on and off the pitch these past few weeks. The strength and unity they have demonstrated is an example to us all. They represent the very best of us.

Sadly, after the final several of the squad were subjected to disgusting racist abuse. What is even more disappointing is that it's not the first time and it's not a total surprise – it's become a feature of social media, reflecting problems in our society that we simply can't ignore any longer.

The racist abuse has shown exactly why the players took a knee, and why some – including senior Tory government ministers right up to the Prime Minister and their friends in some right wing media – were completely wrong to encourage boozing of this simple act. For their own political ends Boris Johnson and others knowingly misrepresented why the players were taking a knee, and they refused to support the team.

As England progressed through the tournament, those who had previously said it was ok to boo them suddenly became huge fans. They wrapped themselves in our flag at every opportunity, got their staff to take photos of them pretending to cheer the team on, and the Prime Minister turned up in the Royal Box at Wembley wearing an England shirt under his suit jacket like a child who's had PE last lesson and can't be bothered getting changed for the journey home.

We see through them.

Our council stands shoulder to shoulder with the players against the appalling racism they've faced and has always and will always fully support the team in taking a knee and in fighting for equality.

We are more determined than ever to do everything we can to challenge racism, but we all need to do this as individuals too. We each need to commit to standing up to it. We need to call out friends and colleagues if and when we encounter racist 'jokes' or comments, and we need to report it if we see it online. St Helens Borough is no place for hate.

The Euros was a brilliant tournament, and aside from England's fantastic achievements on and off the pitch one of the best things about it was the return of fans to the ground. Live sport just isn't the same without supporters, and I'm sure we'll see more evidence of this on Saturday when more than 40,000 head to Wembley for the Challenge Cup Final. I'll be there with my eldest son and my mum and dad, for the first game we've been able to attend since just before the very first lockdown. I can't wait!

Saints already hold the women's Challenge Cup and it would be a unique achievement to win the men's and hold both at the same time. It's been far too long since we last lifted it, and while it won't be easy I'm sure that the players – and the fans attending in huge numbers for the first time in well over a year – will give it their all. Come on you Saints!