

Brighton & Hove City Council

Council

Agenda Item 3

Subject: Honorary Freedom of the City

Date of meeting: 18 December 2025

Report of: Chief Executive

Contact Officer: Name: Anthony Soyinka
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Ward(s) affected: All

For general release

1. Purpose of the report and policy context

- 1.1 This report recommends that the Council confers the title of Honorary Freewoman of the City on Emily Kenward and confers the title of Honorary Freeman of the City on Mesfin Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorghis.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Council admits Emily Kenward and Mesfin Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorghis to be Honorary Freewoman and Freeman of the City of Brighton & Hove respectively.

3. Context and background information

- 3.1 The title of Honorary Freewoman or Freeman is awarded to people who have, in the opinion of the council, rendered eminent service to the city.
- 3.2 Emily Kenward has made an outstanding and lasting contribution to the life of our city by founding the befriending charity Time to Talk Befriending, supporting over 2,500 older, lonely and socially isolated people since its start and establishing a group of volunteers to help run the charity. Emily set up Time to Talk Befriending in December 2013 after hearing elderly people saying they felt 'invisible, forgotten and alone'.
- 3.3 Time to Talk Befriending charity covers the Brighton, Hove and Sussex area. Great care is taken to match lonely elderly people with suitable volunteers, ensuring they live near enough to meet each other easily. Resulting in each person having a special friend to combat the isolation and loneliness of old age. On average, the charity supports 620 people every year.
- 3.4 Emily Kenward founded the charity and has also established a second group of volunteers who help to run the organisation and take part in the day-to-day activities. The telephone is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Recipients say a friendly and helpful voice always telephones back with help, sympathy and reassurance. Volunteers also organise regular tea parties where the elderly can meet each other. Participants have said

they look forward to attending, enjoy it at the time and remember it with pleasure afterwards.

- 3.5 The charity sends out a quarterly newsletter and holds a monthly lunch at Woodingdean Community Centre run entirely by volunteers. There are special group meetings for those with special needs and memory workshops for those with dementia as well as improvement meetings to ensure the charity's offer is constantly evolving and listening to its users.
- 3.6 Testimonials from people who are part of the befriending network note how powerful the work of the charity is, helping them feel less alone and giving them activities to look forward to, noting friendship is a priceless gift.
- 3.7 This proposal recognises Emily's exceptional contribution to the city by positively impacting the lives of the people of Brighton & Hove, with a Freedom of the City award.
- 3.8 Emily Kenward will be the second woman to hold the title since the authority was created in 1997. Following the removal of Aung San Suu Kyi, Mary Clarke was the first woman to be awarded the honorary title of freewoman of the city in December 2023.

Mesfin Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorgis (nominated by Timothy Nichols)

- 3.9 Mesfin Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorgis has made an outstanding and lasting contribution to the life of our city. Throughout the 37 years he worked at the Council he was instrumental in championing race equality and was an outstanding public servant who passionately supported and promoted local democracy.
- 3.10 As a Corporate Director, Principal legal adviser and Monitoring Officer to the Council and East Sussex Fire Authority, he was diplomatic, wise and skilled at problem solving and working with elected members, senior officers and partner organisations.
- 3.11 Abraham's journey from seeking asylum in Britain in 1982 to becoming the beating heart of our civic life represents everything our city and country should offer to those seeking sanctuary. His advocacy for Black and Global Majority communities and his role as an equality champion and link with the council's Black and Minority Ethnic Workers Forum has made a difference at the Council and in the city.
- 3.12 Abraham's career included work on complex housing interventions, such as, making a control order and subsequent compulsory purchase order of a nineteen bedsit slum in the ownership of a private landlord. This was the most complex and serious housing intervention a local housing authority could make at that time and directly positively impacted the lives of residents in the city.
- 3.13 Following the formation of the unitary authority, Abraham was responsible for drafting constitutions for both committee-based and cabinet-run councils.

As principal legal adviser and Monitoring Officer to both the Council and the Fire Authority, Abraham provided legal guidance across multiple administrations. He advised minority and majority Administrations across the political spectrum. His work covering constitutional development and legal oversight within local government ensured all residents could have their say in local democracy enabling Brighton & Hove to be the vocal, active, democratic forum it is today. His incredible contribution to local democracy has been well documented: From refugee to leader in law: “I fled with nothing but the clothes on my back” | The Law Society.

- 3.14 This proposal recognises Abraham’s exceptional contribution to the city by positively impacting the lives of the people of Brighton & Hove and enhancing the city’s reputation with a Freedom of the City award.

4. Analysis and consideration of alternative options

- 4.1 On 10 July 2025 the Council adopted a new policy for awarding the honorary title of the Freedom of the City. Publication of the transparent and clear policy which explains how nominations for the Freedom of the City can be made aligns with the Council Plan priority to ensure our services are easy to access, that customers are kept informed and that their views are listened to. The nominees in the report are the first to be made under the new policy.
- 4.2 Nominations will next be considered in Autumn 2026. The full details of how to make a nomination and the criteria and timelines for doing so can be found on the Council website.

5. Community engagement and consultation

- 5.1 The invitation for nominations was publicised on the Councils website and social media channels following the adoption of the new Policy in July 2025. The Leaders of the Political Groups in the Council reviewed all nominations received by the deadline in October 2025.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 There are no direct financial implications. The costs arising from the award of this title is expected to be met from within existing resources.

Name of finance officer consulted: Ishemupenyu Chagonda
Date consulted: 10.12.2025

7. Legal implications

- 7.1 Section 249 (5) The Local Government Act 1972 (as amended by the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009) enables the councils of cities to confer the status of honorary freeman/freewoman on "(a) persons of distinction and (b) persons who have, in the opinion of the council, rendered eminent services to the local area". The award of the title of Honorary Freeman has to be done by a resolution passed by not less than two-thirds of the Members voting at a meeting of the council specially

convened for the purpose. The Freedom of the City does not confer rights other than to attend formal Council meetings.

Name of lawyer consulted: Elizabeth Culbert

Date consulted: 09.12.2025

8. Risk implications

- 8.1 There are no risk implications arising from the report.

9. Equalities implications

- 9.1 Freedom of the City is a civic honour that can be granted by the Council to deserving recipients and is used sparingly to maintain the significance of the award. The award of the title of Freewoman of the city to Emily Kenward and Freeman of the city to Mesfin Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorghis recognises their contribution to the lives of people in Brighton and Hove and reiterates the Council's values of equality and inclusion and mission to deliver a Better Brighton & Hove for All. It was previously noted that the way the Freedom of the City had been awarded historically may not have been as open and inclusive as it should be. The new policy adopted on 10 July 2025 now ensures the process is more inclusive and transparent, inviting nominations through a clear process and timescale for consideration by Group Leaders and recommendation to full Council.

10. Sustainability implications

- 10.1 There are no sustainability implications arising from the report.

11. Other Implications

- 11.1 There are no other significant implications arising from the report.

12. Conclusion

- 12.1 The conferral of the honour of Freedom of the city is for the council to determine. Given their contributions to the City and their strong local connections, it is recommended that the Council awards the title to Emily Kenward and Mesfin Abraham-Ghebre-Ghiorghis.