

The alternative honours: Sunday Times heroes of 2021

Until the discredited honours system is reformed, the year's unsung stars can be content with our recognition— no political donation required. Tom Calver reports



Clockwise from top left: Ann Keen, Jo Whiley, Joaquin Garcia, Keri Warren, Clova Court and Dr Azhar Farooqi

[Tom Calver](#)

, Data Projects Editor

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Every six months, committees of civil servants and independent experts

pore through thousands of applications to decide who will receive an honour from the Queen.

Under the leadership of Sir Tom Scholar, the permanent secretary to the Treasury, a list is compiled of who has “made achievements in public life” and “committed themselves to serving and helping Britain”. Anyone can be nominated for an award in the Queen’s birthday and new year lists. Yet the reasons why an application succeeds are kept secret.

Of the 1,239 chosen last Christmas, 803 were recognised for work in the community. But some high-profile appointments, critics argue, call into question the integrity of the process. Others warn that the system gives an advantage to those willing to pay.

Mark Llewellyn-Slade, a public relations expert, runs Awards Intelligence, a company that advises people on how to be nominated for honours. Its website says: “The average success rate is estimated to be just 10 per cent (1 in 10). Our success rate is over 65 per cent (nearly 2 in 3).”

He said: “Other than accusations of ‘cash for honours’ by wealthy political donors on a few occasions, I don’t believe the honours system is being misused.”

In a year when sleaze, second jobs and cash-for-honours scandals have rocked the public’s faith in British institutions, what could a better honours system look like?

John Penrose, a Conservative MP who is Boris Johnson’s anti-corruption “champion”, wants the system replaced with a points-based “UK talent list”. He said the existing honours gave too much weight to those in government jobs.

“The system should match the number of public, private and charitable sector jobs in our economy, so people in government jobs aren’t over-represented while less visible ones get overlooked,” he said.

Transparency was vital, he added. “The points would have to be won because of concrete, visible achievements that everyone can see and measure, so the playing field can’t be tilted by politics or favouritism either. That might mean the best educators would be the heads whose schools improved the most. The top entrepreneurs would be people who built the biggest firms, or created the most jobs. The leading philanthropists would have given the biggest donations. Money for political parties shouldn’t count.”

One day the honours system may be decided through data, but there is not yet enough publicly available information to make those decisions. Instead The Sunday Times has this year turned to its own specialists, who have been writing about the unsung heroes of sport, science, healthcare, justice and the arts all year.

Not all will agree with our choices; nor is the list exclusive. But it is a record of who we think should be celebrated this year — and, crucially, why.

The recipients of our 2021 People’s Honours include role models who have inspired children, and campaigners from a range of backgrounds who have fought to make Britain fairer and safer. Many have made enormous personal sacrifices to save lives and livelihoods. While some are prominent, many have been quietly working away during the pandemic.

Tim Atkins



Tim Atkins has worked at Porton Down defence laboratory since 1996

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

Atkins, 48, is a senior fellow at the Porton Down defence laboratory in Wiltshire, which became famous for quickly identifying novichok as the nerve agent used in the Salisbury poisonings in 2018. Many of his scientists are analysing up to 500 Covid test samples a day to design new techniques to save lives, and since November have researched the Omicron variant.

Jen Beattie

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The Arsenal and Scotland footballer was diagnosed with breast cancer in October 2020. Most would have taken time out for treatment — in this case, surgery and radiotherapy. Instead, the centre-half scored five days after her diagnosis, and has encouraged others to stay active while being treated. This year the 30-year-old has used her platform as a footballer to raise awareness and “start conversations” about getting checked and treated for breast cancer.

Clova Court



Clova Court with her trophy for winning the Sunday Times Grassroots Sportswoman of the Year Award
ANDREW FOX FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

An award-winning athlete, Court represented Britain in the heptathlon at the 1992 Olympics. Now she spends her evenings coaching athletics at Tipton Sports Academy near Dudley, in the West Midlands, alongside her day job as a behaviour and inclusion manager. She has worked hard to take young people off the streets and into athletics. The 61-year-old arrived in the UK aged 17 from Jamaica, and was recognised at The Sunday Times Sportswomen of the Year awards in November for being a role model to black children in a deprived area.

Azhar Farooqi



Dr Azhar Farooqi at his practice in Leicester

ANDREW FOX FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

When Dr Farooqi, 62, realised hundreds of his highest-risk patients were turning down the Covid-19 jab, the Leicester-based GP phoned them up one by one to find out why. Remarkably, 70 per cent of the patients he rang booked an appointment on the spot. Farooqi, a GP for 35 years, worked overtime and weekends with his staff, ploughing through hundreds of names. His approach was extended to 50 other surgeries.

Jamie Frost



Dr Jamie Frost's tuition site went viral when schools were closed

THE VARKEY FOUNDATION

Dr Jamie Frost, 34, is a maths teacher at Tiffin School, a grammar in southwest London. He failed his 11-plus but went on to study maths at Oxford, turning his back on investment banking to become a teacher. His tuition site, which is free, went viral when schools were closed and had millions of page views, with more than seven million teaching resource downloads. Last year he was given a Covid hero award by the Global Teacher Prize for helping thousands of children during lockdown.

Lissie Harper



PC Andrew Harper with his wife, Lissie

THAMES VALLEY POLICE/PA

In August 2019, PC Andrew Harper was called to reports of a quad bike theft in Sulhamstead, Berkshire. The 28-year-old tried to stop three teenagers, but was dragged along a lane for more than a mile and died of his injuries. His childhood sweetheart, Lissie, has spent two years campaigning for tougher sentences for those who kill emergency workers after the three teenagers were jailed for manslaughter. In November ministers agreed to Harper's law, which imposes a mandatory life sentence for anyone found guilty of killing an emergency worker.

Frances Haugen



Frances Haugen after giving evidence to MPs in October

TOLGA AKMEN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A data engineer at Facebook, Frances Haugen quit in May with devastating documents she leaked to The Wall Street Journal. They suggested Facebook knew its products were damaging to teenagers' health and that the company was failing to curb violent and terrorist content. The Iowa-born Haugen, 37, testified to MPs in Britain in October, saying that the social media platform “unquestionably” stoked hate.

Rafi Hottak



Rafi Hottak at the Field of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey
GEOFF PUGH/REX

Hottak is a former interpreter for British troops who arrived in the UK in 2011 and has spent the past decade helping others who were denied sanctuary. This year his work mattered more than ever with the chaotic withdrawal of British troops in August. He compiled the names of about 200 interpreters, many of whom were airlifted out. Hottak, 35, who lives in Birmingham, was granted citizenship last year.

Lydia Ina



Lydia Ina
MEN MEDIA

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Ina, 79, from Manchester, has fostered more than 300 children over 23 years. She started fostering after looking after a friend's children, and signed up to do it full-time when she realised she wanted to help as many children as she could. She came to Britain 50 years ago from Nigeria and has opened an orphanage there.

Krish Kandiah



Krish Kandiah is a social entrepreneur
HOLLIE ADAMS/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES

In August, Kandiah set up the charity Afghan Welcome to co-ordinate the relocating of Afghan refugees. Volunteers were mobilised to find clothing, GPs and tutors for children. Kandiah, 50, a Christian and social entrepreneur, lives in Oxfordshire.

Ann Keen



Ann Keen campaigned for a government apology to unmarried women who were forced to hand over their babies

BBC

When she was just 17, Ann Keen was sent to a mother and baby home in Swansea after becoming pregnant. She was forced to scrub steps and was scolded by the staff, who reminded her daily that she was selfish and bad. Eight days after giving birth, she was forced to give up her baby son for adoption. This year, the 73-year-old former Labour MP has led calls for a government apology for the 250,000 unmarried women forced to hand over babies during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In September, parliament's joint committee on human rights announced an inquiry. Keen, a former district nurse, was the MP for Brent and Isleworth for 13 years.

Mark King



Mark King set up the Oliver King Foundation after the death of his son

LIVERPOOL ECHO

King's 12-year-old son Oliver died of cardiac arrest during a school swimming lesson in 2011. He had an undetected heart condition, and King believes his son would still be alive if he had had access to a defibrillator. Through his Oliver King Foundation, he has distributed more than 5,000 defibrillators to schools and sports clubs. In September, Gavin Williamson, who was then the education secretary, said he would look at changing regulations to ensure all schools had defibrillators.

Claire Mercer



Claire Mercer

DANNY LAWSON/PA

Mercer has been a tireless campaigner against smart motorways since her husband, Jason, was killed on the all-lane-running M1 smart motorway in June 2019. He was 44 when he was hit by a lorry. Mercer, 45, has instructed a law firm to bring a judicial review against the government. In November she organised a protest as part of her Smart Motorways Kill campaign group, which involved carrying 38 cardboard coffins to Parliament Square to represent the number of people killed between 2014 and 2019. The Commons transport select committee has now asked for all-lane-running motorways to be paused for five years.

Figen Murray

Murray is the mother of Martyn Hett, a social media manager from Manchester. In May 2017 Hett, 29, was murdered in the Manchester Arena suicide bombing. Since then, Murray, 60, has campaigned for all public venues to be legally obliged to safeguard against a terror attack. “Martyn’s law” was adopted in government proposals in February.

Darren O'Brien

A station manager for Southeastern railways, O'Brien created the Rail to Refuge scheme, which offers survivors of domestic abuse free travel to a refuge. He was inspired by a Channel 4 documentary that featured a woman who was offered a place in a refuge but could not afford the ticket for her and her children. O'Brien at first convinced Southeastern to cover the cost of fares. In April 2020, as victims became trapped at home during lockdown, the scheme was adopted nationally. In its first year 1,348 victims, including 362 children over the age of five, travelled to a safe refuge.

Jimi Olubunmi-Adewole and Joaquin Garcia



Jimi Olubunmi-Adewole and Joaquin Garcia

BPM MEDIA/HOLLIE ADAMS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

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At midnight on April 24, both men were crossing London Bridge when they heard a woman in the Thames shout: “Help me, help me, I can’t swim.” They jumped in. A coastguard and the police were able to rescue the woman and Garcia, 21, but Olubunmi-Adewole, 20, drowned. Described as selfless and pure-hearted by friends, he was his family’s breadwinner. More than 158,000 people have signed an online petition calling for a memorial plaque to be placed in Postman’s Park in central London, which is dedicated to those who have died saving others.

Jihyun Park



Jihyun Park helps North Korean defectors to settle in Britain

ANTHONY DEVLIN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Park became the first North Korean to be a political candidate in the UK when she ran to be a Tory councillor in May, standing in Greater Manchester on a platform of “freedom, justice and happy family life”. She lost, but inspired many and has vowed to run again. Park, 53, who arrived in Britain 14 years ago, survived a North Korean labour camp and two failed attempts to escape. The mother of three has helped fellow North Korean defectors adapt to living in the UK.

Andrew Richardson



Andrew Richardson coached Emma Raducanu to victory at the US Open

ELSA/GETTY IMAGES

Richardson, 47, is a former tennis player who first crossed paths with Emma Raducanu when she was aged just 11. He coached Raducanu at Bromley Tennis Centre in south London, near her home. He was a quiet and calming presence throughout the 18-year-old's astonishing US Open victory in September, but was then abruptly let go by Raducanu in favour of someone with more professional tour experience.

Kevin Sinfield and Rob Burrow

In December 2019 the Leeds Rhinos player Rob Burrow was diagnosed with motor neurone disease and given two years to live — yet the 39-year-old has continued to fundraise and build awareness about the disease. In November, his friend and teammate Kevin Sinfield, 41, ran 101 miles from Leicester to Leeds in less than 24 hours, raising more than £2 million for the MND Association.

Kathleen Stock

After a three-year campaign of harassment, Stock resigned as professor of philosophy at Sussex University in October. Her views on gender were deemed controversial by some students: Stock, 49, is a “gender-critical feminist”, meaning she believes that biological sex matters. The abuse she received led to police recommending security cameras. Stock has become a free speech figurehead.

Jon Tolley

Tolley, 44, owns Banquet Records, a tiny record store in Kingston-upon-Thames, southwest London. Despite the live music sector being ravaged by Covid, his team staged an astonishing 131 gigs in 2021, playing host to, among others, Arlo Parks, Manic Street Preachers and Gary Barlow.

Andrew and Jenny Turner



Andrew and Jenny Turner with their son Mikey

When their son Mikey was born, Andrew, 60, and Jenny, like all parents at the time, were given a child trust fund. Mikey, now 18, has a life-limiting condition and needs round-the-clock care in a residential care home. His parents wanted to use Mikey's fund, which had grown to £5,000, to buy a special bike, but could only access it if he had his own bank account and could prove his identity, something not possible for many learning disabled children. The Turners pushed the Ministry of Justice for a rule change and won in November.

Nick Wallis



Nick Wallis crowdfunded his journalism

The freelance journalist has dedicated his career to reporting on the biggest miscarriage of justice in legal history. Wallis, 48, came across the Post Office scandal in 2010 when he met a taxi driver who told him his wife had been jailed for a crime she did not commit. Through his crowdfunded blog, Wallis helped tell the stories of hundreds of sub-postmasters who were falsely accused by the Post Office of stealing. The government is holding a public inquiry into the scandal with hopes that the victims will finally be compensated.

Keri Warren

As head of children's services in Neath Port Talbot, Keri Warren, 55, turned around a "risk-averse" failing department that had one of the highest rates of children in care in the country. She has fought to keep families together, including a dying mother whose children were being taken away.

Jo Whiley



Jo Whiley with her sister Frances

JO WHILEY/BBC/PA

In February the BBC Radio 2 DJ, 56, expressed frustration that she had been offered a Covid vaccine ahead of her younger sister Frances, who has a learning disability and diabetes. Frances, 54, had been left fighting for her life after contracting the virus in her care home. It prompted a successful campaign for people with disabilities to be prioritised with vaccines.

Naomi Wiseman

The family law barrister at has been providing vital legal advice to campaigners working to end child marriage and virginity testing. Wiseman, 38, scored a victory in July, when the government pledged to ban virginity testing and child marriages. Both laws have since been voted in by MPs.

Additional reporting: Shanti Das, Hannah Al-Othman, Sabah Meddings, Larisa Brown, Ben Spencer, Louise Eccles, Dipesh Gadhher, Rebecca Myers, David Collins, Sian Griffiths and Nicholas Hellen

Do you agree with the awards or do you think someone else should be honoured? Tell us in the comments.