

Open Letter from the Mayor No13

I have stopped saying 'Merry Christmas'. Instead I use the phrase: 'Have the best Christmas you can under the circumstances.' Many of us are unravelling our Christmas plans at the last minute. It's a shame the Government didn't tell us earlier, which would have avoided the heartbreak; but at least the dilemma is out of our hands.

It was the right decision, given that the variant of Covid-19 seems to be much easier to catch, although it is no more virulent in terms of symptoms and deaths. Reassuringly, it would appear the new strain is picked up by the current tests and the vaccine is effective. The number of Covid-19 admissions at St Richard's is increasing and we need to be extra careful as the end promised by the vaccine is in sight. But the dark months of January and February are still ahead of us.

One sector will be celebrating this Christmas: the turkeys. It reminds me of my grandfather, 'Pops' as we called him. He was great character and frequented Henley-in-Arden market to bring home a 'bargain', usually to the despair of my mother. One year, by waiting until the end of the auction, he managed to buy the biggest Christmas turkey you have ever seen. It was so big it would not fit into the oven. The body and each leg had to be cooked separately. In those days there were few fridges and no freezers. Mother would never waste food, so we had turkey in various guises - soups, stews, pies and curry - for at least three weeks into January.

According to the Covid-19 vaccine calculator, I have, at 71 and with no underlying health problems, between six and nine million in front of me in the queue and it will be some time in February before I have the jab. Mother said everything comes to him who waits; and we know patience is a virtue. Here in Chichester we are all going to have to be patient, as other areas with high infection rates will probably take precedence. To reduce the number of deaths and avoid overwhelming the NHS it is vital that at least 80 per cent of the over-70s are vaccinated; so when you are called do not hesitate. I know it is an old-fashioned word, but it is our *duty* to protect ourselves and others. Rest assured, the vaccine is proven safe and effective. All being well, although infection rates may still be high in the general population, by Easter we will have begun to see the end of the pandemic.

The city centre retailers will have suffered greatly through the lack of footfall. Despite their valiant efforts - and the Christmas tree and lights being some of the best we have seen - many people were just too worried to return. December is a key trading month and the future of many businesses is uncertain. Already one in five shops is empty. The economic recovery will be counted in years, not months, so 2021 will be tough. Our community, which stepped up so magnificently during the lockdown, is needed even more now, to

support those who will be left in very difficult personal circumstances as a consequence of the pandemic on the economy.

At least the vaccine means we can now plan for the future. The Mayoress and I are booking our holiday for September in Yorkshire and hope to have our grandson from Japan here for the summer. We are starting to plan that party I promised you all many months ago.

However, it remains even more critical that we all stick to the rules and support each other through the coming weeks. What a disaster it would be, with the end in clear sight, for us to fall now.

The Mayor's Hardship Fund (Telephone: **07740 621812**) recognises the need in the next few months and is stepping up its fundraising, so if you can contribute, or need help, please contact me. The initiative has benefited many whom the virus left with nothing.

Finally, my sincere thanks for all your cards and good wishes. Please stay safe, well and strong; be optimistic for 2021; and, in the meantime, *have the best Christmas you can under the circumstances.*

Richard Plowman, Mayor