

Open Letter from the Mayor No. 18

I had a telephone call from a lady saying that she had cancelled her holiday abroad for the fourth time and what was I going to do about it? I explained that my powers as Mayor of Chichester are limited and that her complaint might be better directed towards the Prime Minister.

March 23rd was the anniversary of the first lockdown, I stood for the minute's vigil at the Cross and, as we have done every Thursday, we lit up both the Cross and the Council House for the frontline workers and the NHS. At 8pm I stood on my doorstep and joined the neighbours with candles and lights. I remembered all the families who had lost loved ones and were unable to be there to say that last goodbye. I remembered the poignant moment when I wrote to you in May last year and when the number of deaths in the UK from Coronavirus passed 27,000 - the population of Chichester. We are now approaching five times that number.

By coincidence, 27,000 vaccines had already been administered at the Westgate Centre when I was officially invited by the NHS to look around the facility. What an excellent and efficient operation it is, with such wonderful staff and volunteers, all of whom took great pride in what they were doing. I thanked them profusely on your behalf and I think the NHS team have forgiven me for putting pressure on the organisation to secure a vaccination site in central Chichester. Over the next few days, while there is a temporary gap in vaccine supplies and with the first nine priority groups almost complete, they are undertaking a re-evaluation. Some of the staff will concentrate on inoculating those in care homes and the housebound

In my last open letter I wrote that I had been talking to the NHS about a central GP unit for those Chichester residents in the first four priority groups, particularly the over-80s living in the city who found the journey to Selsey and Tangmere quite challenging. Because of logistics and vaccine supply, the NHS has decided that those of you in the relevant groups must return to the centre where you had your first jab. The Selsey and Tangmere centres will remain in place.

If travelling to your appointment poses problems, the NHS offers a free transport scheme. To book, you should call **01444 275 008** from Monday to Friday between 10:00-13:00 and 14:00-17:00. The travel coordinator will arrange transport, including any additional needs such as wheelchair-friendly vehicles. All transport providers have signed up to a COVID-19 safety policy to ensure that every precaution is in place for a safe journey.

I have been reassured that there are good supplies of the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines for the second doses and of course both are very effective, despite all that you hear from the EU countries! For the over-50s there seems now to be the extra treat of another

vaccination in September. Today (March 29th) marks the next stage on the road map, with up to six allowed to meet outside and more freedom to travel - but not to go on holiday abroad. I think the holiday in September at our favourite Yorkshire cottage is going to be OK.

Despite the return to school, the levels of infection in Chichester are now very low indeed, but in the rest of the country they have plateaued and are still too high for comfort. The all-important figures for hospital admissions and deaths are, thankfully, much reduced. So I return to my initial question of a year ago: How are you feeling? No longer strange, perhaps, but tired, weary and longing for more freedom and to see family and friends again. Maybe a little more optimistic about the future? There is certainly a sense of relief among those who have had the vaccine and, more generally, that together we have come through the worst of the pandemic.

I was talking with a friend in Priory Park over our first *latte* in several months. We agreed that Chichester had proved an ideal place in which to see out a pandemic. This must in large part be down to the excellent St Richard's Hospital and our great Community. The year has produced many heroes, but how you define a hero? I believe it is someone who is prepared to put his or her own life on the line to save others, particularly in time of war or great adversity. It seems appropriate, therefore, that in what is undoubtedly a time of great adversity Vincent Gray's sculpture of Chichester's own hero, Admiral Sir George Murray, with Horatio Nelson, is to be unveiled on Saturday (April 3rd). Its plinth bears the inscription in Nelson's words: 'Murray or None'. It is a piece which, together with the same sculptor's John Keats in Eastgate Square and John Gillespie's 'Unity' bench in East Street, lifts our spirits and shines like a light in our City Centre.

A reminder that the **Mayor's Hardship Fund** (Telephone: **07740 621812**) continues to recognise those on whom the pandemic has had a devastating financial impact. If you can contribute, or need help yourself, please contact me.

Finally, on a merrier note, we are working hard on 'Over the Rainbow', the party I promised for Priory Park on 30th September.

Richard Plowman, Mayor