

Mayor of Chichester: Councillor Richard Plowman

## An open letter from the Mayor – 14 January 2021

In my last letter I noted how the dark months of January and February were ahead of us. None of us imagined how much darker they would prove. We are all now genuinely worried as the number of deaths from Covid-19 reaches new records. This time, with St Richard's under pressure as never before, the pandemic seems much closer and real. The vaccine is our hope, but the roll-out in Chichester seems to be glacially slow. We are going to have to stay safe, vigilant and patient – a combination I first deployed under different, but no less alarming, circumstances.

It was November 2000 and I was returning round the coastal path at Kaikoura in New Zealand. As I reached the headland, I found the narrow path completely blocked by a fur seal, a species whose nearest land relative is the grizzly bear. This one was a bull, some 7ft long and weighing around 180 kgs, with a ferocious set of teeth. Bull seals attack if you obstruct them. To make matters worse, it was mating season.

Steep cliffs rose up on the land side of the path. I had no mobile phone in those days, and on my trek had met no one. Retracing my steps was not an option. I tried climbing the cliff, but, halfway up, realised I was probably putting myself in even greater danger. I sat and pondered what to do. From this vantage point I could at least watch the path, which, apart from the seal, was clear. I would just have to be stay where I was and hope he would move. After what seemed an age, but was probably about an hour, he moved closer to the main colony. I scrambled down and, after an Olympic sprint, was safe. To this day the incident gives me a tremor.

For us all, relative safety is at hand, in the shape of 'the jab'. The pandemic will pass. For the moment, though, vigilance and patience are strongly recommended.

Unfairness makes me cross. Many of you told me that friends in other parts of the country had already been inoculated. In Chichester we were in the dark. Yet, throughout the pandemic, our community and local authorities had achieved the gold standard. Almost everybody was sticking faithfully to the rules, so Chichester had one of the lowest infection rates in the country. We trusted that the vaccine would be properly, speedily and evenly handled; and that, with our track record and a population boasting a large proportion of the most vulnerable, our city should be near the front of the queue - not, as it seemed, the back. It was time to ask some questions.

Thanks in large measure to the coverage in the *Chichester Observer*, reflecting the level of public concern, a meeting was arranged with Adam Doyle, head of the NHS Sussex Health and Care Partnership, who is leading the county's vaccine roll-out. The attached NHS document is the result and is being widely circulated. It helps to explain what is going on.

Mr Doyle acknowledged that the roll-out for Chichester was slow and that communication had been unsatisfactory, but the matter was complex. I told him that the first Information from the NHS, via the County Council, had not even mentioned Chichester, which in itself gave cause for concern. In surrounding areas - particularly Hampshire - the Pfizer vaccine had been rolling out for two weeks.

The first shipment to Chichester was on January 4<sup>th</sup>, for the staff at St Richard's. St Richard's may be responsible for the roll-out to care homes. The first vaccine for use on the top-priority group will be rolled out on 15<sup>th</sup> January in Selsey. Appointments are expected to start on Monday. I know many of you are concerned how you will be informed of your appointment as we know the post has been extremely erratic. You will be telephoned on instruction from your GP, given your appointment time and venue. Do make sure you have your NHS number to hand. Transport will be made available to those who need it. Telephone the WSCC hub **033 022 27980**

The big question was: why Selsey, which is nine miles away, and not somewhere in Chichester?

The eight-strong Chichester Alliance of Medical Practices (ChAMP) chose to sign up to the central NHS scheme. Other GP practices decided to roll out the vaccine themselves and these have made a much faster start. Under the NHS scheme only one inoculation centre was designated for Chichester and most of the Peninsula. Later it was decided to add Tangmere, which should be ready by Thursday (14<sup>th</sup>).

I understand that the ChAMP decision was determined by the issues surrounding the Pfizer vaccine, which needs storage at -70C, has a very short shelf life and is quite tricky to use. At the planning stage it was the only one to have been registered. A large number of local alternative venues, including the Council House, were rejected as none could fulfil all the specific requirements. The GPs had a very difficult decision to take and we should try to understand this. The GPs have also been under a lot of pressure due to the pandemic.

The logistics regarding the large mass-inoculation centres, even the GP-led ones, are complicated, but they have the advantage of rapid through-put (300 per day was specified). Apparently, capacity was not an issue and, on the basis of 300 per day; the first four categories can be inoculated by mid-February.

I believe there are around 5,000 people in Chichester City in those categories. At 71, with no underlying health problems, I am in one of the last of the four priority groups, so will be in a good position to see how well the process is going. The main issue will be supplies of the vaccine and how quickly they reach the centres. Reassuringly, the logistics are mainly in the hands of the military.

It is a fluid situation and may well change with wide availability of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is much more stable and stored in a normal fridge. Mr Doyle has promised a weekly meeting on progress and its reports and tables will be published.

I still find the situation disappointing, but at least we have a clearer picture of what is happening. In the meantime, the rate of infection here is of deep concern, so please take maximum precautions and stay at home as much as possible.

**The Mayor's Hardship Fund** (Telephone: **07740 621812**) continues to recognise those on whom the pandemic has had a devastating financial impact and is stepping-up its fundraising. If you can contribute, or need help, please contact me.

Spring cannot come soon enough, but patience . . .as we know it is a virtue.

For now, please stay safe, well and strong.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Plowman', with a horizontal line underneath.

Councillor Richard Plowman  
**The Mayor of Chichester**

P.S. I have just heard that the first appointments have been made