

CHICHESTER



CITY COUNCIL

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Mayor of Chichester: Councillor Richard Plowman

An open letter from the Mayor – 5 May 2021

Today is my last as your Mayor. We have journeyed together through the strange, difficult and sometimes frightening times of this pandemic. I have been really proud of how our Chichester Community has stepped up to meet the challenges of COVID-19, with its unexpected twists and turns, the lack of certainty and the impossibility of planning ahead. How we missed our family and friends. I asked one lady how she was coping and she said: 'I keep on thinking I am in a bad dream and I will wake up in the morning.' I knew exactly how she felt. Occasionally, watching the TV news, I thought I was trapped in the worst type of 'B' horror movie.

In my first letter, at the start of the 2020 lockdown, I wrote: 'Together we can beat this and our Community in Chichester will emerge even stronger as a result.' The coming together of many residents' associations, churches and voluntary organisations as the Chichester Community Network (CCN) has been a success and will continue.

In the third letter, at the end of April, I reported the start of a CCN initiative called the Mayor's Hardship Fund, to help those people who had no money and resources to cope with the lockdown. It only took a week to set up, with the Chichester Welfare Trust as administrators and myself as the main point of contact. The City Council immediately made available £5,000 and, thanks to the generosity of many of you, funds swelled to over £11,000. More than 70 people, who had nowhere else to turn, have been given some assistance. I know that at least three were contemplating suicide. Talking to them was a humbling experience and made me realise how fortunate I was in comparison.

At the time of that early letter it was clear to me that the vaccine, a cure or mass testing were the keys to managing the virus and we were in for the long haul.

The fourth letter, in May, urged the use of face masks in confined spaces and on public transport. Meanwhile, the Government was saying that the science for wearing a mask was weak. Not for long.

By the sixth letter, in June, lockdown was easing and we were able to meet up with friends and family in the Park. By the seventh, in July, the Mayoress and I had managed our first haircut in months. (Little did we know!). Deaths in the UK had reached 45,000, compared to just 1,000 in Japan where my son and family are living. In hindsight the first lockdown should have started two weeks earlier and finished two weeks later. Seventy-two per cent of the population were willing to stay in lockdown longer if it meant reducing the infection rate. It was the first of many miscalculations by the Government. Remember when the scientists were saying that 20,000 deaths would be a good result? Today the total stands at more than 127,000; in Japan it is a little over 10,000.

Twinned with Chartres, France and Ravenna, Italy



By the autumn, and letter 10, the summer of greater freedom was over and the second wave hit us. The Government rules seemed confusing, and the clumsy Tier system was to prove ineffective. By November, and letter 11, we were back in lockdown, with the prospect of a respite at Christmas, but the Kent variant was spreading fast and had almost reached Chichester. By letter 13, in December, festive arrangements had to be cancelled, but we were promised the best Christmas present: the vaccine. That brought hope.

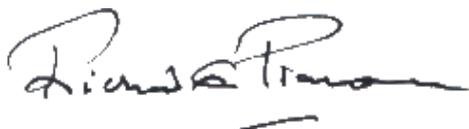
In January, when I wrote letter 14, we had entered the darkest and most difficult months of the pandemic in the UK. The hospitals, even our own St Richard's, were near capacity. The race was on to get as many of us vaccinated as possible. The NHS and the military did a brilliant job. We found out that, despite having always had one of the lowest infection rates in the country, Chichester was left behind in the vaccine rollout. In what was now the third lockdown, the people rose up and as a result we managed to get a vaccination centre at Westgate. Soon, as mentioned in letter 18, we had not only caught up; we were doing well. And in letter 19 I could pass on the most welcome news: St Richard's had no Covid-19 cases in its wards. We had emphatically turned the corner.

The Chichester Community, working together and following the rules, has come through the worst of the pandemic. There will still be challenges, particularly in the form of economic and long-term mental health problems. However, I remain optimistic and am planning that thank-you party I promised way back in letter No. 9.

My two-year duty as Mayor is done and, together, I believe we have made a difference. Thank you once again for all your support and encouragement. My mother and 'Pops' would be proud of us.

As always, 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