

It began for me on Sunday, 8th March at 9.39pm.

An email arrived to alert me that our first positive Covid case had been confirmed in a patient in the hospital just behind you.

Like you, I'd been watching the news about this new virus that had emerged thousands of miles away.

And suddenly it was here.

In our borough, In our home.

How had it got here? Who had it? Who else was exposed? What did it all mean?

Questions that kept spinning in my mind throughout the night.

The next few days were a blur. Organising. Planning. Communicating. Decision making.

The only modelling that existed suggested we'd need 4,000 ventilators for our part of London. We had 17.

Long, long days. Worrying. Processing. Fearing what was to come.

I've been the leader of this incredible borough since 2018 and have experienced a fair number of difficult events and conversations in that time.

Individual deaths, fires, suspected terrorism.

But even in the early days, this felt darker, heavier, more terrifying than anything I'd ever known. Just a few days later, I remember sitting in my office, as the World Health Organisation declared that Covid19 was now officially a pandemic, spreading across the world.

Meetings became more frenetic and people became more panicked as the scale of the virus became clear.

I remember walking through Powis Street and looking at the growing, snaking lines outside shops, the fear filled faces of our residents, their bags soon filled with whatever was left in the shops.

I remember leaving the office after a 15 hour day and reaching Sainsburys to find empty supermarket shelves, row after row of unfilled space where food had once been plentiful.

And I remember seeing the angry, tired faces of shoppers the next morning, forcing their way through the door for whatever was left.

Shopworkers terrified as the angry mob surged through the store like a raging sea. Moving too loudly, and too quickly, to hear the desperate voices of those caught up in the storm, who would end up with nothing.

And then the volume of the world turned down.

The skies no longer filled with roaring engines,

the roads no longer rammed with overflowing buses.

Lockdown. Silence. Emptiness.

Leading our borough is a privilege I can never adequately describe, but in those dark days and moments it was terrifying. But soon, in amongst the darkness and the heaviness, bright lights began to emerge. And as the days become longer, the challenges more complex, those lights have only grown bigger and shone more brightly.

All of you, the stars that have guided us through this pandemic to today.

The first huge challenge we faced was mobilising volunteers, helpers of all shapes and sizes who were desperate to see what they could do for their community. Some furloughed, some fearful but all fearless in their determination to help.

Volunteers like Chris Mannion who is here with us today.

Chris, and hundreds of others, joined our community hub. Others joined the Greenwich Mutual Aid Group, established by an incredible woman called Cathy Wang, who had never volunteered in her life.

Since 27 March, Chris, Cathy & our Greenwich army of helpers have given us over 52,000 hours of volunteering time, almost 6 years of continuous service in less than 160 days.

Can I ask you to please join me in showing your appreciation for Cathy, for Chris and all of our extraordinary volunteers.

An immediate challenge we faced was finding new ways of working to help those people in need. And whilst we're all zoomers now, you can't get virtual medication or ask a robot to deliver your shopping.

Our community hub was set up almost overnight, a network of organisations and partners with Charlton Athletic Community Trust at the core. The trust do truly inspirational work across our borough, leading our short breaks programme for disabled children and a lot of our public health work.

In a matter of days, they changed their entire operating model and were out on the front line from day 1. Football coaches became personal shoppers, swapping the training ground for the supermarket. The community pharmacy people had collapsed, leaving hundreds of people without medication.

Jason, DJ and the team stepped up to every challenge and delivered. Nothing was ever too much trouble. They've taken over 100,000 calls for help since 27<sup>th</sup> March. One of those calls was from Emma. Emma was in Australia and her mum and dad were here. Not only were they shielding, but her mum had Cancer and had run out of chemotherapy pills.

Within 12 hours of calling from Australia, the Trust had got Emma to the hospital for the blood test she needed to get her chemotherapy pills. A literal lifeline for Emma's mum, and many more, throughout the whole of lockdown.

Can I please ask you to show your appreciation for everyone who has worked in and supported our community hub.

It's sometimes difficult to remember what life was like before Covid, but when we look back we know that food poverty was on the rise. In 2010, there were 29 foodbanks operating in this country. After a decade of austerity and savage cuts to public services, you won't be surprised to hear that today there are more than 2000.

But even with poverty rising so sharply, the supply or provision of food had simply not been an issue for most people before Covid.

As panic and fear spread from the middle of March, shops were stripped bare of almost everything. In those early days, a tin of tomatoes was probably more valuable than a bar of gold.

Getting food to people was probably the biggest challenge that we faced. With thousands of people shielded, and thousands more unable to leave the house, meeting the most basic of human needs was essential.

The Greenwich Cooperative Development Agency has been in the business of supporting our communities to be healthy & sustainable since 1982 and never have they been more valuable to our borough.

Claire, Jane, Mel, Jas, Gary & the whole GCDA team used their local networks to start feeding those in need. Cooking up thousands of meals for our older residents, our children who'd just left care.

Ensuring local businesses supported our effort and stayed in business as a result, Distributing thousands and thousands of foodboxes across our borough.

It has been the most extraordinary effort.

If you ever get the chance, take a visit to Woolwich Common Community centre. It is a place that warms the soul. A place that shows the power of people and what can be achieved by working together.

Can I ask you to show your appreciation to the incredible team at GCDA for everything they have done for our most vulnerable residents during this time.

I have learnt during these past few months that there will always be more people to thank, and never enough time to do so. The incredible team of officers I'm lucky to have at the Council have risen to this challenge in ways I could only have hoped for, the very best of public service.

Last night, I was honoured to share this stage with Angela Helleur, the Chief Nurse at the Lewisham and Greenwich NHS trust, who has led the nursing team here in Woolwich through the challenge of their career. And while the clapping

has stopped, we must ensure the increased respect, admiration and support we have seen for our NHS continues to grow. Nye Bevan said that the NHS will last as long as there folks left with the faith to fight for it. I truly hope that after everything we have seen, that faith is bigger and stronger than ever before.

We owe so many people an immeasurable debt of gratitude for what they have done for us.

This pandemic has changed the world we live in for good. The things that we value, and the things that we don't, have never appeared so clear. I'm incredibly proud that we are here, at the first outdoor arts festival in the Country. Real people, at a cultural event. Not a zoom invite in sight.

The fight is on to rebuild and recover, and we must never forget that culture, in all of it's forms, is an essential part of our lives. A vehicle that brings us all together and allows us to reflect, to enjoy, to celebrate the togetherness that has got us here today. 158 days since the lockdown began.

Today,

I stand here in awe. Of the phenomenal individuals and organisations that we are so blessed to have here in Greenwich.

We mourn here, in memoriam, for everything and everyone we have lost.

And we stand here, together, in the hope that better days are ahead of us.