

COVID-19 Commemoration Speech from Mayor Rokhsana Fiaz OBE

Friends, colleagues, and most importantly, the people of Newham.

The Covid-19 pandemic did more than just change our lives; it laid bare the deep-seated injustices that we have been fighting for generations.

We stand here today not just to remember a date in a calendar, but to hold space for the families whose kitchen tables still have an empty chair, and whose hearts carry a weight that words can barely reach.

In Newham, we didn't just witness the pandemic. We were at its epicenter. We bore the heaviest of burdens.

The Weight of Our Loss

The weight of our loss was a heavy one.

During that first, terrifying wave, Newham recorded the highest Covid-19 death rate in the entire country.

At one point, we had the highest mortality rate because of the deprivation that exists in our borough: a death rate of 144 of our residents for every 100,000.

These weren't just "statistics."

They were our elders who held our community's wisdom.

They were the frontline workers who lived in overcrowded housing because they couldn't afford anything else.

They were our neighbours, parents, and friends.

And our residents from across all our diverse communities

Each one of those lives mattered.

And their loss was not an accident of fate: it was a reflection of the systemic health inequalities that I have vowed to dismantle.

As your Mayor, I say to you: we remember them with love, and we honour them with our determination to change the system that failed them.

But in our darkest hour, Newham showed the world what "People at the Heart" really looks like.

We showed our Resilience in Action

When the shops went bare and the vulnerable were trapped at home, we didn't wait.

We established the Newham Food Alliance, a massive mobilisation that ensured no one in this borough went hungry.

We turned our community centers and schools into hubs of hope.

I want to pay tribute to our extraordinary NHS staff at Newham Hospital and across our Barts Health Trust.

And the London Ambulance Service frontline drivers.

The Police and the London Fire Brigade and all our dedicated frontline carers.

You worked until you were exhausted, then you worked some more.

Alongside you were our "unsung" heroes: the cleaners, the porters, and the delivery drivers, many of whom are the backbone of our diverse borough.

And our teams at the Council: especially our registrar and mortuary service.

As a Council, we took radical steps:

- We moved our rough sleepers off the streets and into safe, dignified accommodation.
- We launched our Covid-19 Health Champions—over 400 residents who volunteered to debunk misinformation and save lives in dozens of languages.
- We provided direct financial support to families who were pushed to the brink by the "No Recourse to Public Funds" rules.

Building a Fairer Newham

When the vaccines arrived, we didn't just open clinics; we opened doors of trust.

We worked with our faith leaders - our Imams, Pastors, and Priests - to make sure that every resident, regardless of their background or immigration status, felt safe coming forward.

We proved that in Newham, our diversity and our people is not a challenge to be managed; it is our greatest superpower.

But let me be clear: Recovery is not enough.

To simply go back to how things were before 2020 would be a disservice to everyone we lost.

WE ARE NEWHAM.

That is why we launched our Covid-19 Recovery Strategy with a singular focus: Building a Fairer Newham.

We are tackling the housing crisis that made the virus spread so fast.

We are investing in our young people through our "Year of the Young Person" legacy.

We are demanding a "Wellbeing Economy" where your health is not determined by your postcode.

As we honour and remember those loved lives lost, the lives still impacted and the health and well-being of our young and future generations...

We must remember Our Sacred Duty

Today, we reflect with sadness, yes. But let us also reflect with a fierce, renewed gratitude for the spirit of Newham.

We saw mutual aid networks spring up on every street.

We saw neighbours who had never spoken before become lifelines for one another.

That is the Newham I know. That is the Newham I am proud to lead.

We recommit ourselves today to the lesson this pandemic carved into our hearts: Every life in Newham must count equally.

We will never forget.

We will continue to build.

And we will do it together.

Thank you: for being here as we mark this coming Sunday's National Covid-19 Day of Reflection today and here in Newham.

And thank you for your ongoing love and kindness for each other and our borough.

WE ARE NEWHAM.