

Alister Jack welcomes coronavirus vaccine rollout to Scotland

By Alister Jack, Secretary of State for Scotland (originally published in the Scottish Mail on Sunday 06/12/20)

Magnificent news for us all that the rollout of the first Covid-19 vaccine to be approved in the western world begins here in the UK.

Inch by painful inch, countries everywhere have been struggling to find an exit from the misery inflicted by this wretched pandemic and now we have a great, tangible leap forward thanks to brilliant scientists who have harnessed the power of their knowledge to bring us a safe vaccine which offers the chance to finally slacken the grip of Covid-19.

It is great news too for the Union. We know the 300-year-old links which bind us as one nation state have a great past, but here now is proof that the self-same Union offers us a great future too.

For make no mistake, all four nations which form the United Kingdom are benefitting equally from our combined strength as one country. From our furlough scheme, Covid testing, vaccine procurement, and now the efforts to get the vaccine to where it is needed, the UK Government has been working tirelessly to support all parts of the country through the pandemic.

The UK Government took advance steps to secure the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine which will be made available to frontline medical staff and some of our most vulnerable citizens from tomorrow.

The figures are astonishing, and a clear indication of the heft this country can bring to bear amidst a crisis of terrifying proportions. The initial shipments from Belgium will amount to some 800,000 doses and Scotland will quickly get 65,500 of those.

Backing those stellar scientists to the hilt, the UK Government has secured nearly 360 million vaccine doses, representing the world's largest and most diversified vaccine portfolio. This means we have the best chance of securing speedy access to other vaccines once they finish their essential checks for efficacy and safety.

Right from the start, the UK Government has strained every sinew to aid the global search for a vaccine, funding more international research than any other country of comparable size.

We are starting to see real returns on that £230 million investment. Pfizer/BioNTech have delivered a vaccine with an outstanding 95 per cent effectiveness rate and no serious safety concerns – now approved by the regulator. There will be more vaccines to come from other sources – with the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine likely to join us soon on the front line of the Covid fight.

And of course, securing, approving and paying for millions of doses of safe vaccines is one thing – delivering them quite another altogether. The mass vaccination programme we are undertaking now is unlike anything we have seen before and here again the power of the Union is to the fore.

Doses will be distributed fairly across all parts of the UK according to population share. As a result Scotland will be able to vaccinate and protect priority groups such as the clinically vulnerable and frontline health and social-care workers.

It is wonderful that the UK Government has made experts from the forces available for us here in Scotland to help ensure the vaccines reach priority groups swiftly.

It has been heartening to see co-operation on this great endeavour across the United Kingdom. The UK Government has involved the devolved administrations at every stage – in the certain knowledge that full co-operation between Westminster, Holyrood, Stormont and the Senedd is the best for every citizen of these islands.

The conquest of Covid – for that is what we are aiming for – is a real display of what we can achieve together. The Union is firing on all cylinders, delivering fairly in each and every corner of the country.

Of course, we have many miles to go before we can rest, before we can declare Covid under control. That means not relaxing our guard just yet and still obeying the rules around hygiene and social distancing.

Though the approval of this first vaccine is perhaps an early Christmas present, this festive season will still – unfortunately – be lower key this year.

Yet we can now look forward to better times not so very far ahead, and to a time when Covid restrictions can at last be eased off.

I am confident people will ignore any false stories and embrace, at the first chance, the opportunity to protect themselves and their loved ones from a truly dreadful illness.

For my part, I will gladly roll up my sleeve and have the jabs, when my turn comes.

Meantime, we must concentrate fully on the task of rebuilding an economy laid low by an invidious enemy. Here too the Union has proved its worth, with thousands kept in jobs and countless businesses supported by the broad shoulders of the UK and the deep pockets of our Treasury.

Rather than the inward-looking and diminished country the Brexit naysayers said we risked becoming, Britain has in these last months shown not just amazing solidarity within our borders, but maintained engagement with our many friends around the world. The Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, developed with UK Government funding, is to be made available to countries in the developing world on a not-for-profit basis in perpetuity. Britain remains a beacon of

light in an often dark world.

Many people have made huge sacrifices this year. Much has been done, but we know much remains to be done.

However, let's take a moment to savour this week's good news. We are, in all four nations of our fantastic Union, looking forward to a bright future.