

New Year message from Scottish Secretary Alister Jack

It has been another challenging year and while Covid continues to demand much of us all, I am optimistic for 2022.

We are working flat out to ensure that we have the best protection possible against the Omicron variant – but we shouldn't forget that we are in a much better place than we were 12 months ago.

This time last year, the vaccination programme was in its infancy and results uncertain.

Now the UK is to the fore in the global struggle against the virus, with the vast majority of us safer thanks to vaccines and – after the Herculean efforts of the NHS over the past couple of weeks – booster jabs too.

I want to pay tribute to the scientists who made this possible by developing, innovating and testing; to the magnificent staff of the NHS and the volunteers who worked alongside them; and to the British military personnel who toiled tirelessly amid the greatest national effort of peacetime.

And thanks are due not least to you, for the sacrifices you've made, for looking out for your neighbours, and putting up with huge restrictions on your lives. Thank you, most importantly, for rolling up your sleeves for injections that might well have saved your life and those of others around you.

We still have a way to go, and I encourage anyone not yet vaccinated or boosted to get their jabs now. It's never too late to play your part in the fight against Covid.

Though it is natural to look back at this time of year, we must also look forward.

Recovering from the pandemic is our priority. The UK Government's unprecedented package of support – including 18 months of furlough – did a huge amount to protect businesses and livelihoods.

A third of Scottish jobs were supported by our furlough and self-employed schemes, helping insulate families as the economy rode out the storm.

Now we are Building Back Better. The UK Government's £1.5 billion City Deals programme continues at pace. And we have announced more than £191 million in grants for communities in every corner of Scotland, as we drive to level up across the UK. On top of that our Plan for Jobs is getting people into work and helping them progress.

Much is done, yes, but much more remains to be done.

We will bring Freeports – which offer the conditions in which high-tech, high-end jobs can flourish – to Scotland.

The Union Connectivity Review is a visionary blueprint designed to transform the lives of Scots by bringing our transport network up to a standard that is both fit for today and ready for tomorrow. By smoothing the flow of people and goods by road, rail, sea and air, we can deliver a better connected and therefore more prosperous UK.

One beacon of light this year was COP 26, the United Nations' conference hosted in Glasgow, which was huge in scale and vision. It brought together the world in a spirit of joint endeavour to tackle the other great crisis of our times – the climate emergency. The UK will continue to lead the world on tackling climate change during our year-long presidency of COP.

Scotland can lead the world in this green revolution. We're investing massively in renewables such as wind and tidal, while at the same time helping the North Sea industries, on which so many rely on for their livelihoods, transition to new technologies and opportunities.

Though no one can be precise about when the misery of Covid will pass, I am sure that – together as one United Kingdom – better times are ahead for all.

I wish everyone a happy, healthy and prosperous 2022.