

Secretary of State thanks people of Wales in New Year message

Secretary of State for Wales Simon Hart has thanked everyone in Wales for the sacrifices they have made during the past year.

In a New Year Message, the Welsh Secretary has looked back over a year which has been dominated by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, but which ended with the approval of two vaccines for use across the UK – potentially hastening a return to normal life.

Mr Hart also looked ahead to 2021, which will be Wales' and the rest of the UK's first outside the European Union for decades and pointed to some of the opportunities it brings as the UK Government seeks to build back better from the pandemic.

This has been a year like no other and I want to thank everyone in Wales for the sacrifices they have made during extremely challenging times.

It's a year when every single person in Wales had to cope with the restrictions placed on our lives by the pandemic, including many who have also lost their jobs.

These extraordinary events have highlighted the best of us – from our health workers in the front line of the pandemic to our Armed Forces helping build field hospitals and administering tests. But they have also shown us just how far people the length and breadth of Wales will go to help look after their communities, whether that's providing help and support for others or simply by following the regulations so we can defeat the virus as quickly as possible.

There was fantastic news to close the year with the approval of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine. Every additional vaccine which becomes available takes us a step closer to our normal lives. With production of this vaccine taking place in North Wales it will put Wales on the front line in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although it is hard to imagine at the moment but I am also confident that in 2021 we have much to be optimistic about. Christmas Eve saw the end of long months of negotiations and years of debate as we delivered on the result of the 2016 referendum and sealed a trade deal with the European Union – the most expansive deal that the EU has ever agreed.

For the first time in almost 50 years, there is now an opportunity for people, businesses and governments to do things very differently. From now on we can take full advantage of the fantastic opportunities available to the UK as an independent trading nation, following on from the progress that we made in 2020 when we signed free trade agreements with over 60 nations.

In Wales, every part of the county is now covered by a growth deal. These represent huge opportunities to help rebalance the Welsh economy with the UK and Welsh Governments working hand in hand alongside local authorities and business to unleash the full potential of our different regions. Whether it is our green ambitions, digital connectivity plans, freeports schemes or smaller projects linking all corners of Wales, the next few months are going to be about job creation, recovery and livelihoods.

We've achieved so much across the UK with one arm tied behind our back, yet the scale of our ambition for Wales has only just begun. With an end to the pandemic now in sight, the UK Government will continue its work to level up the nations and regions of the UK, creating jobs, delivering prosperity and strengthening the United Kingdom of which Wales is such an integral part.