

Welsh Secretary looks to year ahead on St David's Day

In the week we celebrated St David's Day, we can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel after two years of collectively fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. Vaccines – many manufactured in Wales – have been a game-changer, playing a big part in allowing society to open up again. Children are back in school, town and city centres are getting busy again and the Six Nations rugby is taking place in front of big crowds at last.

At the same time as we have celebrated our Welsh national day, our patriotism and freedom, we can reflect that these values are ones that both we and the people of Ukraine share and hold dear.

As Ukrainians defy President Putin's aggression, the UK has committed £40 million of humanitarian aid among a comprehensive package of ongoing support.

As the Prime Minister has said, the world has witnessed awe-inspiring displays of bravery and heroism from the Ukrainian people and the UK will not turn its back in Ukraine's hour of need.

Closer to home, we marked this St David's Day by appointing Wales' first Veteran's Commissioner. Colonel James Phillips will enhance support for veterans in Wales, be an independent voice on veterans' issues, and champion their interests. The Armed Forces have a long, important tradition in Wales and our ex-servicemen and women and their families deserve recognition and respect throughout the duration of their service and beyond.

As we look ahead into 2022, the UK Government's priority is to continue our recovery from the pandemic and to level up every part of the UK. The people of Wales share a profound sense of pride in their communities, and rightly so. Industrial Wales powered the UK through the industrial revolution and its seaside towns and mountain scenery are beloved by tourists from across the world – not least the slate landscape of north west Wales which became a Unesco world heritage site last year. Wales is a unique place with an incredible history and even greater potential.

But not everyone in Wales has the same opportunities as each other or with people in other parts of the United Kingdom.

As a government we recognise that this is wrong and our levelling up plans are already seeing us work with councils, communities and the Welsh Government to reverse the geographical inequalities that have plagued Wales and the wider UK.

This includes making great strides in gigabit broadband and 5G rollout, and moving research and development spending out of the south east of England so other areas have the funding they need to prosper.

Every part of Wales is now covered by four Growth Deals – North Wales, Mid

Wales, Swansea Bay and Cardiff Capital Region – which are also key to our levelling up ambitions. The UK Government has invested £790m, alongside the Welsh Government and local authorities to create thousands of jobs in the coming years.

And we are funding communities directly – providing investment through the Levelling Up Fund, Community Renewal Fund and Community Ownership Fund. Late last year more than 175 projects right across Wales received more than £165 million in direct funding for schemes. These range from transforming the seafront and promenade in Aberystwyth, revitalising the Montgomery Canal and reopening the Muni Arts Centre in Pontypridd, to rejuvenating Haverfordwest Castle, among dozens of projects right across Wales.

And this was just the first round of funding. Many more projects, places and communities will benefit further by the end of 2022.

Across the economy the UK Government has set a course for recovery, prosperity, jobs, growth and a green industrial revolution. We have a huge job to do and we are focused as a government on getting the UK back on course. But we want to work with Welsh Government and see them deliver on their plans for the people of Wales which is why we have provided them with the largest ever settlement from the Treasury, £18 billion a year, so they can deliver devolved services like health, education and flood protection.

We know that the increasing cost of living will strain many household budgets which is why we have our Plan for Jobs, which has seen youth unemployment at a record low, and the £200 discount on bills this autumn for domestic electricity customers.

Covid-19 and the cost of living difficulties are still with us, but we can nevertheless look forward with optimism. Defence remains a vital employer in Wales and the MoD is making a £320m investment in the Army estate in Wales, including the retention of Brecon Barracks and basing a new regiment in Caerwent by 2028, while there will also be a new RAF aircraft contract for Broughton.

And just this month the Ministry of Justice announced it would be moving 500 jobs to locations across Wales. The UK Government wants to make full use of the talent and potential of the Welsh workforce and relocating more civil service roles helps us achieve that.

We are facing an uncertain time with our focus currently very much on the terrible situation in Ukraine. But I hope the year ahead will be one of optimism and recovery for all our communities.