

Welsh Secretary's thanks for continued efforts in Covid-19 fight

Secretary of State for Wales Simon Hart has thanked people across Wales for their continued sacrifices in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic in the past year.

In a New Year Message, the Welsh Secretary has looked back at a year in which the ongoing global pandemic continued to be a huge factor in everyone's lives as, but which also saw the roll-out of the UK's ground-breaking vaccination programme.

Welsh Secretary Simon Hart said:

I want to thank everyone in Wales for the sacrifices they continue to make in the pandemic. People the length and breadth of the country have once again displayed the best of Wales in 2021 – whether it's helping to look after their communities, providing help and support for neighbours and family or simply by following the regulations.

The magnificent vaccine programme has set us on the road to defeating the virus and I also thank everyone who has been a part of that effort – from those who developed and produced it, to our health workers in the front line of the pandemic and the Armed Forces who continue to give vital assistance in its roll-out.

The incredible effort to roll out the vaccine – and recently a booster – in 2021 has brought much greater safety to large numbers of the population and it undoubtedly means we are in a better place than 12 months ago. We still have a way to go, and I encourage anyone not yet vaccinated or boosted to get their jabs now.

Supporting the UK through the pandemic has been our priority and the world leading procurement and roll-out of vaccines was only the beginning. 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 Welsh jobs, around 500,000 jobs were supported by our furlough and self-employed schemes, helping insulate families from the economic storm.

We will continue to work alongside the Welsh Government to protect lives and livelihoods in Wales for as long as the pandemic continues.

The Welsh Secretary also reflected on the UK Government's delivery for Wales in 2021, and looked ahead to 2022 as the UK Government seeks to build back better from the pandemic and deliver its key levelling up agenda.

He said:

It may be difficult to imagine at the moment but I am confident that in 2022 we will have much to be optimistic about.

In Wales, every part of the country is now covered by a growth deal. These significant economic schemes represent huge opportunities to help re-balance the Welsh economy. The UK and Welsh Governments are working hand in hand, alongside local authorities and business, to unleash the full potential of our different regions.

Levelling up is at the centre of the UK Government's ambitions and Wales stands to benefit hugely from our plans. We launched the Levelling Up Fund, Community Renewal Fund and Community Ownership Funds last year and over 175 projects right across Wales – a higher proportion than the other UK nations – have already been given more than £165m in direct funding for schemes ranging from improvements to road infrastructure in the Rhondda to money for Gwynedd locals to help buy their local pub.

After these funds were announced in the Autumn Budget I was able to visit several of the projects which had received funding. The plans I saw at the Muni Arts Centre in Pontypridd, at the tourism sites of the Dee Valley and at Cyfarthfa greenhouses in Merthyr, which I visited with Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove, were incredibly exciting. Communities across Wales will be transformed over the coming years as this funding kicks in.

Wales is one of the traditional homes of the UK's Armed Forces and I was delighted to see the announcement that number of defence personnel based in Wales would be increasing. The relocation of the Welsh Cavalry to Monmouthshire was hugely significant and welcome news. I was also proud to announce the creation of a Veterans Commissioner for Wales, to be recruited in 2022 and bringing Wales in line with the other UK nations who already have commissioners in place.

The UK this year hosted COP 26, the United Nations' conference in Glasgow, which brought together the world to tackle the other great crisis of our times – the climate emergency.

Wales can lead the world in this green revolution. We are investing massively in renewables such as wind and tidal off Anglesey and in the Celtic Sea while businesses across the country are transitioning to new technologies and opportunities.

Whether it is our green ambitions, digital connectivity plans, or our commitment to bring at least one freeport to Wales, the coming year will be about job creation and recovery. We can approach 2022 with optimism. We have negotiated trade deals with Australia, New

Zealand and others with more to come. Welsh farmers will be able to export lamb to the United States for the first time in 30 years and a large area of north west Wales enters the New Year as a UNESCO world heritage site poised to feel the benefits of a higher profile and increased tourism after its magnificent slate landscape was rightly recognised.

Though we cannot be certain when the pandemic will finally be behind us, we are clear in the scale of the UK Government's ambition for Wales. We will continue our work to level up the nations and regions of the UK, prioritise health and the vaccines and boost jobs and prosperity throughout the United Kingdom.