

Claire Coutinho MP – January 2021

It was the privilege of my life to be elected as your Member of Parliament just over a year ago. From dealing with the pandemic, securing more money for pothole filling, and protecting the Surrey Hills, to assisting with local businesses and supporting the Chancellor with the Covid-19 economic response in my role as PPS to HM Treasury, last year was certainly a busy start. As a newbie MP, still learning the ropes, I wanted to make myself as accessible as possible. I carried out virtual constituency visits, held remote surgeries, and hosted Facebook Live Q&As. But this year I hope to meet many more of you in person.

Unfortunately, the exponential rise in coronavirus infections recently meant that the Government had no alternative but to implement a stronger lockdown and a national stay-at-home order last week. These new strains of coronavirus are spreading up to 70 per cent faster than previous transmissions, and they risk the NHS being overwhelmed within just 21 days.

I know that being back under these restrictions is really difficult to take for everyone. However, there is a clear difference between this week's announcement and those made last year. The Government is now rolling out the biggest vaccination programme in British history, which has already seen us vaccinate more people than the rest of Europe combined. Over a million have received their Covid-19 vaccinations, including at East Surrey's own vaccination centre.

Indeed, the NHS expects to have offered the first vaccine dose to everyone in the four top priority groups by the middle of February. This group of 13.5 million people account for almost 90% of the tragic coronavirus deaths we have seen over the past year. Once they have all been vaccinated, we will be able to lift many of these restrictions and provide a clear timetable for the normality we all crave.

It is also no exaggeration to say that Britain has led the charge on the vaccination front. The Government has secured access to over 350 million vaccine doses through agreements with seven separate developers. We

were the first country in the world to have a clinically approved vaccine for supply. We should not take that for granted. It has been nothing short of a scientific triumph and an example of global coordination at its best.

However, despite the optimism that the vaccines provide, I know that businesses will be feeling a great deal of pressure yet again. I am delighted that the Chancellor decided to issue top up grants for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses – worth up to £9,000 per property – to help them through these next few weeks. A £594 million discretionary fund has also been made available to support other impacted businesses. This is in addition to £1.1 billion in further discretionary grant funding for Local Authorities, Local Restriction Support Grants worth up to £3,000 a month, and the extension of the furlough scheme.

At my end, I will continue my work with the East of Surrey Local Economic Taskforce that I set up last June with Crispin Blunt, our neighbouring MP. We meet fortnightly with Surrey County Council, Tandridge District Council, Reigate and Banstead District Council, the LEP, and the Federation of Small Businesses to drive a local economic plan to support jobs, skills, investment and much needed infrastructure.

Finally, I know that 2020 brought unprecedented challenges. It is very much my hope that 2021 will bring unprecedented recovery. After four and a half years of division, I was pleased that Britain secured a free-trade agreement with the European Union – the first deal based on zero tariffs and zero quotas that the EU has ever agreed. I very much look forward to continue working hard for local residents over the coming months to ensure that we can embrace the many opportunities that 2021 provides for East Surrey and Global Britain alike.

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