



## A Better Way Forward: towards a Zero-COVID Island

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After the success of bringing our daily COVID case numbers in Northern Ireland down to single digits in June after three hard months of lockdown, has come the realisation in October that what we had experienced was just the first wave, and the second wave is already upon us. There are policy choices to be made.

What is stopping us driving down the virus is the perception that the health of the economy and the health of citizens are in opposition. A policy choice of living with the virus at low and contained levels was made, but this has been like driving with a foot constantly on the brake, lurching forwards, putting on a local brake for clusters, a more generalised brake when R (the reproductive rate of the virus) goes above 1. Business is suffering, education is suffering, the population are tiring of the constant changes, and we have been unable to stop the increase in case numbers under this policy. So neither the economy, nor health, are benefiting.

We know that there will be more economic and health damage as we deal with the second wave, and that economic damage will be compounding as it strikes already weakened sectors. We also know that this cycle will happen all over again for successive waves.

Waiting for a vaccine is not a solution – we cannot be sure when an effective vaccine will become available, nor how effective it will be, nor how quickly we can vaccinate the population given the global pressures. Whatever we do now therefore must be sustainable in the medium to long term. Herd immunity is also not a solution – it would take years to reach herd immunity within health service capacity, at the expense

of the vulnerable in society who cannot be effectively or fairly isolated.

### COVID elimination

The alternative policy choice is COVID elimination, aiming for a Zero-COVID Island. This policy of aiming toward complete elimination has been successfully adopted in New Zealand, Australia, Taiwan, South Korea and a number of East Asian countries. Such a policy posits that what is good for health is also good for the economy. Once community transmission has been eliminated, business can open up and life can return to normal. Vulnerable members of the population, older people and those with health conditions which put them at higher risk of severe COVID, can participate fully in society and family again.

Being an island is not a prerequisite for COVID elimination, but is certainly advantageous. Northern Ireland already has a memorandum of agreement with the Republic of Ireland regarding COVID control measures, allowing an All Island approach. The United Kingdom would need a temporary imposition of between-country borders, like Australia has done between its States, while COVID elimination is achieved. Strict testing and quarantine measures for travellers for countries which have not reached Zero COVID status would be needed indefinitely while the pandemic continues, and this is likely to become more straightforward as quicker, cheaper testing methods become available.

COVID elimination requires a number of months of severe social distancing measures (the length of time depending on the severity of the measures). These measures were tried

and tested during the first wave, but we have learned better where to target efforts, and this time can accompany these measures with a fully functioning and rapid find, test, trace and isolate (FTTI) system, and economic measures to support people isolating and support those whose livelihoods have been placed most at risk.

As we face the future, a COVID elimination strategy allows us to put financial support in place with an endpoint in view, and allow business more certainty about the future to help them weather the storm and plan for the future, knowing that business confidence will return.

Zero COVID provides the population with a clear goal, which can be decentralised to local areas. The challenge will be in public consultation and communication, since it is the last phase, when case numbers are very low but elimination has not yet been achieved. That requires persistence. The strategy needs to be backed up by total transparency (while preserving confidentiality) regarding the test and trace results.

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A Zero COVID strategy for Northern Ireland is supported by two independent Scientific Advisory groups. The Independent Scientific Advisory Group (ISAG) for COVID-19 ([www.isagCOVID19.org/](http://www.isagCOVID19.org/)) are a voluntary and independent expert group from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and abroad, advocating a SARS-CoV-2 (the virus causing COVID19) elimination strategy for the island of Ireland. ISAG believes that this strategy should be informed by science, and developed openly with people living on the island through discussion. Independent SAGE, the independent scientific advisory group in the UK ([www.independentsage.org/](http://www.independentsage.org/)) has been advocating for a zero COVID strategy since July 2020. It is a strategy which has gained the endorsement of the NI Assembly Health Committee in July, but with the changing conditions since, now needs urgent attention and support across the political spectrum.