

Stephen Reicher is a professor of Social Psychology at the University of St Andrews. He advises both the UK and Scottish governments on their response to the coronavirus crisis. Here, he writes for The National on the need for a co-ordinated UK-wide Zero-Covid approach to the pandemic.

What is a "Zero-Covid strategy"?

A Zero-Covid strategy is based in a refusal to believe in any "acceptable" level of Covid infections and deaths in the community and a relentless effort to drive it down.

The first ambition is to reduce to no more than one new infection per million people per day (control) at which point the infection is sufficiently scarce to begin to ease restrictions with confidence. But the ambition is to reach a state where there is no domestic transmission (elimination) and we can then remove restrictions with confidence.

How do we reach Zero-Covid?

Success depends upon a co-ordinated combination of measures which include:

- Cautious and careful easing of restrictions, a step at a time and checking the impact of each step before moving on
- Working with localities to identify, respond and support people through any upsurges in infection
- Enhanced testing and screening (especially of those coming into the country) along with support to allow everyone who is asked to self-isolate to do so without detriment
- Systematic procedures to ensure workplaces and other spaces are Covid-Safe before reopening
- Strict maintenance of distancing, hygiene and mask wearing measures
- Systematic attention to the inequalities which affect the transmission and impact of infection
- An open and honest dialogue with the public, supported by systematic communications as to the dangers of Covid, the rationale for response measures and clarity around exactly what people are asked to do.

Is Zero-Covid realistic?

We need to distinguish between a Zero-Covid elimination strategy, which is about stopping domestic transmission, from an eradication strategy, which is about removing the virus from the whole world.

Eradication is very difficult. But there are multiple examples of eliminating even the worst infectious diseases, even without vaccines from specific territories – such as Ebola in many African countries.

As for Covid-19, Scotland is not that far from elimination and other countries, such as Taiwan and New Zealand, are already there.

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THE NATIONAL

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So Zero-Covid is realistic, it can be achieved in Scotland, but it would be much easier if it were a co-ordinated strategy between all four nations of the UK.