

UK nations plot path out of virus lockdown

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Northern Ireland on Tuesday became the final UK nation to agree an unwinding of its coronavirus restrictions, while Scotland is considering accelerating its lockdown exit due to falling case numbers.

Deputy first minister Michelle O'Neill said Northern Ireland's strategy

will be "careful, cautious and hopeful" but warned: "We are not out of the woods."

"This is a day very much of hope," she told lawmakers at the devolved Northern Ireland assembly.

Sports and leisure, travel and worshipping restrictions will be eased in stages, from lockdown to "cautious first steps, gradual easing, further easing, and preparing for the future."

Unlike easing for England, Scotland and Wales, the plan does not set any target dates, with the next steps being decided by the latest data.

"We must do everything we can to try to make this one the last lockdown," said O'Neill.

"We can take some tentative preparatory steps towards the lifting of restrictions. But great care is still needed."

Of the four UK nations, only England now has a case rate of more than 100 per 100,000, according to latest data.

The devolved administrations in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast are each in charge of their response to the pandemic.

But all four nations are now in their third lockdown since the virus arrived more than a year ago.

More than 123,000 people have died across the UK in one of the world's worst outbreaks.

But lockdowns and a mass vaccination program have recently seen cases falling, leading politicians to plot a return to normality.

Scotland First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said Tuesday that she was thinking of speeding up the process as she announced all pupils would return to school on a part or full-time basis from March 15—a week after schools reopen in England.

"We will be considering if it might be possible to accelerate the exit from [lockdown](#) in any way, consistent, of course, with the care and caution we know is necessary," she told parliament.

"All of us want to move on as quickly as possible and, as a priority, to see friends and family again. I hope that day is now not too far away," she added.

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