

Sweden unveils plan to ease virus restrictions

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Sweden's government on Thursday announced a plan to ease restrictions designed to curb the spread of COVID-19, starting on June 1 but without a firm date for a complete reopening.

"We are starting to glance the beginning of the end," Prime Minister Stefan Lofven told a news conference.

The easing of restrictions would be done in five stages, and depend on

the level of infection, the stress on healthcare and rollout of vaccines, the government said.

"I want to emphasise that the removal of restrictions is being done responsibly and with the preparedness to handle a situation where the rate of infection potentially increases again," Lofven said.

The Scandinavian country has never imposed the type of lockdown seen elsewhere in Europe, controversially relying on mostly non-coercive measures.

It has however gradually tightened restrictions since November, including a ban on [alcohol sales](#) after 8 pm and on public gatherings of more than eight people.

Since March, cafes, bars and restaurants have also been required to shut by 8:30 pm.

The first step of the reopening would see restaurants being able to stay open till 10:30 pm, and the resumption of some sporting activities and in person teaching for adult students.

The second stage, planned for July 1, will include a higher cap on private and public gatherings, and allowances for larger audiences for sporting and cultural events, as well the removal of a recommendation to only interact with people within a close social circle.

Stages three and four are currently planned for July 15 and September respectively.

They would first see the removal of restrictions on seating on [public transport](#) and how many people can be inside stores followed by the complete lifting of restrictions on the number of people at private and

public gatherings together with audience restrictions at events.

A date had not yet been set for the last stage, which would see the complete lifting of all [restrictions](#), Lofven said.

Johan Carlson, director of Sweden's Public Health Agency, noted that the number of new cases had fallen by 30-40 percent in parts of the country but urged people "to continue to persevere and follow the recommendations that are still in effect".

The Nordic country of 10.3 million inhabitants reported a total of 1,068,473 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on Thursday and 14,451 associated deaths.

Last week, Sweden topped the EU for the number of new cases per capita, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

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