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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

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## **The Independent SAGE Report 15**

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### **A closer look at Sweden's response to COVID-19**

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain & Northern Ireland by Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser, UK Government, Chair of Independent SAGE

## A closer look at Sweden's response to COVID-19

[Sweden is often used as an example](#) of a country where a population immunity strategy is working, without lockdowns. Its chief public health expert Anders Tegnell himself has said "[Each country has to reach 'herd immunity' in one way or another, and we are going to reach it in a different way](#)".

However, firstly, the idea that Sweden has no restrictions or lockdown is a misconception and secondly the assertion that its strategy is successful is far from clear. Independent SAGE has discussed the problems with a population immunity strategy in detail in an accompanying report released on 25 September. In this report we look at Sweden's response, context and current outcomes over the pandemic period to date.

### 1. Swedish restrictions

On 17<sup>th</sup> March, Sweden moved to online learning only for all children 16 and over and university students. They did not return to face-to-face teaching until the middle of June. Schools for children under 16 had and still have small class sizes, social distancing and hygiene measures. Universities have now returned with very similar social distancing measures in place to those in the UK.

The government advised Swedes to work from home if possible until the end of this year and many did and are continuing to do so.

Sweden also banned [travel from outside the EU](#) (in place until November 2020, with some exemptions), [visiting retirement homes has been banned from April to October 2020](#) and [there is a continuing ban on gatherings over 50 people \(punishable by a large fine or prison\)](#).

[All restaurants and bars](#) must only provide seated service, at tables at least 1m apart with hand sanitiser or hand washing facilities readily available. People are not allowed to stand or queue. These restrictions remain.

A [study using banking data](#) found that the decline in aggregate consumer spending after the Danish lockdown on 11<sup>th</sup> March was very similar in Denmark and Sweden, falling by 29% and 25% respectively, suggesting that reduction in activity was similar in the two countries. [Another study using Citymapper data](#) found that the reduction in mobility in March was about 50% in Stockholm, only slightly smaller than in other European cities.

In July, [Tegnell estimated that Swedes had only 30% of the social interactions they had pre pandemic](#) and almost 90% of the population said they were continuing to follow social distancing recommendations. Thus although Sweden did have fewer imposed restrictions, people's behaviour changed in such a way as to mimic the impact of severer restrictions elsewhere.

While the other Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway and Finland all imposed much tougher restrictions during the first wave, by the end of June all four countries had similar levels of restrictions in place as lockdown restrictions were progressively eased. In fact, Sweden's restrictions were more stringent than those in Denmark, Norway and Finland over the summer.

### 2. Swedish context

Sweden, like all of the Nordic countries, has a high standard of living conditions, strong social safety nets, and well-functioning public institutions. In a [2013 study](#) of national performance on healthy public policies in 43 European countries, the top four, in order, were Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Finland. The UK came 12<sup>th</sup>. As has become apparent within the UK, social and working conditions are strongly correlated with the burden of COVID-19. [OECD data](#) show that these also differ between

the Nordic countries and the UK in several important aspects. 12.15% of employees work long hours in the UK, compared with 1.07%, 2.93%, and 3.81% in Sweden, Norway, and Finland respectively. Life satisfaction, measured on a 10 point scale, is lower in the UK, at 6.8, compared with 7.3, 7.6, and 7.6 in the same countries respectively. Labour market insecurity is also greater in the UK, measured in terms of earning loss in case of unemployment, as is the proportion of income spent on housing, while air pollution, now known to be linked with severity of COVID-19 infections, is much higher in the UK.

Concerns have been raised about outbreaks associated with schools, with outbreaks reported from several countries including France and Israel. All else being equal, it can be assumed that it will be easier to enable social distancing where class sizes are smaller. The average [class sizes](#) in public primary schools in France and Israel are 23 and 27 respectively, while in the UK the figure is 27.2. In contrast, it is 20.2 in Sweden.

Levels of trust are very much higher in the Nordic countries than elsewhere, something that can be expected to contribute to the willingness of the population to accept advice. In the 2017-2020 wave of the [World Values Survey](#), the percentages of people stating that “Most people can be trusted” were 62.8%, 72.1%, and 68.4% in Sweden, Norway, and Finland respectively but only 40.2% in the UK.

Taking all these considerations into account, it seems seriously misleading to draw direct comparisons between Sweden and the UK. Rather, it is appropriate to compare Sweden with its Nordic neighbours. Nor is it justifiable to imagine that policies adopted there can be applied seamlessly in the UK

### 3. Swedish outcomes

[Sweden has one of the highest current per capita death rates](#) from COVID-19 in Europe of 580 per million compared to 111, 49 and 62 per million, in Denmark, Norway and Finland respectively, partly because it experienced [significant outbreaks in care homes](#). Sweden experienced a large prolonged peak of infection over the summer while the other Nordic countries maintained very low levels of infection for months after restrictions were lifted (see chart below).

Although Sweden’s social restrictions were milder than its EU neighbours, the economic contraction that it has suffered is not out of line with Denmark and Finland both of which imposed tighter restrictions and suffered far fewer cases of, and deaths from, COVID-19.

**Table 1.** [Gross domestic product, forecast \(percentage change on preceding year, 2020-1\)](#)

	Forecast for 2020	Forecast for 2021
Sweden	-5.3	+3.1
Denmark	-5.2	+4.3
Finland	-6.3	+2.8

Since September, cases have been rising across Europe. Of the Nordic countries, Denmark in particular has seen a significant surge in cases and Norway too showed a sharp increase before levelling off, while Sweden’s cases appeared relatively flat in early September (see chart below). This has been [taken by some](#) as proof that Sweden’s strategy is working. However, Sweden’s cases are now rising again, and both Finland’s and Norway’s cases per population remain lower than Sweden’s. It is interesting to note that as of 24<sup>th</sup> September, [Tegnell has suggested local lockdowns](#)

[in Sweden](#) in response to new spikes. None of the Nordic countries have re-imposed lockdown, so at the moment all are functioning under similar levels of restrictions.

The chart below shows confirmed cases per million population for the four Nordic countries since March.

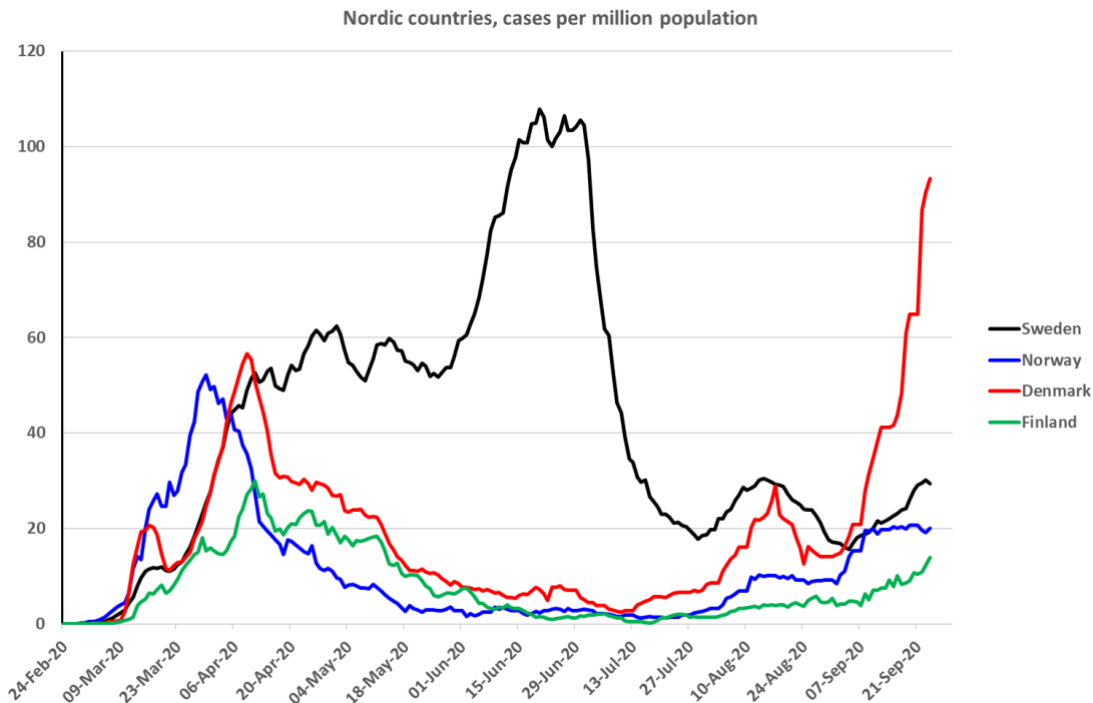


Figure 1 - 7-day rolling average of average number of cases per day per million population. Data from <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/download-todays-data-geographic-distribution-covid-19-cases-worldwide>

There is little to suggest in this chart that Sweden’s strategy is better than its Nordic neighbours (particularly Norway and Finland) and a lot to suggest that it is worse with a much larger burden of disease over spring and the summer. While it is certainly possible that the winter will evolve very differently for Sweden compared to the other countries, it is far too early to know. In the meantime, we should learn from Sweden’s excellent public messaging, high levels of public trust and from how it has kept schools for younger pupils open throughout. We should also look to [Finland](#) and Norway and seek to understand what has been working there. Finally, we need to recognise that the UK is not Sweden – and what works there might well not work here for the reasons outline above.

**indie\_SAGE**

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