

# COVID-19 Tracking App

The Government is trialing a Coronavirus Tracking App in an attempt to reduce the spread of the virus, thus allowing businesses and schools to re-open. But is our privacy at risk?

The Coronavirus Tracking App technology has a vital part to play in reducing the spread of the virus, thus allowing businesses and schools to open and for there to be some semblance of a return to what has been christened 'the new normal'.

## What does the app do and how will it help?

The use of a mobile COVID-19 phone tracker app is currently being trialled on the Isle of Wight as part of the Government's exit strategy for the lockdown. The idea is that mobile phones exchange encrypted digital identifiers via Bluetooth when they are in close proximity to each other for sustained periods of time.

If a user subsequently tests positive for COVID-19, other phone users that had connected to the infected person's phone are notified and told to apply to be tested and to self-isolate. This is known as the so called 'test, track, trace and isolate' (TTTI) policy.

If the trials are successful and the app is rolled out across the UK, it is hoped that as long as more than 50% of the population downloads the app that it will speed-up the country coming out of lockdown while continuing to suppressing the virus, keeping the 'R' number below one.

## What are the concerns?

One issue that could prevent the required uptake and use of the app is the issue of people's privacy as a result of the app's centralised approach, which collects and stores people's data, that is used to map the spread of and contain the virus. The Government argues that this could provide it with valuable data about the spread of the disease and allow it to provide more nuanced messaging to users on what actions they should take.

The centralised approach has however raised many questions about data privacy. Although the NHS insists that everything will be transparent and that no data will be personally identifiable,

the NHS envisages future iterations of the app could collect additional data, such as locations, as well as it being able to include additional functionality without people's consent or their knowledge.

Questions are also being raised about what happens to peoples' data uploaded to the central server, which at the end of the crisis will still be available to NHS Digital, such as for sale to commercial organisations and foreign countries for medical research, which is permitted under a GDPR 'Research Exemption'. The NHS argues however, that people have to balance their data being collected and used for these other purposes against the benefits they receive in relation to COVID-19.

Other reported issues with the app include phone efficiency which early reports say can be significantly reduced due to issues in identifiers being picked up and with the operation of the app generally. Reliance on Bluetooth is also already raising security issues with reports that phishing emails and SMS messages could increase significantly as a result of Bluetooth being on and receiving data from other transmitters.

## When will we know more?

It is hoped that the Government will shortly be required to publish its data protection impact assessment (DPIA) required by the GDPR, together with reports on relevant technical information that will result in experts being able to comment on privacy and other issues. It can only be hoped therefore, that this information provides sufficient confidence in the app that people will be content to download and use the app.



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