NHS COVID-19 App: DfE Stakeholder Advisory Group

Background

The NHS COVID-19 App was launched on 24th September and is intended to be downloaded by people aged 16+ in England and Wales. Since then, over 20 million people have downloaded the App.

The App is a key part of the country's ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) response, aiming to extend the speed, precision and reach of NHS Test and Trace in England, as well as NHS Test, Trace and Protect in Wales. The App complements the overall service by automating some aspects of the process of contact tracing and has been designed to slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) by alerting people who may have been exposed to infection so that they can take action to help break chains of transmission.

Staff in education settings and some students in years 11 and above may download and use the App. We believe that it will be beneficial in helping these settings to accurately identify those at risk of infection quickly and respond accordingly to prevent further spread. In September 2020, the Department for Education published guidance for leaders and staff in education and childcare settings in England about the NHS COVID-19 App, how it works, and how to use it within their setting.

Q&A

   1. What is the legal status of App notifications?

- App users are anonymous unless they choose to interact with the system, e.g. to book a test.

- The App will advise a user to self-isolate if they have come into close contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus but the App cannot force them to self-isolate, or identify them if they are not self-isolating.

- We hope that App users will follow app advice to protect their loved ones and stop the spread of the virus.

- Some App users who are identified as contacts may be known to the person who has tested positive (the index case). If an individual is contacted by Test and

Trace, for instance by telephone after somebody names them as a close contact, then this is legally enforceable.

- The NHS Covid-19 App is designed to the highest standards of data privacy and data security. All personal data is stored on the phone and is not shared with the Government, NHS or law enforcement.

2. *Who can override the App notifications?*

- The NHS Covid-19 App complements rather than replaces existing contact tracing processes. The App automates some aspects of the process of contact tracing and aims to extend the speed, precision and reach of the wider NHS Test and Trace service.
- If a notification is received from the App informing the user that they have been in close contact with somebody who has tested positive, it should not be ignored. It will not be possible to know who the contact was with, or when or where the contact took place; it may well have taken place outside the education setting.
- App users are anonymous and the App cannot force them to self-isolate or identify them if they are not self-isolating. We hope that App users will follow App advice to protect their loved ones and stop the spread of the virus.
- Local Health Protection Teams support use of the App and should not attempt to override notifications.

3. *Can Schools/Trusts tell staff to turn off the App?*

- We do not recommend that Schools/Trusts ask staff to turn off the App.
- It is a matter for individual staff members as to whether they use the App, but employers should not be preventing staff from using the App if they wish to use it.
- The App is a key part of the country's ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) response, aiming to extend the speed, precision and reach of NHS Test and Trace.
- The App complements the systems of controls that schools are expected to put in place in accordance with the DfE Full Opening guidance for schools.
- In an educational setting, pausing the contact tracing functionality in the App is recommended when an individual is not able to have their phone with them, for example because it is stored in a locker or communal area – this is to avoid the App picking up contacts when the individual is not with their phone.

4. How does the algorithm calculate when to send an alert?

- For the purposes of contact tracing, a high-risk encounter is classed as one where an individual has been within 2 metres of someone who has tested positive for Coronavirus for at least 15 minutes.

- The App uses this as a basis for identifying high-risk encounters (those that trigger a notification), along with the infectiousness (of the individual testing positive) on the day of the encounter.

- The App will only notify someone to self-isolate if their phone has been close to that of another App user who has tested positive. For each encounter, a score is calculated as follows:

    - Estimated within 1m of the other device: total time spent within 1m
    - Estimated 1m or beyond from the other device: sum of [total time at each distance / distance squared]

- These times are then cumulated into blocks of no more than 30 minutes, and each block is multiplied by a factor, recognising the infectiousness (of the individual testing positive) before being assessed individually to determine if it should be considered a high-risk encounter.

- The App does not look at interactions across multiple days as it uses new anonymous IDs every day in order to protect the privacy of users.

- The recent upgrade of the App has resulted in the App being able to discriminate between high and low risk encounters (i.e. 15 mins at 2m for high risk, or not) with performance that is considered as "excellent" by international scientific standards.

- More info can be found here https://faq.covid19.nhs.uk/article/KA-01128/en-us?parentid=CAT-01033&rootid=CAT-01032

5. *Does the algorithm take into account distances between 2 and 4m, not just up to 2m?*

The App may start logging contact that is over 2m in order to calculate an accurate picture of exposure. If the user has been over 2m from someone at all times it is highly unlikely that you would receive a notification to self-isolate.

6. *Why do some of the App notifications disappear? How quickly do we need to act on notifications?*

Some users might have had a notification saying 'possible COVID-19 Exposure'. These were generated automatically from the Apple or Google technology that the App uses. We recognise that this was causing confusion and unnecessary concern, and the notifications have now been removed in the latest version of the App.

7. *Is the App recording contacts when colleagues have a wall separating them? Could the App notify users to self-isolate if somebody working in a nearby room gets coronavirus (COVID-19)?*

- The App uses an algorithm to work out who gets an alert when someone they've been near tests positive for coronavirus.
- The algorithm uses anonymous data based on Bluetooth signal strength to make calculations about risk. This is based on the physical distance between App users and how much time they have spent near each other.
- Rigorous testing has been carried out to see how walls effect the Bluetooth signal. Walls reduce the signal strength, thereby making devices appear further apart than they are. It is unlikely that the device would register signal strength consistent with the required threshold for notification.
- Therefore, if a user receives a notification from the App then they are at risk and they should follow the advice provided. NHS doctors and scientists are continuously updating this algorithm to make it as accurate as possible.