

Survey reveals what the public wants from a contact-tracing app

May 15 2020, by Emmeline Taylor, Jonathan Jackson, Julia Yesberg and Krisztián Pósch



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The UK government is currently trialling a [contact tracing app](#) among residents of the Isle of Wight ahead of a plan to roll it out across

England. The app is designed to alert users if they have been in contact with someone who has reported COVID-19 symptoms and encourage them to self-isolate. But success will depend on the number of people who are willing to actually use it.

We conducted a non-[representative survey](#) of 730 people on May 11—six days into the trial—which has thrown up some findings that could help work out what would convince people to use this app.

Overall, [we found multiple concerns](#) about how it operates. Amid [concern](#) that the app would gather information in a [central database](#), respondents were less worried about that and more about who would be able to access the data and how it would be stored.

Paradoxically, there was also a strong commitment to downloading the app. Just under 75% of people said they were likely to download the app (28% moderately likely, 20% very likely and 25% extremely likely). Only 13% said they were not likely at all.

Why might there be such strong support for the use of a contact-tracing app in England if there are wide ranging concerns about how it operates?

Data privacy is a significant concern, with 86% of respondents saying it was very or extremely important to them that their data was fully anonymised. And 73% said it was very or extremely important that their data was only stored for a limited amount of time. Some 58% were very or extremely concerned about privacy protection and 60% of people that their data might be used for purposes other than tracing COVID-19.

None of this can have been helped by the vagueness with which [data privacy](#) matters have been handled. When the government published a key document on the Isle of Wight pilot, it redacted the parts on data security and gave only ambiguous information about user anonymity.

Track, trace and trust

There is prior evidence that could help here. We know that [public support for enhanced police powers](#) to tackle the virus (such as drones, facial recognition and GPS mobile phone tracking to enforce social distancing) is rooted in [public trust](#) and [police legitimacy](#). When the public trusts authorities, their concerns about privacy are mitigated. They can feel reassured that new technologies, laws and powers will be used in the correct way and not be abused.

In our survey, we found that less than a third of participants (32%) had a lot or a fair amount of confidence in the government to handle the COVID-19 crisis. Only 31% had a lot or a fair amount of confidence in the prime minister.

This might be explained, in part, by the widespread confusion caused by the prime minister's speech on May 10 announcing changes to lockdown advice. We ran our survey the day after and just 28% of respondents said they trusted the government to give them a clear picture about what everybody needs to be doing and not doing.

On the other hand, 85% of respondents reported a lot or a fair amount of confidence in the NHS, so the government's decision to brand the app as the "NHSX-app" may well enhance support for it—even though [NHSX](#) is a government unit. And, indeed, 87% said that data from the app only being accessible by the NHS was very or extremely important to them.

Believing that it is only the NHS that will be able to access data from the app may also override public concerns about it being centralised rather than decentralised, since people trust the NHS but not politicians, with their data.

We found a slightly higher level of support for the centralised model.

Some 58% of participants reported that they were very likely or extremely likely to download the app if anonymised data was uploaded to a remote government server, versus 48% who were very likely or extremely likely to download the app if data stays on a user's phone with no central oversight of the virus spread.

In our survey, some people were presented with a system in which data from the app is fed directly into an NHS database. Others were presented with a system in which "no centralised database of users, their movements and contacts are required, and no personal information is used". The centralised NHS database system received more support than the decentralised anonymous system.

In it together

Our survey also found that a collective sense of responsibility may drive support for the app.

A [recent study](#) into lockdown compliance found that self-reported adherence to social distancing requirements was rooted not in fear of the virus, police or law, but in [social norms](#) (backed up by [legal requirement](#)). Making social distancing a legal requirement may have strengthened public compliance not through deterrence but by signalling that the nation needs to take social distancing seriously.

We asked participants the extent to which they agreed with statements such as "by making it a legal requirement, the government sent the message that social distancing is important to fight the pandemic" (96% agreed) and "observing the social distancing laws shows other people in my community that I care for their safety" (84% agreed). Another 83% agreed that "following the [social distancing](#) rules helps me feel that I am part of the collective fight against the pandemic".

A sense of common fate and everybody acting for the common good seems to spill over into, or be expressed by, support for a contact tracing app that is strongly associated with the NHS. And while that was a [strong force](#) in the early weeks of lockdown, when there was widespread support for the measures, it's less clear that the same will be true in this next period, when there is potentially less consensus about the best course of action.

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