



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Máinnystrie O Poustie

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Michael McBride
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By e-mail

Dear colleague,

STOPCOVID NI – PROXIMITY APP

I am writing to ask for your support in promoting the new Northern Ireland contact tracing smartphone app amongst the health and social care professions and help to reduce the spread of COVID-19, save lives and avoid another lock-down.

The Public Health Agency have put in place a contact tracing service that will get in touch with anyone in Northern Ireland who tests positive for the virus. This is a manual phone based service that establishes where the person has been and who they spent time with. The aim is to identify any of their friends, family or colleagues that might be at increased risk of acquiring the virus themselves. Prompt communication with those people and offering appropriate advice can help to reduce the spread.

It has been found that there are many people who test positive for COVID-19 who displayed no symptoms at the time - some go on to develop symptoms but not all. While they may feel well there's a chance that they could still infect others. Using a Contact Tracing process to find the people who are at risk or may not yet have symptoms helps to break these chains of transmission. This is one of the key techniques in the public health response to the pandemic.

Whilst the principles of contact tracing are well established there are some limitations. With the easing of restrictions people in Northern Ireland are travelling, working and socialising more in public. The public health interview can identify those that are known to the person who caught the virus, but there could be others that are impossible to identify, for example if the person travelled on public transport.

Several countries, including the Republic of Ireland, have launched an app based on Apple and Google technology that uses smartphone features to help quickly, provide alerts to that wider group of people who are potentially at risk. We have built a Northern Ireland version called 'StopCOVID NI that is due to be launched shortly. It will be available in the Apple and Google App Stores.

The app doesn't know who the user is or where they've been, but if they test positive for COVID-19 the app can anonymously identify other users that are at heightened risk of acquiring the virus and give them advice and guidance.

We have used the Google – Apple supported method to exchange anonymous identifiers with the Republic of Ireland, to provide benefit for everyone on the island of Ireland. This is the first time this has been achieved globally, so we're ahead of the game. The information exchange is based on an emerging EU standard and when other parts of the UK or Europe release similar apps, with the right integration work, we will be able to share these anonymous identifiers, and maximise the protection available as we travel.

We know that effectiveness of the app in helping to break transmission chains, save lives and avoid another lock-down will be an important factor in the level of public adoption - the more people who use an app like this, the more protection it will provide.

We recognise that the HSC workforce is a large and influential section of the community in Northern Ireland and we would like your help to communicate the importance of the app to colleagues. We also recognise that use of the app for HSC staff members raises particular questions, and we would like your help to establish sector specific guidance.

The app is effective in identifying individuals who meet the Public Health case definition for a close contact (contact greater than 15 minutes in duration within a distance of 2m or less). The Public Health definition also consider mitigations, like wearing of PPE for one of the individuals in the proximity. This is assumed to effectively eradicate the risk of infection, and with mitigations in place the traditional contact tracing service would discount a close contact from follow-up. The app is not context aware, it does not know when an individual is wearing PPE or a proximity even is subject to other mitigations that would otherwise reduce the risk of acquiring the virus.

The guidance for HSC workers who use fitted PPE equipment while in a work environment, is to download and use the app as normal, but disable Bluetooth temporarily in environments where they are protected through PPE or other mitigations like full length Perspex screens. Bluetooth capabilities should be switched on again, once they have left these environments.

We recognise that there will be a number of different scenarios to consider and are happy to provide technical support for development of sector specific guidance. Please submit questions to StopCovidNIApp@hscni.net

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dan West', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Dan West
Chief Digital Information Officer