



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;370:m3780<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3780>

Published: 28 September 2020

Covid-19: Glitch leaves users unable to link test results to new contact tracing app

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Thousands of people who had tests for covid-19 in NHS hospitals and Public Health England (PHE) laboratories were unable to share their results with the NHS's new contact tracing app for England after it went live last week.

The app was launched on 24 September and was downloaded by six million people in England and Wales on its first day of operation. But on 25 September, it emerged that tests done at NHS hospitals and PHE laboratories under pillar 1 of the government's testing programme could not be automatically linked to the app, with only data from pillar 2 testing centres run by the private company Serco linking automatically.

The Department of Health and Social Care subsequently said that it had fixed the glitch.

But the problems meant that more than 60 000 tests carried out in England on Friday—almost a third of the total number carried out—could not be linked to the app.

The problem came to light after the app's developers replied to a query from a user who had been tested and wanted to put his result into the app but had not been sent a code.

In a tweet, the app's official Twitter account said,¹ "If your test took place in a Public Health England lab or NHS hospital, or as part of national surveillance testing conducted by the Office for National Statistics, test results cannot currently be linked with the app whether they're positive or negative."

According to government figures² a total of 210 375 people were tested for covid-19 in England on Friday. Of these, 61 481 (29%) were in hospitals and PHE laboratories under pillar 1 of the government's testing programme. Some 148 894 were done under pillar 2, in testing centres run by the private company Serco.

After the problem arose, Labour's shadow health secretary Jonathan Ashworth said, "How can this app be effective if someone is unable to link up their tests carried out by the NHS or tests carried out for surveillance?"

The department said that the matter had been resolved on 26 September. A spokesperson said, "Everyone who receives a positive test result can log their result on the app. A minority, such as hospital patients, who were unable to log their positive result can now request a code when contacted by NHS test and trace to input on their app."

The problem did not affect users in Wales, where all test result notifications include a token to enter into the app.³

In England, the resolution of the glitch means that people being tested in an NHS hospital, through a PHE laboratory, or in a surveillance study can now request a code from NHS test and trace to log a positive result. Test results for people who book a test through the app will be automatically logged, while those that book a test with the government's testing website can log a positive test result with a code provided to them.

But a person only receives a code if the test is positive.

As of 27 September, the department said 10 million people had downloaded the app.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said, "This is a strong start but we want more people and businesses getting behind the app. The more of us who download it the more effective it will be."

1 NHS covid-19 app. 25 September 2020. <https://twitter.com/NHSCovid19app/status/1309446092057202689>.

2 Public Health England. NHSX. Coronavirus (covid-19) in the UK. Testing in England. <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/testing?areaType=nation&areaName=England>.

3 Evans I. 26 September 2020. https://twitter.com/ifan_e/status/1309774774546173952?s=20 Sept 26.