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LAST month, UK prime minister Boris Johnson said England would have a “world-beating” contact-tracing system in June. But as non-essential shops began reopening in England, the past week has seen two major blows to contact-tracing efforts there.

First, the UK government ditched an overdue National Health Service app designed to automatically detect possible instances of virus transmission between people, after a trial on the Isle of Wight found its use of Bluetooth failed to detect many iPhones running the app. The app was originally due to be rolled out across the UK in May.

The UK government will now pivot instead to build a new app relying on software that will be baked into Google and Apple’s mobile operating systems, it was announced on 18 June – an approach being pursued by many other countries. The app is unlikely to launch until winter, UK ministers indicated.

Scotland and Northern Ireland are pursuing their own apps. In the current absence of such apps, the UK’s tens of thousands of human contact tracers have been attempting to break the virus’s chain of transmission. However, new figures show that England’s Test and Trace scheme, the biggest of the UK’s four nations, is still failing to contact around a quarter of people testing positive.

During the scheme’s second week, from 4 to 10 June, only 73 per cent of the 5949 people who tested positive were successfully contacted, a similar proportion to the launch week. Initial contact is key to establishing the person’s recent close contacts. Similar contact-tracing operations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland aren’t yet publishing comparable statistics.

England’s scheme hasn’t yet released data on its speed of operation, from the point at which someone orders a test to when their close contacts are told to self-isolate. A quick turnaround is vital to contain the virus’s spread.

One contact tracer for the scheme told New Scientist that they were typically phoning people to tell them they had tested positive around three days after the person first developed symptoms and ordered a test.

Newly published minutes show that the UK government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) said a month ago that the contact-tracing operation “could very rapidly become overwhelmed” if there were still high numbers of new covid-19 infections. At the time, there were around 10,000 new cases across the UK a day. In the past week, the UK government has been reporting around 1000 to 1300 confirmed cases a day.

The reproduction number – the average number of other people one infected person passes the virus on to – for the UK is at 0.7 to 0.9, while its infection growth rate appears to be at -2 to -4 per cent. Both these estimates suggest the outbreak is slowly declining. But there have been signs of isolated local outbreaks, such as at a meat plant in Anglesey, Wales, raising the prospect of a local lockdown by authorities.

Nevertheless, most indicators of the virus’s prevalence are showing a decline. Figures last week from an ongoing Office for National Statistics study suggest that an estimated average of 33,000 people, excluding those in care homes and hospitals, in England had covid-19 in the first two weeks of June, down from 149,000 in the first two weeks of May.

On Tuesday, Johnson announced that the 2-metre social distancing rule would be reduced to 1 metre in England from 4 July, in situations where other safety measures are in place. Without such measures, evidence considered by SAGE suggests that the shorter distance carries between two and 10 times the risk of transmission.