Australian Government
Digital Transformation Agency

dta

COVID-19 Ministerial Meeting on Sovereign Technological Responses
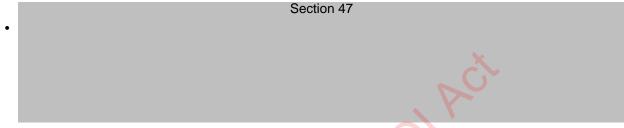
Talking points:

Overall view on the COVID-19 crisis

- Our nations are facing an unprecedented challenge as we grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social and economic upheaval.

- The pivotal role of government and strong international cooperation in managing public health outcomes to protect our citizens has become clear.

- Australia commends your rapid and decisive actions in managing the pandemic.

- We are slowly shifting into the recovery phase of the pandemic in Australia, and are looking to take steps now that will help to reduce the potential of a secondary outbreak into the future.

Sovereign Digital Response and Exposure Notification Framework (ENF)

- Like you, Australia has implemented a sovereign digital response to help solve tracing challenges associated with COVID-19. On 26 April 2020, we introduced COVIDSafe, a contact tracing app that—along with restrictions—has successfully augmented the efforts of public health officials in slowing the spread of COVID-19 across Australia.

- In the six weeks since its launch, more than 6.2 million Australians have registered for the COVIDSafe app. Australia continues to work to identify improvements to Bluetooth and security functionality of the COVIDSafe application.

- The COVIDSafe app was a component of the overall response to COVID-19 and is an important pillar of managing any future spread of the virus as restrictions in across Australia are eased.

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- In developing COVIDSafe, the Australian Government made a series of deliberate decisions that guided the development of the app:

- The app supports manual contact tracing practices for public health outcomes. The app data is not available to law enforcement agencies and the app has no tracking capability.

- Health professionals have full control over the notification process so no individual can accidentally or maliciously self-assert their COVID-19 status.

- Access to the contact data is tightly controlled. Only authorised state and territory officials are able to access data, that is uploaded with the consent of users. This is underpinned by legislation and strict privacy controls.

- Section 47

- We have created a COVIDSafe prototype using the ENF to confirm its potential and the impact on our existing contact tracing capability. This is currently being tested.

- The ENF aims to deliver a range of improvements including better Bluetooth performance. Section 47 .

- Australia is concerned that adopting the ENF will fundamentally change the way we all operate our public health responses, including our sovereign apps.

- We are interested in the approaches being taken by other countries that are implementing government-led sovereign digital responses to COVID-19, including whether they are considering adopting or aligning to the ENF.

The proposed international Ministerial meeting

- Our Minister for Government Services, the Honourable Stuart Robert MP, has carriage of the digital portfolio. Minister Robert would like to chair a Ministerial meeting to learn about the approaches being taken by countries who were first-movers in implementing government-led sovereign digital responses to COVID-19.

- Minister Robert would like to extend an invite to your relevant Minster to attend this meeting.

- He would like to explore your country's views and responses to COVID-19, particularly in regard to the ENF and whether you are considering adopting or aligning to it.

- A key outcome of the meeting would be reaching an agreement on how we might collectively position ourselves to leverage any benefits of the Apple and Google ENF, while maintaining a sovereign health and contact tracing capability.

Arrangements for the meeting

- Minister Robert proposes to chair an international Ministerial-level meeting through telepresence on Thursday 18 June 2020 at 0800 UTC.

- Section 33

- We are hoping to receive confirmation of your relevant Minister's availability to attend this meeting by Tuesday 16 June 2020 at 1500 UTC.

- RSVPs or any enquiries should be sent to ceo.office@dta.gov.au

Background/Sensitives:

- Further details about the considerations in adopting ENF include:

  - There is less handset compatibility, meaning a smaller number of citizens will be able to participate in contact tracing relative to sovereign apps. This will affect at-risk parts of the community, such as elderly users and those from lower socio-economic communities.

  - The ENF model limits access for state and territory health officials to effectively manage the pandemic by removing patient-to-patient tracing.

  - Section 47