

Malware found on laptops given out by government

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Some of the laptops given out in England to support vulnerable children home-schooling during lockdown contain malware, BBC News has learned.

Teachers shared details on an online forum about suspicious files found on devices sent to a Bradford school.

The malware, which they said appeared to be contacting Russian servers, is believed to have been found on laptops given to a handful of schools.

The Department for Education said it was aware and urgently investigating.

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A DfE official told BBC News: "We are aware of an issue with a small number of devices. And we are investigating as an urgent priority to resolve the matter as soon as possible.

"DfE IT teams are in touch with those who have reported this issue."

"We believe this is not widespread."

According to the forum, the Windows laptops contained Gamarue.I, a worm identified by Microsoft in 2012.

The government has so far sent schools more than 800,000 laptops, as it tries to distribute more than a million devices to disadvantaged pupils who may not have access at home.

"Upon unboxing and preparing them, it was discovered that a number of the laptops were infected with a self-propagating network worm," wrote Marium Haque, deputy director of Education and Learning at Bradford Council.

She recommended that schools also check their networks "as an added precaution".

Information security consultant Paul Moore told the BBC that the Gamarue worm

"presents a very severe threat to any PC or network."

"Ideally users should reboot into safe mode and run a full scan with an anti-virus product," he said.

"However with this type of malware, it is advisable to seek professional assistance in order to ensure it has been correctly removed."

The malware in question installs spyware which can gather information about browsing habits, as well as harvest personal information such as banking details.

"The fact that these devices were not checked and scrubbed before being sent to vulnerable children is a concern," said George Glass, head of threat intelligence at security firm Redscan.