

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN PRISONS

Unlocking relationships, learning and skills in UK prisons

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About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policy-makers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises and other grass-roots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2021 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

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Executive summary

Over the past ten years, UK society has become increasingly digitised. More and more, a significant proportion of our daily activities – including our personal relationships and our professional lives – are conducted online. This societal change has been accelerated rapidly due to the impact of Covid-19.

And yet our prisons are almost entirely offline. The majority of prisons in England and Wales do not have the cabling or hardware to support broadband, with just 18 out of 117 prisons possessing in-cell cabling. Remarkably, even prison staff do not have access to the internet, such as video conferencing services. Some lower-risk prisoners in lower category prisons may have highly restricted access via an internal system, principally for minimalist email services, but this is the exception, not the rule.¹ Many older prisoners serving longer sentences have never held a digital device.

The cost to the UK of prisoner reoffending is £18.1 billion per year. Employment prospects for released offenders are extremely bleak: 68 per cent were unemployed in the four weeks before custody (81 per cent for men), 47 per cent have no qualifications, and only 4 per cent of women and 11 per cent of men are in work six weeks after their release. Prisoners are often among the most digitally excluded in our society, yet nearly all jobs – from supermarket assistants to construction workers – require digital literacy of at least a basic level.

Ever more educational courses are only available online, reducing prisoners' opportunities to learn. The Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) has argued that digital "remains the essential ingredient that would revolutionise prison education. Without this, the digital divide will become a chasm, as prisoner learners miss out on developing digital literacy skills."

Because of the lockdown, almost all prisoners in England and Wales have been confined to their cells for up to 23.5 hours per day. A prisoner who successfully sustains a family relationship is 39 per cent less likely to reoffend than one who does not, yet prisoners have been barred from seeing their relatives, with family visits completely forbidden. Video calling has been installed across the prison estate, but prisoners are entitled to just one 30-minute call per month. As such, many family relationships have completely broken down.

One prisoner's partner said: "My three-year-old grandson hasn't seen his dad for 11 weeks and yesterday he said, 'Daddy has gone now'. The impact on the children (and the parents) is heart-breaking."

¹ See National Offender Management Service, PSO 25/2014 – IT Security Policy, www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/offenders/psipso/psi-2014/psi-25-2014-it-security-policy.pdf

One prisoner said: “If I don’t see my family I will lose them, if I lose them what have I got left?”.

43 per cent of prisoners have a diagnosed mental illness, and one fifth of male prisoners have attempted suicide. Yet prisoners remain isolated from family, deprived of opportunities to learn or reform, without the psychological support they need, and confined to their cells in circumstances that produce enormous mental strain.

While there is a perception that the British public are not supportive of giving digital access to prisoners, Dr. Victoria Knight has shown they are broadly supportive provided proper security can be guaranteed and that there are verifiable outcomes in terms of recidivism.² Such security can be delivered, and the evidence for reducing the rate of reoffending is there.

The conditions imposed on prisoners as a result of the lockdown has exposed a pre-existing problem. Prisons in England and Wales are rooted in a pre-digital age. If this is allowed to continue, our prisons will serve not as places of reform, but as drivers of exclusion, systematically denying the prison population access to education and training, and leaving them unable to work. This report argues the time has come to modernise our system – and to redress the exclusion of prisoners from the world outside the prison walls – by installing controlled broadband facilities throughout the prison estate.

2 <https://icpa.org/public-acceptability-survey-on-the-prisoners-access-to-digital-technology-emerging-results>

Introduction

We can't go on with prisons in a pre-internet dark age: inefficient, wasteful and leaving prisoners woefully unprepared for the real world they will face on release. I have not met one prison professional who does not think drastic change is needed.³

Nick Hardwick – former Chief Inspector of Prisons

In this report the CSJ argues that the installation of broadband technology with limited, secure access to the internet for prisoners is both overdue and necessary, and that this pressing need is intensified by the specific pressures of the lockdown prison environment. As the use of digital platforms for personal communication, sustaining relationships, professional communication and education and learning becomes the norm, it is vital that prisoners are not deprived of the digital skills and facilities that will allow them to engage in meaningful, positive activity during their sentences. Moreover, it is essential that they are not left in a digitally illiterate and/or excluded state upon their release, or they will stand very little chance of navigating the world around them.

With the government announcing in the 2020 Spending Review the implementation of a £5 billion UK Gigabit Broadband programme with the aim of levelling up connectivity, and a government drive to provide access to remote rural areas, the anomaly of the digital “black holes” that are the nation’s prisons seems ever harder to sustain.

In particular, this paper will argue that online digital technology should be implemented for the purposes of:

- Improving and sustaining relationships with family
- Improving educational and employment opportunities
- Delivery of emotional and psychological support to address mental health, wellbeing and addiction support
- Improvements to prisoner and staff wellbeing and relationships by means of improvements in prisoner behaviour

³ www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Through%20the%20gateway.pdf

Ever greater urgency: the impact of Covid-19

The impact of Covid-19 and the national lockdown has accelerated the pace of social and technological change. For many of us, online interactions are now as commonplace (and recently more commonplace) than face-to-face interactions and form a basic and normal part of the human experience. Digital skills are essential for many – if not most – daily tasks. The majority of jobs require at least basic digital skills, even jobs which are principally manual in nature. Covid-19 has increased the degree to which digital literacy is a necessity rather than a luxury in modern life, with almost all workplaces, including bars, restaurants and supermarkets, now requiring staff to use digital devices and touch-screen technology.

However, the prison population is among the most digitally poor in our society. Prisoners lack internet access and at most have access to certain limited intranet-based services for education and rehabilitation. These offerings are not currently adequate given the nature of the outside world. Given the pace of change in the non-incarcerated population, by freezing a prisoner at a particular technological point in time, denying them access to digital technology actually leaves the individual more excluded and skills-poor relative to the rest of society than at the time of incarceration.

Numerous overseas jurisdictions are experimenting with secure online functionality, for communication, education, rehabilitation and other forms of support. But the removal of all external access, confinement to individual cells and the cessation of educational activities have placed prisoners in an even worse position than they were pre-Covid. A Scrutiny visit to HMP Hewell by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Prisons (HMIP) in August was critical of the conditions found:

The severely curtailed regime at the start of the restrictions was understandable but almost five months had passed and there had been little progress in ensuring that prisoners had sufficient time out of cell or purposeful activity. This contributed to prisoners' frustration and potentially to a deterioration in mental and emotional well-being. Prison leaders at both local and national level should take note of the fact that 70% of the prisoners we surveyed at Hewell reported problems with their mental health. One hour out of cell each day was simply not enough. The situation was often worse for prisoners on the margins, including the small number who were isolating. They could not have a shower regularly and sometimes had to wait for up to 14 days to do so.⁴

The introduction of digital technology in the prison estate may seem to some like a luxury. However, as technology moves on and prisons remain in a pre-internet state, there is a strong argument that providing prisoners with greater access to specific digital resources, which will improve their relationships and wellbeing and reduce recidivism, should be regarded as a necessity.

4 HMIP, Report on a Scrutiny visit to HMP Hewell, 4 and 11–12 August 2020

Scope – a safe path to progress

It is not suggested that prisoners be given unlimited access to the internet. Rather, they should be able to access pre-approved sites and content for educational and rehabilitative purposes in-cell.

It is not recommended that prisoners have access to video calling in-cell. Rather, video calling of relatives and other contacts should take place within a supervised environment in order to ensure the safety of those contacted (especially children) and to prevent, for example, the orchestration of criminal enterprises by video call. However, as technology evolves it may certainly be possible to ensure security remotely through device monitoring in-cell, and it would certainly be possible to put the question of in-cell video calling security out to public consultation with a view towards a potential implementation in time, provided that adequate surveillance and protection can be guaranteed.

It is accepted that access to the internet and to communication with individuals outside is a qualified human right, not an absolute one. However, the deprivation of liberty is the appropriate and just punishment for a prisoner. Prisons should be a place of rehabilitation and reform, and digital technology has the capacity to improve prisoner wellbeing by facilitating the sustenance of personal relationships with family members, to reduce recidivism through rehabilitative and educational programmes, to improve wellbeing and mental health, and to improve prisoner orderliness and behaviour. For these reasons the costs involved represent a sensible and wise public investment.

There is not a plausible case for delay, given the pace of societal and technological change.

It is accepted that the installation of broadband may incur significant costs to the MoJ. The MoJ estimates that the cost of installing the hardware necessary to support broadband throughout the prison estate would be in the region of £100 million.⁵ This estimate tallies with existing MoJ accounts, which place the cost of installing cabling in 6 prisons at £6 million.⁶

However, it must be recognised that costs will not be uniform throughout the prison estate. New prisons, such as Berwyn, have been built with digital in mind, while a third of the estate is Victorian.⁷ The cabling necessary to support broadband already exists in 18 prisons,⁸ and the fact that there may be physical obstacles to installing the necessary cabling in a minority of older prisons should not be considered an argument against rolling out broadband across the rest of the estate. Indeed, gradual roll-out across a period of time with monitoring of results would be a sensible and practical approach.

5 MoJ estimate supplied in interview

6 Ministry of Justice, 'Contracts Held by the Ministry of Justice with Strategic Suppliers', n.d., accessed 16 September 2020

7 House of Commons Library, 'The Prison Estate', 2018

8 Hardware infrastructure varies widely throughout the prison estate and the cabling that exists is not universally accessible in the public domain. The picture throughout the estate may well vary over time, but the figure given represents the CSJ's understanding at the time of writing. It is certainly true that in-cell internet access is not provided even in those prisons in which there may be the necessary infrastructure.

Furthermore, it is argued here that the costs of failing to utilise the potential of technology to improve prisoner wellbeing and reduce recidivism are far higher, and that this outlay of expenditure is one which will have to happen at some point. There is not a plausible case for delay, given the pace of societal and technological change. In the example of Northern Ireland, primary costs were associated with the installation of hardware and software to support the use of Zoom and Skype; ongoing maintenance and running costs are low.

Security can be guaranteed in order to prevent the abuse or mistreatment of technology by prisoners through digital safety restrictions for personal internet use and by in-person oversight for video calling. Moreover, the existing evidence does not support the notion that prisoners are prone to mistreatment of technology – in fact, the evidence shows the opposite, as will be explored later.

A secure environment – existing precedents

Precedents exist for rendering internet access secure. In Belgium, a secure digital service called PrisonCloud is used in prison cells. It “offers web access through different categories like healthcare, job search, e-learning and others, where security is key”, according to its chief developer, Benny Goedbloed.⁹ In Australia prisoners have digital access without the ability to surf the web. Secure systems allow them access only to a “Walled Garden”.¹⁰ The devices are linked to a prison server, with every prisoner action recorded. The Walled Garden model imitates the experience of accessing the internet, but with prisoners only able to access legitimate resources, with access to inappropriate content restricted.¹¹

While in the Belgian case prisoners are allowed access to certain films and TV online, a decision could be made in the UK as to whether purely leisurely as opposed to educational and other rehabilitative content should be made available. The key point is that the technology exists for “white-listing”, that is the creation of a list of pre-approved accessible websites and/or content.

Several of Denmark’s open prisons operate “internet cafes” that allow prisoners expanded access to the internet, primarily for educational purposes, job applications and other communication. There is monitoring of prisoners’ use and inappropriate content is blocked.

Denmark operates a tiered approach with prisoners granted different levels of access based on their individual risk profile. The Danish model operates three tiers: communal internet cafes, tightly controlled classroom use through a secure network, and “fairly unrestricted” access, including use of email.¹² In-cell access is determined on a case-by-case basis and is only for educational and work purposes, and for communication.

9 <https://theconversation.com/despite-public-outrage-web-access-for-prisoners-isnt-a-luxury-item-heres-why-88803>

10 https://eprints.usq.edu.au/27040/11/Pike_Farley_Hopkins_TC2015_SV.pdf

11 Helen Sara Farley and Anne Pike, *Engaging Prisoners in Education: Reducing Risk and Recidivism*, 2016, 8

12 <https://prisonerlearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Digital-Divide-Lessons-from-prisons-abroad.pdf>, p.6; Sharff Smith (2012), ‘Imprisonment and internet-access: Human rights, the principle of normalization and the question of prisoners access to digital communications technology’, *Nordic Journal of Human Rights*, 30, www.researchgate.net/publication/321018740_Imprisonment_and_internet-access_Human_rights_the_principle_of_normalization_and_the_question_of_prisoners_access_to_digital_communications_technology

It should be noted that Denmark operates a stricter regime for closed prisons. In this system, an extremely limited form of internet access is available to students participating in certain educational programmes, and is generally available in classrooms during lessons. It is restricted to a small number of pre-approved websites.

Smart risk management

Under MoJ rules all prisoners accessing technology must be subject to an individual risk assessment.¹³ This model should continue to apply and be adapted for risk-assessing prisoners with respect to their ability to access the internet. Inappropriate use could lead to periods of exclusion, or permanent exclusion from digital access in severe cases.

Different prisons throughout the estate should have responsibility for their own risk management. The MoJ should develop a tiered structure of risk profile for different levels of prison, reflecting Denmark's own variation. Specific types of offence, such as terror offences, may carry with them automatically enhanced risk status for use of technology, commanding a ban subject to review.

Within individual prisons, a culture could be fostered in which "safe" status would be regarded as a reward for demonstrated good behaviour and trustworthiness with technology.

It would be necessary for HMPPS to collaborate with cyber security and intelligence branches of government in the process of prisoner risk management, which would incur costs, but once again it must be realised that there are significant risks and costs associated with delays to implementing change.

The evidence base

In March 2020 Dr. Emma Palmer conducted an evaluation of digital technology in prisons in England and Wales. Her research did not show evidence of prisoner mistreatment or misuse of devices. Perhaps surprisingly, she found that prisoner behaviour was improved, not worsened, by the introduction of in-cell telephony and laptops. Prisoners mostly treated such devices with respect, with a clear incentive for good behaviour provided by the opportunity to have access to a device.

She reported that relationships between prisoners were improved and tensions diminished, that relationships with staff had improved as prisoners were calmer, and that staff workloads were improved as prisoners were better able to manage routine administrative tasks themselves. In fact, the report found that when prisoners could undertake these tasks, it saved on average 91 hours per prison per week of staff time, the equivalent of two prison officers working a full week. This represented a reduction in administrative follow-up exercises of 82 per cent.¹⁴

¹³ National Offender Management Service, PSO 25/2014 – IT Security Policy, n.d., sec. 16.12

¹⁴ Palmer, Hatcher and Tonkin, 'Evaluation of Digital Technology in Prisons', (Ministry of Justice, 2020), p.46; <https://reform.uk/research/tools-transforming-lives-using-technology-reduce-reoffending>, p.7

McDougall, Pearson, Torgersen and Garcia-Reyes conducted the first quantitative assessment of prisoner behaviour and reoffending patterns as influenced by access to digital technology. The objectives of the study were to assess the impact of digital technology on the culture of prisons, and on prisoners' ability to self-manage their behaviour and re-offending. 13 prisons in the UK were examined that had installed self-service technology over a period of 7 years. A longitudinal multi-level model was used to analyse frequencies of disciplinary proceedings within and between the prisons before and after installation. Reoffending was examined in comparison with a control sample. It reported improved outcomes in both categories. They found a greater sense of responsibility and agency, improved attitudes and prospects for accommodation and employment, and reduced recidivism. They reported:

This study can be regarded as a positive indication of the likely effect of technology on the lives of prisoners, officers and the community into which they are released. Our study demonstrated that prison behaviour was significantly improved and reoffending in the community was significantly reduced. Supporting information from usage data and a prisoner survey showed that the interaction with the technology produced a feeling of worth and personal control. This suggests that, by introducing prisoners to modern technology, it can transform their lives from dependency to self-responsibility, where they can learn new ways of behaving in a supportive rather than a punitive environment.¹⁵

Recommendations

The CSJ is therefore calling for:

Recommendation 1

The installation of hardware and software to support broadband throughout the prison estate, as far as is allowed by physical limitations.

Recommendation 2

The rolling out of in-cell devices with online connectivity, restricted to "white-listed" content and websites for educational and rehabilitative purposes.

Recommendation 3

A restricted "Walled Garden" model to be used to guarantee security.

Recommendation 4

For levels of access to the internet and digital services to be subject to an MoJ risk assessment, and the implementation of a tiered approach based on the security level of prisons and the risk profile of individual prisoners.

¹⁵ McDougall, Pearson, Torgersen & Garcia-Reyes (2017), The effect of digital technology on prisoner behaviour and reoffending: a natural stepped-wedge design, www.researchgate.net/publication/320355491_The_effect_of_digital_technology_on_prisoner_behavior_and_reoffending_a_natural_stepped-wedge_design

Recommendation 5

For video calling facilities to be significantly expanded by means of rolling out broadband. Video calling should take place in a communal area, subject to supervision by staff, for the purposes of protecting the safety of the “digital visitors”. This may be able to move to an in-cell basis as the technology for secure digital monitoring of calls develops.

Recommendation 6

For the implementation of digital platforms for the delivery of psychological and addiction support, as well as facilitating Through the Gate mentoring programmes and other voluntary sector engagement so these interactions can occur online.

Recommendation 7

Video calling, digital educational delivery and digital psychological and wellbeing support should not replace in-person interactions but should supplement them.

chapter one

Sustaining family relationships

The value of family relationships

The Farmer Review

Lord Farmer's Review on the importance of family and other relational ties in prison was commissioned by the Government as part of a planned prison overhaul which would recognise the vital nature of sustaining such relationships as a crucial component of rehabilitation, and the conclusions and recommendations of the report have been accepted by the Ministry of Justice.¹⁶ The MoJ's own research demonstrated that a prisoner who receives visits from a family member is 39 per cent less likely to reoffend than one who does not.¹⁷ In spite of this, Lord Farmer's work showed an "unacceptable inconsistency of respect for the role families can play for boosting rehabilitation" across the prison estate.¹⁸

The Farmer Review reported that while education and employment are regularly cited as "mainstream rehabilitation activities" in offender management, which all prisoners are expected to partake in, working to maintain families ties is rarely mentioned.¹⁹ The Farmer Review emphasises the vital motivational and morale-boosting effect of sustaining a meaningful family relationship, and the challenges posed by relationship breakdown for prisoners. One prisoner said when interviewed: "If I don't see my family I will lose them, if I lose them what have I got left?".²⁰

Research has shown that being encouraged to take on some of the emotional responsibilities of fatherhood and maintaining a consistent and close relationship with a child can also provide a stronger source of identity for a prisoner, especially for males, as a more positive and beneficial alternative to gang membership.²¹ This flows from the emotional

16 www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-review-places-family-ties-at-the-heart-of-prison-reform

17 May C., Sharma N. and Stewart D., (2008). Factors linked to reoffending: a one-year follow-up of prisoners who took part in the Resettlement Surveys 2001, 2003 and 2004. London: Ministry of Justice

18 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642244/farmer-review-report.pdf

19 Ibid

20 Ibid

21 Moloney, M., MacKenzie, K., Hunt, G., and Joe-Laidler, K. (2009), 'The path and promise of fatherhood for gang members,' *British Journal of Criminology*, 49, pp.305–325; HM Inspectorate of Probation (2016), *Desistance and young people*. Available online: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/05/Desistance_and_young_people.pdf

“opportunities” afforded by the responsibility of providing a role model, guidance, direction and support to loved ones, especially children (approximately 312,000 children are affected by imprisonment).²²

The Farmer Review highlights the Woolf Inquiry into the HMP Strangeways riots of 1990, in which Lord Woolf called for:

Better prospects for prisoners to maintain their links with families and the community through more visits and home leaves and through being located in community prisons as near to their homes as possible.²³

In describing the proper role of the prison service, Lord Woolf concluded that:

The Service must seek to minimize the negative effects of imprisonment, to encourage prisoners to take some responsibility for what happens to them in prison, to match the demands of life in prison as closely to the demands of life outside as the conditions of imprisonment permit, and to prepare prisoners properly for their return into society.²⁴

Numerous reports and studies since the Woolf report have emphasised the importance of family connections in maintaining healthy relationships and rehabilitation.

In 2002, the Social Exclusion Unit concluded that there was considerable evidence from criminological and social research that family networks were one of the nine key factors that influence re-offending, but emphasised that “Not enough has been done to engage prisoners, their families, victims, communities, and voluntary and business sectors in rehabilitation.”²⁵

In 2009, the MoJ and the Department for Children, Schools and Families published a framework for improving the local delivery of support for the families of offenders. However, while recognising the transformative impact of many good quality and innovative services, a 2014 study for NOMS and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) found a gap between the national vision outlined in the local delivery framework and “the execution at the front line in commissioning family services.”²⁶

Furthermore, the 2014 Her Majesty’s Inspector of Prisons (HMIP) Joint Thematic Review on Resettlement made strong recommendations highlighting that engaging with families remains a neglected area for rehabilitation.²⁷

22 https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/89643c_a905d6cf4f644ee5afb346e368bb9e0e.pdf

23 Prison Reform Trust (1991), A Summary of the main findings and recommendations of the inquiry into prison disturbances, p.36

24 Prison Reform Trust (1991), A Summary of the main findings and recommendations of the inquiry into prison disturbances, p.14. Available online: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Woolf%20report.pdf

25 Social Exclusion Unit (2002), Reducing reoffending by ex-prisoners: Summary of the Social Exclusion Unit report, p.6. Available online: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social_exclusion_task_force/assets/publications_1997_to_2006/reducing_summary.pdf

26 Ministry of Justice and Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009), Reducing re-offending: supporting families, creating better futures. A Framework for improving the local delivery of support for the families of offenders. Available online: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/207/7/reducing-reoffending-supporting-families_Redacted.pdf

27 HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation and Ofsted (2014), Resettlement provision for adult offenders: Accommodation and education, training and employment. Available online: https://socialwelfare.bl.uk/subject-areas/services-activity/resettlement/criminaljusticejointinspection/1693032014_Resettlement-thematic-for-printSept-2014.pdf

Lord Farmer's Review recommends that enhancing family connections should not be seen in isolation, but as linked to the other key areas discussed in this paper – education and prisoner welfare – in an interrelated manner. Dame Sally Coates's review into education in prison, "Unlocking Potential: A Review of Education in Prison" (2016), emphasises the connection between family relationships and educational development:

Education is more than a service provided by OLASS providers in classrooms or workshops. All areas of the prison regime should be considered suitable for learning. My vision for prison education is holistic.

She specifies within that:

Personal and Social Development (PSD), including behaviour programmes, family- and relationship-learning, and practical skills (e.g. parenting, finance, and domestic management).²⁸

Lord Farmer reports the desire of male prisoners interviewed in focus groups to have access to parenting courses and family-oriented learning in order to improve as a father.²⁹

The link between sustained family contact and mental health is also vital. Lord Harris's review into deaths in custody of prisoners aged 18–24 identified the danger attached to the "cliff-edge" point at which an inmate turns 18 and continuous family involvement is no longer assumed or expected.

The link between sustained family contact and mental health is also vital. Lord Harris's review into deaths in custody of prisoners aged 18–24 identified the danger attached to the "cliff-edge" point at which an inmate turns 18 and continuous family involvement is no longer assumed or expected. In his recommendations around family contact he said that families should be regarded as a central component in ensuring the safety of prisoners.³⁰

Family relationships and mental health

One fifth of all male prisoners have attempted suicide, and prisoners are 3.7 times more likely to die of suicide than the general population.³¹ There is academic literature which suggests that regular contact with family is linked to safety over the course of a sentence and with an improved ability to cope while in prison.³² The emotional impact of imprisonment can increase the risk of suicide,³³ and prisoners at greater risk of suicide are less likely to have regular contact with relatives.³⁴ In addition to improved

28 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf

29 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642244/farmer-review-report.pdf, p.66

30 Harris, T. (2015), *Changing Prisons, Saving Lives: Report of the Independent Review into Self-inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18–24 year olds*, London: Ministry of Justice, pp.120 and 124. Available online: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/439859/moj-harris-review-web-accessible.pdf

31 www.ons.gov.uk/news/news/maleprisonersare37timesmorelikelytodiefromsuicidethantheublic

32 Adams, K. (1992), 'Adjusting to Prison Life' in *Crime and Justice* (16), pp.275–359

33 Loucks, N. (2012a), 'Prisons: Where DOESN'T the community come in?' *Prison Service Journal*, No. 204, pp.42–50; Codd, H. (2008), *In the Shadow of the Prison. Families, Imprisonment and Criminal Justice*. Cullompton: Willan

34 Liebling, A. and Krarup, H. (1993), *Suicide attempts and self-injury in male prisons*, London: Home Office; Pierce, M. (2015), 'Male Inmate Perceptions of the Visitation Experience: Suggestions on How Prisons Can Promote Inmate Family Relationships' in *Prison Journal* Vol. 95(3), pp.370–396

prospects for rehabilitation and improved mental health, there is evidence to suggest that prisoner behaviour also improves when prisoners have better family ties; it can reduce anxiety in prisoners and make them less confrontational, as well as being psychologically motivational, particularly with a view towards engaging in employment and educational opportunities in prison.³⁵

Providing prisoners with greater access to meaningful communications with family members should therefore be understood as having holistic effects with an impact on other areas of their rehabilitation. Moreover, regular access to meaningful and high-quality interactions with family members should not be regarded as a luxury or something that is designed for prisoner comfort, but should be considered an essential requirement for prisoner mental health, safety and rehabilitative potential.

Existing barriers to sustaining relationships

Before present lockdown conditions, there were already significant barriers to receiving regular visits and sustaining family relationships for many prisoners. The Social Exclusion Unit found that difficulties with visiting including time, distance, stress, restrictive visiting hours and practical difficulties such as lockdowns or adverse weather conditions, and the effect of visiting regimes on children all act as impediments to regular visiting.³⁶ Many prisons are in extremely remote locations which are not accessible via public transport. Some prisoners are moved around regularly, with a highly disruptive effect on their ability to sustain continuous contact with family.

The Covid-19 pandemic has deepened the problem of broken and fragmented family relationships between prisoners and their relatives, but it has also thrown light on a pre-existing problem. As of 2019 there are an estimated 312,000 children in England and Wales affected by parental imprisonment, according to research by Crest.³⁷ The average distance of a male prisoner from his home area in the same year was 50 miles, and it was 60 miles for women.³⁸ Furthermore, as of December 2012 there were 10,592 foreign nationals³⁹ held in prisons in England and Wales, 13 per cent of the overall prison population. These prisoners come from 157 countries;⁴⁰ for them, having access to digital video calling makes the difference between having some contact with their relatives and having none. For domestic prisoners the distances are not inconsiderable, especially when families may have limited access to transport or may be of limited means. Clearly face-to-face visiting presents even more severe challenges for prisoners from overseas.

The present circumstances of lockdown due to Covid-19 have all but put a stop to visits in the prison estate,⁴¹ posing serious challenges to the maintaining of family connections. Prisons Minister Lucy Frazer said:

35 Woodall, J., Dixey, R., Green, J. and Newell, C. (2009), 'Healthier prisons: The role of a prison visitors' centre' in *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education*, 47(1), pp.12–18

36 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/through%20the%20gateway.pdf

37 www.nicco.org.uk/userfiles/downloads/5c90a6395f6d8-children-of-prisoners-full-report-web-version.pdf, p.6

38 Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefing Prison Factfile, Autumn 2013

39 Defined as non-UK passport holders

40 Ministry of Justice (2013) Offender Management Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, July to September 2012, Table 1.6

41 www.gov.uk/government/news/prison-visits-cancelled

The decision to end prison visits has not been taken lightly. We know these are important to many prisoners and that they will be concerned for the wellbeing of their family members. It is therefore right and proportionate that we provide other, controlled ways for them to stay in touch so that they can maintain the close bonds that will ultimately reduce their chances of reoffending when they are released.⁴²

It should be noted that in normal circumstances prisoners are entitled to no fewer than two hours of family visiting time in any 28-day period.⁴³

The impact of lockdown on prisoners' families

It is noteworthy that being denied access to seeing a parent in prison has been the subject of legal dispute, with claims being made that denying a 16-month-old baby contact with his father (incarcerated at HMP Erlsetoke, Wilts) represents a breach of the child's human rights.⁴⁴ Leaving aside the legal merits of such claims, it should be noted that sustained denial of access to one's parents or one's partner presents severe challenges and trauma to relatives as well as to prisoners.

The loss of regular connection with families has clearly had a severe impact on both prisoners and their family members. Individual reported cases provide distressing reading. Examples collated by the Prison Reform Trust's (PRT) CAPPTIVE project, which seeks to gather information by surveying prisoners, staff, families, Independent Monitoring Boards, social media and the voluntary sector engaged with prisons, make for distressing reading:

My little people don't understand why they can't see daddy, they don't understand why home leave has been cancelled or why they haven't seen him for 14 weeks.⁴⁵

My three-year-old grandson hasn't seen his dad for 11 weeks and yesterday he said, 'Daddy has gone now'. The impact on the children (and the parents) is heart-breaking.⁴⁶

The last time I saw my son was on the 20th of March, then lockdown happened. He has also not seen his fiancée and his two-year-old son since then. The distress and heartache this has caused us all is incalculable.⁴⁷

The limitations of in-cell telephony

To compensate for the lack of personal visits, on 24 March the government announced that secure phone handsets would be distributed to prisoners in 55 prisons, enabling the use of 900 locked SIM handsets.⁴⁸

However, there is significant evidence to suggest that the compensatory provision in the form of in-cell telephony and video calling facilities suffers from severe limitations.

42 Ibid

43 www.prisonersfamilies.org/visits

44 www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/31/ban-on-prison-visits-in-england-and-wales-breaches-childrens-rights-say-lawyers-coronavirus

45 Children Heard and Seen [CHAS], Twitter, 3 June 2020

46 Penal Reform Solutions, Twitter, 6 June 2020

47 Email to PPN, Family Member, 10 June 2020

48 Ibid

The PRT determined that 52 prisons within the prison estate did not have in-cell telephony (as of 11 March 2020). Its March report said “While phone calls cannot replace face-to-face contact, prisoners are able to feel safe in the knowledge that they can contact family on a daily basis.”⁴⁹ Reporting on the limited access to calls experienced by prisoners, the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) found:

Prisons with in-cell phones have been able to provide access and some support for those at risk of self-harm and with mental health concerns, access to psychology and probation for progression and parole hearings, and greater access to legal advice, Samaritans, IMBs, families and friends. Prisoners without this facility can be restricted to as little as ten minutes a day to make calls. These discrepancies are creating both unfairness and heightened risk for prisoners without in-cell phones.⁵⁰

The PRT went on to highlight the inadequacy of the situation in which incoming calls cannot be received on in-cell phones, claiming that one of the main reasons for the acquisition of illicit phones by prisoners was in fact to be able to receive calls from family.

One family member reported:

His time on the telephone is rationed between us all before his credit runs out, therefore difficult to have deep meaningful conversations. We have an exchange of conversation squeezed into a short call but the need for my son to receive a mother’s counsel to support his mental wellbeing is constrained. My heart aches for him.⁵¹

In addition to time limitations, the distribution of in-cell mobile handsets appears to have been inadequate, with the numbers of handsets nowhere near sufficient to meet demand, and the functionality of in-cell landlines (where mobile handsets were not distributed) limited to 4.5 hours per day. There have been instances of mobile handsets not being distributed by staff.⁵²

The lack of regular and reliable contact has created situations in which infants do not have a relationship with parents, and contact between prisoners and relatives has been highly interrupted and strained. There are instances, for example, of prisoners’ out-of-cell time not corresponding with the time that their families are available, which can prevent regular contact when in-cell telephony is absent.

Attempts to roll out video calling technology

Video calling had been rolled out in 26 prisons⁵³ in England by May 2020, with HMPPS having announced a full rollout by December 2020. However, prisoners and families have experienced significant obstacles in maintaining sustained visual contact with one another. The software is provided by the commercial app Purple Visits, which must be downloaded by those wishing to use the service. Prisoner calls last 30 minutes and a maximum of 4 individuals are allowed to be on the call.⁵⁴

49 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/CAPPTIVE_families_webfinal.pdf

50 IMB Findings Letter, 3 June 2020

51 Email to PPN, Family member, 10 June 2020

52 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/CAPPTIVE_families_webfinal.pdf, p.11

53 Figure as of 27 May 2020b

54 www.gov.uk/guidance/visit-a-prisoner-using-a-video-call

However, physical limitations have caused serious problems. The absence of broadband infrastructure throughout most of the prison estate, means that video calling devices can only be operated from physical data points in the wall, which are only present in particular parts and rooms of a prison. Physical limitations have resulted in highly inadequate capacity to meet demand.

The PRT reported on one case:

Video calls are 30 mins but only once a month. Her visit entitlement is almost once a week so this is a far cry from that and there has been four months without any contact. The reality too is that any movement stops the video call and you have to begin the whole reverification process again. Therefore video calls are more like 20 minutes. It is impossible to keep a toddler still so the call is disrupted.⁵⁵

Another partner of a prisoner, speaking to the CSJ, also reported that video calling was limited to one call per month at her partner's prison. As stated above, in normal circumstances a prisoner is entitled to no fewer than two hours' visiting time in any 28-day period.

Implementation appears to have been severely delayed, with instances of prisons purchasing the relevant software for video calling which were then disallowed by the MoJ in favour of their own systems, which were slow to be delivered, and which in some instances were incompatible with the devices already purchased by the prison.⁵⁶

At present, video calling services (where they exist) are provided as a free service, in lieu of physical visits. However, the MoJ has reserved the possibility that video calling may move to being a paid service.

At present, video calling services (where they exist) are provided as a free service, in lieu of physical visits. However, the MoJ has reserved the possibility that video calling may move to being a paid service.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Lucy Frazer has commented that video calling is being considered as a solution in the long term for those prisoners who are not receiving physical visits, but has not indicated that video calling may be made available to all inmates post-coronavirus.⁵⁸

The PRT's CAPPTIVE inquiry concluded that "the gaps between ministerial announcements and what prisons have been able to provide has damaged trust and caused families distress", going on to claim that "our evidence shows that the system's response has been slower and less ambitious than the public presentation of it would imply. As a result, the harm caused to families and prisoners is likely to be deeper and more long-lasting".⁵⁹

55 Family member, email to CAPPTIVE, 3 July 2020 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/CAPPTIVE_families_webfinal.pdf

56 *Ibid.*, p.14

57 *Ibid.*, p.15

58 www.clinks.org/community/blog-posts/lucy-frazer-mps-update-rollout-video-calling-prisons

59 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/CAPPTIVE_families_webfinal.pdf, p.16

The opportunities of digital for sustaining relationships

Expansion of video calling through broadband

More extensive access to regular video calling would serve as a powerful boost to the sustaining of meaningful family relationships. Video calls should not be understood as a replacement for in-person visiting. Digital communication should not be regarded as a full emotional substitute for face-to-face contact with a partner, parents or children. Furthermore, not all relatives of prisoners will have easy access to, or familiarity with, digital video calling technology. Finally, limitations that are currently placed on the number of individuals who can take part in a call can leave children excluded, which would eliminate contact between a prisoner and his or her children if the only contact were to be online.

Before coronavirus the PRT's "Through the Gateway" survey of prison managers found that 73 per cent already said they would support the use of ICT for family contact by secure relay messaging, 71 per cent supported an increase in family contact by use of Skype, and 71 per cent wanted to see more family contact via video conferencing.⁶⁰

A survey of prisoner relatives by the charity Partners of Prisoners (POPs) found that 88 per cent would use "virtual visits" (video conferencing) if available, though not as a substitute for in-person visits. 92 per cent felt that in-cell telephony would help their relative in prison to keep in better family contact.⁶¹

The company Prison Voicemail, which is a provider of voicemail and video calling facilities in prisons, attests to the fact that 96 per cent of prisoners report that receiving a voicemail makes them feel better, indicating the emotional value of familial contact.⁶²

Findings of the Palmer Review

Dr. Emma Palmer's 2020 Evaluation of Digital Technology in Prisons made positive findings with regard to the effects of in-cell technology. Her findings predate Covid-19 and relate to in-cell mobile phones and offline laptops for the purposes of conducting administrative tasks rather than video calling. However, she found that in-cell telephones were contributing to prisoners' relationships with the outside world, improving family ties (particularly for those with young children), and that prisoners reported having more privacy and time to make calls.⁶³

Some staff reported a perception that greater access to in-cell telephony for the purposes of calling family saw a reduction in illicit mobile phone use, the latter being driven in the main by a desire to make more family calls.⁶⁴ Her qualitative research showed a tendency for in-cell mobile phones to reduce tension on the wings between prisoners and staff, since competition for landing-based communal telephones was a historical flashpoint for conflict.⁶⁵

60 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/through%20the%20gateway.pdf, p.27

61 Statistics provided by POPs to the CSJ

62 <https://prisonvoicemail.com>

63 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/899942/evaluation-digital-technology-prisons-report.PDF, p.4

64 *Ibid*, p.4

65 *Ibid*, p.4

Precedents

Overseas

There are overseas precedents for the roll-out of video conferencing, including in Australia and the United States. Susan Phillips trialled the use of video visits for children of imprisoned parents for the Sentencing Project in Washington, D.C. She reported that, as of mid-2012, at least 20 states had the capacity for video visits or were developing the idea.

The attraction for prison authorities was that video visits required fewer staff, reduced the risk of contraband entering, and in some cases raised revenue. However, such calls were found to be less meaningful than in-person visits: "Video visitation can be expected to have the greatest benefits when used as an adjunct to rather than a replacement for other modes of communication, particularly contact visits."⁶⁶

Domestic

There is a precedent in Northern Ireland. Video calling via Zoom at Maghaberry Prison has proved "successful beyond expectations", according to prison governor David Kennedy, with prisoners receiving one call per week rather than per month.⁶⁷ The prison has declared its intention to maintain video calling facilities along current lines in future, even after lockdown restrictions have ended.

The use of video conferencing technology to improve prisoner relationships with family has a precedent in Northern Ireland going back five years. In 2015 more than 70 approved prisoners at Magilligan were given access to Skype. The governor, David Eagleston, said:

The audio visual Skype link allows prisoners to make personal video calls to loved ones. We know that when prisoners have strong family support they're in better shape for reintegration to family and community and we see this as an important part of the rehabilitation process.⁶⁸

Eagleston noted in particular that:

imprisonment may also have a devastating effect on the development of relationships between a child and father...Being able to interact in 'real time' with their father, in their own home, helps children to understand he is engaged with their lives, interested in their achievements, and is there to support them in times of difficulty.⁶⁹

Crucially, in Northern Ireland, apart from the initial costs of installing the technology, they are free to use. The model that has been shown to work in Northern Ireland should therefore be made available throughout the prison estate in England and Wales.

Access to video calling should be subject to a ban in the eventuality of inappropriate use or anti-social behaviour, or if a prisoner fails a risk assessment. This should be applied in accordance with standard prison disciplinary procedures and ethics.

⁶⁶ Phillips, 2012

⁶⁷ www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53179481

⁶⁸ www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/prisoners-using-skype-contact-families

⁶⁹ Ibid

Sustaining relationships – a digital solution

The wider roll-out of digital technology such as regular video calling would not only alleviate the isolating effect of current lockdown conditions, but would go a long way towards overcoming the existing barriers to sustaining family relationships experienced by many prisoners, and to extend and enrich relationships for those prisoners who do normally receive visits.

The CSJ therefore recommends that video calling infrastructure be increased such that all prisoners have much more regular access to video calling facilities, and that broadband infrastructure be rolled out to facilitate an increase in capacity for these calls to take place.

Recommendations

- The Ministry of Justice should install broadband infrastructure that would allow for an expansion of video conferencing technology so that prisoners can gain access to one video call per week minimum.
- The number of locations where video calling can take place within each prison should (as a consequence of the installation of broadband) be increased.
- Video conferencing should be accessible in secure areas with appropriate oversight by prison staff.
- Video calls should be free.
- Video calls should not, post-Covid, replace face-to-face visits.

chapter two

Digital education and employability

Digital exclusion – the costs

Providing education and rehabilitation to prisoners should be regarded as a major public priority. The cost of current levels of reoffending has been estimated at £18.1 billion per year.⁷⁰ Engaging in education in prison can reduce reoffending by up to 43 per cent according to a meta-analysis of 30 years' worth of data by RAND.⁷¹

During the Covid-19 lockdowns many schools and universities shifted to online educational provision. Even before lockdown, blended learning and the use of online learning platforms such as Firefly and Moodle for task-setting, uploading academic course content and digital feedback provision had become normal. In contrast, prison education remains largely non-digital, dependent upon face-to-face tuition in classroom formats and paper-based learning. This limits the number and range of courses accessible to prisoners, and as online courses become more popular, the options available to prisoners diminish.⁷²

In this chapter the issue of prisoners' digital exclusion is tackled, and it is argued that digital technology presents a vital opportunity to improve prisoner education and rehabilitation. Improving the rehabilitative and training opportunities available to prisoners through digital platforms would have a significant reducing effect on the rate of recidivism and would boost employment opportunities for prisoners upon release.

It is also argued that modulating towards digital delivery has been rendered even more urgent due to the cessation of most educational activity during the lockdown periods.

Prisoners and digital exclusion

The Council of Europe held in 1990 that "Education for prisoners should be like the education provided for similar age groups in the outside world, and the range of opportunities for prisoners should be as wide as possible."

70 Ministry of Justice, Economic and Social Costs of Reoffending: Analytical report. 2019, p.2

71 www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html

72 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/through%20the%20gateway.pdf, p.18

Access to online content is now a foundational part of most people's daily lives. Whether accessing the internet for news, research, administrative tasks such as banking, fact-finding, moving house, shopping or engaging a professional service, online platforms are usually our first port of call. However, 11.3 million adults in the UK are digitally excluded, whether due to lacking the skills, the connectivity or the accessibility to make regular, full use of the internet.⁷³ Vulnerable and disadvantaged people are the most likely to be digitally excluded, according to the Government Digital Inclusion Strategy.⁷⁴

Prisoners are among the most likely to lack basic educational attainment and key skills, yet are among the most digitally deprived.

Prisoners are among the most likely to lack basic educational attainment and key skills, yet are among the most digitally deprived. The landscape facing prisoners in terms of educational outcomes before coronavirus was not rich. Today, 20–30 per cent of prisoners have a learning disability in some form.⁷⁵ In 2017–18, 34 per cent of prisoners were assessed as having either a learning disability or difficulty upon entry into prison.⁷⁶ Dr. Helen Farley, who specialises in prisoner educational rehabilitation research, reports that this figure could be even higher, with up to 60 per cent suffering from dyslexia. The Prison Reform Trust estimates that 60 per cent suffer from severe literacy or numeracy impairment.⁷⁷

Prisoner education – the current picture and impact of lockdown

Currently, 42 per cent of prisoners report having been excluded from formal education at some stage.⁷⁸ On reception, a larger proportion of them are assessed at entry level 1–3 for English and Maths (the expected level for primary schools) than were assessed at GCSE level or equivalent.⁷⁹ 47 per cent have no qualifications, compared with 15 per cent of the working age population of the UK.⁸⁰

Dame Sally Coates's review of education in prison, *Unlocking Potential*, found that out of 101,600 learners engaged in education learning in the academic year 2014–15, under the present OLASS (Offenders' Learning and Skills Service) contracts for prison education, only 100 prisoners participated in a full Level 3 course in 2014/15 (equivalent to A level), with none participating at Level 4 or above. Three fifths of prisoners were found to leave prison without any identified employment or educational outcome.⁸¹

However, with lockdown conditions imposed, the picture is now significantly bleaker. With the move to the Exceptional Regime Management Plan on 24 March 2020, most activities including prison education ceased.⁸² Education staff were furloughed.

73 <https://prisonerlearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Digital-Divide-Lessons-from-prisons-abroad.pdf>

74 www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy#people-who-are-digitally-excluded

75 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/uploads/documents/noknl.pdf

76 Skills Funding Agency (2018) OLASS English and maths assessments by ethnicity and learners with learning difficulties or disabilities: participation 2014/15 to 2017/18, London: SFA

77 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/uploads/documents/noknl.pdf

78 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf

79 *Ibid*

80 Ministry of Justice (2012) *The pre-custody employment, training and education status of newly sentenced prisoners*

81 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf

82 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/CAPPTIVE_families_webfinal.pdf, p. 7

One prisoner's relative reported:

We have had no interaction from the governor regarding what will happen or if anything will happen regarding visits and normal regime no library books no education just bad management from prison officers.⁸³

The HMIP 'Scrutiny Visit' report⁸⁴ conducted at HMIP Hewell in August 2020 during lockdown conditions found that, since the lockdown, classroom-based learning had ceased, and only 55 prisoners (out of 828) were engaged in in-cell courses. Education staff only marked work and then provided feedback. Recruitment of prisoners back into education was yet to take place. The absence of meaningful rehabilitative activity was noted, with inspectors reporting that "This was having a considerable impact on their mental and emotional well-being".⁸⁵

Educational provision for the prisoner population of England and Wales, beyond the conducting of independent work in-cell, is largely non-existent.

Existing inadequacies of digital provision – the Dame Coates review

Dame Coates's review emphasises not only the potential for enhanced use of ICT to deliver education, it also stresses the need for meaningful prisoner education to promote digital skills themselves. Given the pace of technological change in the world outside, depriving prisoners of the opportunity to become familiar with the use of technology means placing them in a worse position than when they entered prison – surely the opposite of a desirable outcome.

Current digital learning is provided by the Virtual Campus (VC) and Prison ICT Academies (PICTAs). The VC is available in 105 prisons in England and Wales. The Offenders' Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) also uses Microsoft packages such as Word and Excel. PICTAs provide training in practical ICT skills, including programming, networking, wiring, cabling, repair and maintenance, and functional skills that are basic to any employment. The VC is a secure web-based intranet system (offline) offering a range of skills (examinations and courses) and employment-focused content (such as job searches). It gives prisoners access to material hosted on VC servers and a limited range of white-listed sites. To allow continuity for ex-prisoners who are in the middle of courses, they can gain access to the VC via a web-portal to allow them to continue their studies outside.

However, Dame Coates found that in almost every prison she surveyed that the VC is an under-utilised resource. Access points are often poorly located, sometimes in rooms that are mostly locked, or do not work properly due to insufficient capacity.⁸⁶ Prisoners usually have their VC use physically supervised (unnecessarily, since it is an intranet system) by teachers or prison officers.⁸⁷ Coates reported low levels of awareness concerning the potential of the VC, as well as a lack of training among prison staff and education providers to support its use.

83 Family member, statement to Pact

84 HMIP, Scrutiny visit to HMP Hewell, August 2020, p.24

85 Ibid p.12

86 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf, p.45

87 Ibid

In the latter quarter of 2015, there were nearly 30,000 recorded VC users, but only 10,000 had actually logged in and nearly half of this 10,000 had not made meaningful use beyond registration as a user. This suggests that the digital offering is not experiencing good uptake, given the size of the prison population (86,000 at the time of the report, now approximately 79,000).⁸⁸ The Prison Education Trust's "Through the Gateway" report found that access to the VC was limited due to a lack of escorting by staff, with VC access in some cases down to 3 hours per week.⁸⁹

By 2015 digital hardware in prisons was already outdated.⁹⁰ However, there has been an expansion of in-cell device capacity since 2015. Cabling with capacity for broadband provision has been installed in a number of prisons including Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Wandsworth⁹¹ prisons, which would enable the use of in-cell devices. Indeed, when new prisons are built, they are built with in-cell cabling as a default in order to cater for a possible future change of policy on wi-fi access. Although this might be more difficult in older prisons with thicker walls, the specific obstacles in individual prisons should not represent an argument against installation of broadband infrastructure in general throughout the estate.

The PET report 'Through the Gateway' surveyed 42 prisons and found that 33 used the Virtual Campus. It should be borne in mind that "use" may not imply constructive use here but mere registration. Only 26 offered distance learning, and none used either E-books or virtual teaching.

The recommendations of the Coates review

The Coates review recommended the installation of in-cell devices throughout the prison estate so that educational materials could be pre-loaded onto devices for in-cell use. Pilot schemes at HMP Wayland and HMP Berwyn have been run by the MoJ since 2017, experimenting with the use of in-cell laptops for day-to-day tasks such as checking applications, buying pin-phone credit, placing canteen orders and so on. The devices also allow access to offline materials on mental health, educational content and prison rules, etc.⁹² The Palmer review reported positive outcomes from these pilot schemes.

The Coates review also calls for the implementation of video conferencing technology in order to allow for distance learning so that, for example, teachers from local FE and HE colleges can deliver lessons online when they otherwise may be reluctant to enter a prison. It recommends that suitably risk-assessed prisoners be granted controlled access to the internet. Teachers reported to Dame Coates that being unable to utilise online resources made teaching much more difficult.⁹³ The option of online educational delivery in prisons is made all the more acute by the coronavirus context.

88 www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-figures-2020

89 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/through%20the%20gateway.pdf, p.15

90 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf, p.47

91 HMPS Aylesbury, Bristol, Chelmsford, Cookham Wood, Durham, Eastwood Park, Exeter, Guys Marsh, High Down, Holme House, Kirklevington, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Moorland, Nottingham, Swaleside and Wandsworth all have cabling at present.

92 <https://prisonerlearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Digital-Divide-Lessons-from-prisons-abroad.pdf>, p.3

93 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf, p.47

HMIP reported of one prison:

It was unhelpful... that in a prison like Kirklevington Grange, whose purpose was to prepare men who have been incarcerated for long periods for entry into the modern world, that prisoners had no access in the prison to the internet. It was ironic that prisoners would have this access when they left the prison on ROTL or release, but unlike every other area of resettlement, very little was done to prepare and test them for this in the supervised environment of the prison. This was something over which the prison had very little control.

The rehabilitative opportunities provided by digital

Although prison education providers have been supplying and distributing learning materials to prisons that can be used in-cell, there has clearly been a severe lack of educational opportunities during lockdown. The Prison Education Trust has called upon the government to expand the role of digital technology in offender education by rolling out in-cell devices. PET argues that digital remains the essential ingredient that would revolutionise prison education. Without this, the digital divide will become a chasm, as prisoner learners miss out on developing digital literacy skills.⁹⁴

The Prison Education Trust funds over 2,000 prisoners a year to engage in distance learning courses, but those prisoners must undertake the best available paper-based courses. A PET advice manager said:

Being able to fund online courses would give us a much wider choice of courses as there are some amazing high quality online courses. The more courses prisoners can choose from, the more appropriate those courses are likely to be in meeting both their individual needs and the needs of employers. This in turn would help prevent reoffending.⁹⁵

According to PET's 'Through the Gateway' survey of prison staff, families and prisoners, 88 per cent of respondents agreed that people in custody need computer skills for most of the jobs they might be likely to go on to do upon release.⁹⁶

The principle of increasing prisoner access to digitally delivered education has been accepted in Scotland. The Scottish Justice Committee, reporting its findings on the question of prisoner access to the internet, said:

The Committee strongly agrees that secure access to the internet is both achievable and highly desirable to provide a learning environment which is comparable to that in the community. Not only would this support staff and learners but it would also help prisoners continue their learning in the community following their release.⁹⁷

The evidence

There is a body of evidence suggesting that technological delivery and interventions can be very effective at producing learning outcomes and reducing recidivism. McLaughlan & Farley's 2019 study on use of virtual reality to teach literacy and numeracy at a low

94 www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/2020/07/lessons-from-lockdown-how-can-prisons-support-education

95 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/through%20the%20gateway.pdf, p.18

96 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/through%20the%20gateway.pdf, p.10

97 Scottish Justice Committee (2013), 5th Report, Session 4, para. 22

level in prison, and to teach vocational skills, showed strongly positive results. It reported that tablets and VR “are well-suited to this kind of delivery”. In their trial, prisoners could use tablets and VR to role-play vocational work activities such as experiencing a virtual construction site or commercial kitchen. Their pilot project demonstrated that “such technologies can be made secure, minimising risks of security breaches”, and were effective at delivering digital literacy as well as the baseline skill goals.⁹⁸

The Justice Data Lab conducted a study into the effect of enabling prisoners to engage in distance learning. The study examined the likelihood of employment and the likelihood of being in receipt of benefits on groups of prisoners who had engaged in distance learning. The 2018 study found that 39 per cent of the treatment group were in employment during the 12 months after release, which is notably greater than the comparison group (31 per cent). 27 per cent were employed 12 months after release, greater than the comparison group (22 per cent). The treatment group spent on average less time receiving out-of-work benefits during the 12 months after release than the control group (125 days vs 134 days).⁹⁹ The 2015 Justice Data Lab study into reoffending rates for prisoners provided with funding for distance learning found a difference of reoffending rate of between 6 and 8 percentage points.¹⁰⁰

The marginal impact on reoffending rates attributable purely to the use of digital as measured variable are meaningful, but they do not capture the bigger picture. It is known that meaningful engagement in education is a powerful tool against recidivism and an improver of prisoner outcomes. Radically expanding digitally delivered education would significantly increase capacity for prisoner engagement in learning. Moreover, it presents obvious opportunities to overcome current restrictions to in-person learning. If digital provision of educational courses can deliver improvements in prisoner outcomes of even a few percentage points, this would represent a significant potential return on investment for the Government and for the MoJ.

The academic literature on the use of technology in prisoner education and training is positive, but it is not in favour of the replacement of in-person teaching methods with digital alternatives.

The academic literature on the use of technology in prisoner education and training is positive, but it is not in favour of the replacement of in-person teaching methods with digital alternatives. Rather, digital provision should be considered an adjunct or enhancement of face-to-face teaching time, as is increasingly used in schools and universities throughout the UK. Dr. William Lockett, who conducted a 2011 study into the potential for the use of technology in educational delivery in prisons, said:

98 McLaughlin & Farley (2019), *Fast Cars and Fast Learning: Using Virtual Reality to Learn Literacy and Numeracy in Prison*, Journal of Virtual Worlds Research

99 www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Justice-Data-Lab-PET-employment-and-benefits-outcomes.pdf, p.11

100 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459470/prisoners-education-trust-report.pdf, p.4

Technology is not a replacement for good teaching and learning and should be viewed as complementary to, and supporting, existing systems. However there are three areas in particular that I consider technology can make a difference: individuality, flexibility and continuity.¹⁰¹

Existing models of in-cell devices for education

The prison estate educational provider firm Coracle Inside is one example of a commercial entity providing digitally based learning opportunities already, albeit in an offline format. They are currently active in 20 prisons in England and Wales, both public and privately run. They provide a range of facilities including video, audio, content created using e-learning authoring tools, documents, e-books and graphics, interactive quizzes and multiple-choice questionnaires, progress monitoring, assessment and feedback tools.

A package of 10 devices (Chromebooks) loaded with Coracle's digital educational content costs £6,480 for the first year including VAT, reducing to £4,200 in the second year. Coracle provides devices that are fully MoJ security compliant as well as software and hardware support.

It can be seen that models for offline digital in-cell learning already exist. Given the roll-out of in-cell laptops across the prison estate, there is a case that HMPPS should work with the devices it has already purchased, then contracting with suppliers who will make their software compatible with MoJ devices, rather than purchasing new devices from commercial suppliers. The cost of a MoJ-issued Dell laptop is approximately £200.¹⁰²

It should be noted that with digital delivery of educational content, economies of scale will become possible. For instance, pre-recorded video lectures can be viewed multiple times over by an unlimited number of prisoners without incurring additional costs. This stands in stark contrast to an in-person teacher delivering the same lesson multiple times.

Readiness for employment

The lack of access to digital technology and the internet presents serious obstacles to prisoners who are attempting to find employment or to access the welfare system. Employment outcomes for prisoners leaving prison are not good: in 2012 just 27 per cent entered employment upon release.¹⁰³ According to MoJ data, just 4 per cent of women and 11 per cent of men were in paid employment six weeks after release from custody.¹⁰⁴ For most of us, the internet is the first port of call when applying for a job, searching for housing or attempting to access the welfare system.

According to a 2012 survey on uses of ICT for resettlement, just 22 out of 42 prisons surveyed facilitated job applications by secure relay messaging, only 16 used ICT in prison workshops, only 11 offered virtual interview practice, just nine used ICT to provide prisoners with information about benefits, nine used ICT for contacting through the gate

101 Lockitt (2011), Technology in Prisons, <https://williamlockitt.co.uk/download/technology-in-prisons>

102 MoJ figure

103 Ministry of Justice (2012) National Offender Management Service Annual Report 2011/2012: Management Information Addendum, Table 13

104 Table 11, Ministry of Justice (2019) Community performance quarterly MI, update to March 2019, Employment circumstances, London: Ministry of Justice

services, only six used ICT as part of housing search, four offered it for accessing personal finance advice, only three offered ICT for opening a bank account and just one prison had the facility to allow prisoners to set up an email account.¹⁰⁵

Those who are most socially excluded are more likely to be digitally excluded.¹⁰⁶ A majority of young people use computers in their daily work, but a survey by the Prince's Trust found that young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) were significantly less likely to have carried out a digital task, such as creating a Word document, compared to the general population.¹⁰⁷

Extending digital access to prisoners for the purposes of preparing for the world of work, whether through interview preparation, drafting a CV or making online job applications, should now therefore be considered a necessity.

Access to welfare

For those unable to secure employment after their sentences, the only means of financial support is usually the welfare system. However, applying for Universal Credit is a presumptively online process. Notably, there is a five-week wait before UC claimants receive their first instalment. Yet UK prisoners cannot apply for UC while they are in prison; they must wait for their release.¹⁰⁸ Frontline voluntary resettlement workers are reporting that recently released prisoners are experiencing delays of 6–8 weeks before their first UC payment is received, according to evidence provided by Pact.¹⁰⁹

Providing prisoners with basic internet access would provide an obvious solution to the problem of inability to apply for, and delay accessing, UC, together with the risk of re-offending that denying prisoners access to immediate welfare support clearly poses.

Examples of digital education in prisons

Example 1: The Shrewsbury Colleges Group

The Shrewsbury Colleges Group has developed the use of Augmented Reality (AR)¹¹⁰ for delivering alternative digitised educational provision for young offenders.¹¹¹ In terms of cost, SCG secured £240,000 of funding under the Erasmus scheme for a 3-year project. Facilities provided included digitised prison induction and orientation content for new arrivals, prison safety and mental health, digital information on vocational work such as

105 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/through%20the%20gateway.pdf p.9

106 Martin, Hope & Zubairi (2016), *The role of digital exclusion in social exclusion*, Carnegie UK Trust https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2016/09/LOW-2697-CUKT-Digital-Participation-Report-REVISE.pdf

107 www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/through%20the%20gateway.pdf p.11

108 www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/universal-credit-prisoners-being-set-up-to-fail-and-lured-back-into-crime-by-benefit-delays_uk_5be595aae4b0dbe871aa26f2#:~:text=The%20Department%20For%20Work%20and,make%20their%20claim%20to%20benefits

109 Allowing prisoners to apply to UC by phone call has been introduced in some prisons, but it is argued here that this remains significantly more cumbersome than allowing applications to take place online, which is the case for most UC applications in the non-imprisoned population, <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/universal-credit-dwp-national-benefits-phone-line-ex-prisoners-reoffending-rates-790345>

110 Augmented Reality, or AR, is an interactive experience of a real-world environment (as opposed to Virtual Reality, which is a projected environment), where the objects within that environment are enhanced by computer-generated perceptual information. For example, a digitally projected moving object with which the user can interact may be superimposed within a real-world space.

111 Booth (2019), *Trialling Augmented Reality in the Secure Estate*

brickwork, carpentry and joinery, and “how to” guides. Survey feedback from offenders was highly positive. While 63 per cent had not heard of AR before entering prison, 88 per cent said they would use the technology outside of a classroom setting on their own, and 88 per cent said that the use of AR helped them to stay interested and engaged in what was being delivered.

In qualitative feedback from prisoners and prison staff, comments included:

A useful tool – especially for prisoners who cannot read or write.

People can get bored and switch off when listening to others, also some struggle with reading so AR would be a very useful & interesting.

Ideal tool for prisoners with a short attention span.¹¹²

The report concluded by advocating the wider roll-out of digital technology for educational purposes throughout the prison estate, finding that “a mixture of online and blended learning approaches in conjunction with face to face teaching/instruction can provide a greater balance and variety of resources and interactions.”¹¹³

Example 2: The University of Southern Queensland

The University of Southern Queensland, Australia, has been engaged in a four-year project to deliver offline digitally enhanced educational services to prisons in Australia. Its Making the Connection Project offers tertiary level educational opportunities to prisoners in Queensland. It has experienced an excellent uptake rate, with 7.2 per cent of the eligible prison population in Queensland engaging in tertiary courses, when the national average is 1.5 per cent.¹¹⁴ By comparison, in the academic year 2014–15 only 100 prisoners in the UK prison population were engaged in Level 3 (tertiary) study.¹¹⁵ Remarkably, USQ reports that its incarcerated students gain on average better results than their non-incarcerated students. They attracted 1,500 higher education level students over a five year period, with an average student retention rate of 76 per cent.

Example 3: Cambridge University “Learning Together” project

There are examples of university engagement with prisons in the UK, too. Cambridge University’s Learning Together project run by Drs Amy Ludlow and Ruth Armstrong obtained support from the University’s Teaching & Learning Innovation Fund to pilot the scheme. It brings people within the criminal justice system and university students alongside one another to study with the purpose of transforming horizons and expectations. One Learning Together student, reporting her experience, said:

Learning Together made me realise my world was small. I know a few people, on a few streets. I thought universities and places like that were spaces I couldn’t go to, but now I realise I can go there. I can exist outside of my small world.¹¹⁶

112 Ibid., p.6

113 Ibid., p.10

114 Data supplied by University of Southern Queensland

115 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf, p.11

116 Eugene, Learning Together student 2015, www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/tlif/learning-together

The roll-out of online digital platforms and in-cell device technology would greatly increase the possibility of community and institutional voluntary engagement in joined-up prisoner learning experiences such as that pioneered by the Learning Together programme. Barriers caused by issues of physical distance, or the present restrictions due to Covid-19 lockdowns, would be removed, thus increasing the potential for collaboration and partnership with the prison population.

The Shrewsbury Colleges Group pilot scheme represents a powerful example of how educational institutions, private philanthropic engagement and the work of the voluntary sector could all be facilitated if digital platforms were to be allowed as a method of access to the prisoner population. A plethora of charitably orientated organisations aimed at helping the excluded and the vulnerable exist, but there are significant obstacles of geography and of security to such individuals and organisations from operating within the prison estate. The desire of volunteers to offer services from which prisoners might benefit could be realised much more easily if such activities could occur online; at present the obstacles to prison access act as a serious barrier to this untapped potential.

The CSJ therefore makes the following recommendations:

Recommendations

- Secure in-cell devices with online as well as offline functionality with limited internet access should be available throughout the prison estate.
- Blended learning opportunities should be adopted, in which individual study conducted with in-cell devices complements face-to-face teaching.
- Distance learning should be facilitated, with prisoners able to dial in to online classes and seminars delivered outside the prison via in-cell devices.
- Prisoners should be able to complete job applications, access job application advice and support, and apply for Universal Credit online from personal in-cell devices.
- If necessary, this should be limited to security-cleared or enhanced status prisoners.
- Appropriate risk assessments should take place to secure against misuse of devices.

chapter three

Prisoner welfare, wellbeing, mental health and addiction support

Challenges in prisoner welfare

It is estimated that 10–12 per cent of people in prison have diagnoses of major depression.¹¹⁷ 4 per cent have psychotic illnesses¹¹⁸ and the prevalence of post-traumatic stress, anxiety and personality disorders is higher than among the general population.¹¹⁹ Prisoners are significantly more likely to have used or be regular users of illegal drugs than the general population, including problem drug use.¹²⁰ 43 per cent of men and 67 per cent of women reported having mental health problems when surveyed by inspectors.¹²¹ A 2019 study of 469 male and female prisoners found that 43 per cent of participants had been previously diagnosed with a mental illness. The most common diagnoses include personality disorders (27 per cent), anxiety disorders (27 per cent), PTSD (20 per cent), psychotic disorders (10 per cent) and autism (4 per cent).¹²²

The rate of suicide attempts in the prison population has already been discussed above with respect to the importance of sustaining relationships; clearly a significant proportion of the prison population are in need of serious mental health interventions and support.

117 Fazel S., & Seewald K. (2012). Severe mental illness in 33,588 prisoners worldwide: Systematic review and meta-regression analysis. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 200, 364–373

118 Goff A., Rose E., Rose S., & Purves D. (2007). Does PTSD occur in sentenced prison populations? A systematic literature review. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 17, 152–162. 10.1002/cbm.653

119 Butler T., Andrews G., Allnutt S., Sakashita C., Smith N. E., & Basson J. (2006). Mental disorders in Australian prisoners: A comparison with a community sample. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 40, 272–276. 10.1080/j.1440-1614.2006.01785

120 www.emcdda.europa.eu/attachements.cfm/att_191812_EN_TDSI12002ENC.pdf, p.9

121 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2018) Annual report 2017–18, London: HM Stationery Office

122 Tyler, N et al. (2019) *An updated picture of the mental health needs of male and female prisoners in the UK: prevalence, comorbidity, and gender differences*, *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 54, 1134, Springer: Berlin Heidelberg

Mcdougall, Pearson, Torgerson and Garcia-Reyes conducted a study of the impact of digital technology on prisoner behaviour and reoffending. They found that the ability to use technology to contact an external supervisor (such as an offender manager), together with assistance finding accommodation and employment after release, significantly improved prisoner wellbeing and mental health.¹²³

Implementing a fuller roll-out of online digital technology has the potential to transform prisoner welfare, wellness, mental health and addiction support through radically expanding the opportunities for greater “surface area” and contact time between prisoners and mental health professionals, trained volunteers operating through prisoner support charities, and professionals and charities offering addiction support.

The opportunities of digital for improving prisoner wellbeing, mental health and addiction support

Building on Through the Gate services

The CSJ spoke to Pact, the Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact), which delivers Through the Gate mentoring and Family Engagement services to prisoners in the UK prison estate, delivered by professional staff and supported by volunteers. In a response to a survey of how digital technology might improve the ability to deliver their support services, most Through the Gate staff (who work across multiple prisons) said that being able to conduct sessions via Zoom or Skype would significantly increase the number of prisoners they could engage with. Family Case Workers were less clear about the impact digital video calling facilities would have on their capacity in comparison with pre-Covid levels. However, some reported that being able to conduct contact online would seriously increase their capacity.

A digital gateway for support charities and the voluntary sector

The opportunity to engage with prisoners via digital technology has the potential significantly to increase capacity for the delivery of Through the Gate and Family Engagement services by mentors, with existing logistical barriers to physical interaction alleviated.

Furthermore, emotional or psychological obstacles to volunteering or working in a prison would be alleviated, since interactions could take place online. The practical obstacles to physically visiting a prisoner would also be relieved. As such, allowing prisoners the opportunity to speak to mentors and other support staff or volunteers outside the prison through digital video calling would have great potential to increase capacity and even frequency of interactions.

Addiction support

Currently there is not a facility for prisoners to access talking therapies or addiction support through online platforms. The Forward Trust is pioneering online based addiction recovery support for people with substance abuse problems. Before lockdown, the Forward Trust (“Forward”) delivered one-to-one key work sessions with abusers of substances, but had to

¹²³ www.researchgate.net/publication/320355491_The_effect_of_digital_technology_on_prisoner_behavior_and_reoffending_a_natural_stepped-wedge_design

switch overnight to telephone and video call-based support provision. Forward discovered that its online format was actually proving popular with clients, who were less likely to fail to attend support sessions, and reported that an online support session entailed less of a burden with a lower emotional and psychological barrier effect to attendance.

The charity makes use of group messaging and group audio/video call formats to offer addiction support through fostering emotional connections with others. It reported a steady increase in uptake of its support services after the switch to online formats.

Forward reports that its ability to reach out to prisons was extremely limited due to the lack of prisoner access to the internet.¹²⁴ The organisation suggests that prisoners should be able to participate in group addiction support sessions with the non-incarcerated population. This presents obvious security considerations, and therefore could not feasibly happen in-cell. However, it would be entirely possible for such sessions to take place in a communal area under supervision, as currently happens with Purple Visits calls to family members. Alternatively, prisoners should have access to addiction support through online platforms in a one-to-one setting. The added privacy and ease of access of online platforms would be likely to increase participation rates in addiction support sessions.

Mental health support through digital technology

The Palmer review of digital technology in prisons found that the roll-out of in-cell telephone increased the number of calls made to the Samaritans. A prison officer interviewed during the review said:

I have heard that they use the Samaritans number a lot more now.... on the phone and that's quite a good thing. We have a free phone PIN number that we put money on every – well, whenever is needed... and there has been a big uptake in them using the Samaritans phones in their cell whereas before there was a Samaritans phone they had to go out and ask staff.¹²⁵

While calls to the Samaritans take place via regular telephone calls, whether mobile or landline, the finding of the Palmer review indicates that prisoner demand for emotional and/or psychological support exceeds what is currently available. While prisoners making calls to the Samaritans is a good thing, it is also an indicator that more can be done in terms of mental health support. The apparent prisoner preference for seeking support in a context of greater privacy could be delivered upon by supplying psychological and emotional support through online platforms.

In October 2019 Unilink launched a software model that allowed prisoners to send private and confidential messages to the Samaritans via their in-cell kiosks and laptops at HMP Wayland. The technology was funded by a grant from HMPPS. 453 messages were sent from HMP Wayland to the Samaritans in just the first 3 months of the service. This provides a powerful example of the kind of improvements to prisoner welfare and wellbeing that

¹²⁴ Forward, Pulse #9, Recovery Online

¹²⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/899942/evaluation-digital-technology-prisons-report.PDF, p.41

might be achieved through a more extensive roll-out of digital technology throughout the prison estate.¹²⁶ It is also an indicator of the demand for emotional and psychological support from the prison population.

At present, Purple Visits video calls between prisoners and family members take place either in a communal area or in a private room with the supervision of prison staff. Devices that support video calling which are installed in private rooms rather than communal areas could be designated as devices for the purpose of making video calls to a therapist or another provider of psychological and / or addiction support. This would go a long way towards overcoming barriers to access for those willing and able to provide support services to prisoners.

The CSJ therefore makes the following recommendations:

Recommendations

- Prisoners should be able to access psychological and addiction support through secure video calling, including supervised participation in groups such as Alcoholic Anonymous with members of the non-incarcerated community.
- One-to-one mental health support, including talking therapies, addiction support and other psychological interventions should be made available through online platforms in a secure and private setting, subject to the sanction of being denied such services if there is abusive behaviour.
- Prisoners should be able to make contact with prison staff, including an offender manager, from in-cell devices, for assistance and support.
- Certain white-listed websites, including the Samaritans and other mental health and addiction support website, should be accessible to prisoners in-cell.
- Mentoring services, Through the Gate casework and family casework as provided by charities such as Pact should be allowed to take place online in a supervised setting.

126 www.samaritans.org/news/prisoners-get-digital-connection-samaritans

Conclusion

It is understandable that certain reservations prevail concerning the prospect of rolling out in-cell technology and installing broadband capacity throughout the prison estate. These may range from political hesitancy about public reactions to pragmatic considerations of cost and prioritisation at a time of serious fiscal pressure. However, the present crisis and the societal shifts it has precipitated render the ending of the digital “black hole” for the prison population, and the modernisation of the prison estate generally, more pressing than ever.

Prisoners are among the most digitally excluded constituency in the UK, yet the use of digital platforms for meeting basic needs has now become more societally ingrained than ever before. The use of digital platforms for social, educational and professional purposes throughout the Covid-19 pandemic has entrenched the position of digital as an essential rather than a luxury. Although eventually lockdown restrictions will end, the necessity of digital access for normal social functioning will not be reversed.

The cost of recidivism to society and the state is vast, yet the pace of technological change means that many prisoners are completing their sentences in a worse position relative to the non-incarcerated population than they were at the time of sentencing. Moreover, public attitudes towards digital access for prisoners have been shown to be more nuanced than many would presume, provided that the technology is utilised for constructive purposes with a positive outcome for UK society as the demonstrable end goal.

Endorsing the CSJ’s work, PET said:

The Prisoners’ Education Trust strongly supports this timely report. Reform is overdue, and we welcome the clear conclusion that digital technology will equip prisoners with the education and skills needed on release.

Enhancing prisoners’ ability to contact relatives, to sustain emotional relationships with their partners and children, to engage in educational and rehabilitative opportunities, and to manage basic administrative tasks are all objectives with which it is difficult to take issue. Denying the possibility of using digital means to achieve these objectives is, we argue, unsustainable, and contrary to the desirable ends of improving prisoner outcomes and reducing re-offending. It is unacceptable to refuse digital access for legitimate and constructive purposes when there is strong evidence that providing it has an improving effect on mental health and suicidality. There is even a powerful argument for extending prisoners’ access to digital technology based on behaviour alone.

The unusual circumstances of the lockdown and the rapid shift of many – indeed most – interactions to online platforms has thrown into sharper relief a pre-existing problem. Any risks associated with delivering limited online access must be offset against the very high risks of perpetuating digital exclusion, and the high rate of recidivism that digital exclusion perpetuates. Although concerns about costs are valid, the cost to society of deepening the digital divide are also considerable, and will only increase as implementation of digital access is delayed.

A legitimate question for the Ministry of Justice may therefore be: why later, rather than now?



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