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Recovering from the COVID-19 Pandemic**

An evaluation of digital technology in prisons — key considerations for recovery planning

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The role digital technology has played prior to and during the pandemic is important for us to understand. Recently, digital technology has been installed into many prisons. The Ministry of Justice commissioned an evaluation of digital technology in prisons which was undertaken by Emma Palmer, Ruth Hatcher and Matthew Tonkin and published in 2020[1]. The summary from this report stated:

The technologies that have been introduced into prisons and which are the focus of this report are: In-cell telephony, whereby PIN telephones[2] are installed within prisoners cells, rather than on landings; self-service kiosks on wing landings which allow prisoners to complete administrative tasks that were previously completed through a paper-based system; in-cell laptops allowing prisoners to access the same functions as through the wing self-service kiosks; and mobile devices for prison staff with access to Prison-National Offender Management Information System (P-NOMIS).

The aims of the technology are to:

- *Provide more opportunities for prisoners to build skills (including IT skills) and assist in their rehabilitation.*
- *Provide prisoners with the ability to be more responsible for themselves.*
- *Improve relationships between prisoners and between prisoners and staff, thereby reducing prison violence.*
- *Improve relationships between prisoners and people outside of prison.*
- *Increase staff job satisfaction.*
- *Reduce the time taken for administrative tasks by prison officers, freeing up their time to spend on providing greater opportunities for officers and prisoners to have more positive interactions.*

The following interview discusses some of the findings from the research and helps inform our understanding of the role digital technology plays in prisons in order to determine future possibilities. The interview was conducted in November 2021.

MW: Learning from your research, what is important for us to be aware of as we recovery from the pandemic?

EP: I think we need to appreciate how important in-cell phones are. Just being able to contact people, family and friends outside, particularly during the pandemic, was so important. Our research found that prisoners found being able to maintain contact in this way so helpful and you could see how much they valued it, particularly for contacting family. One man told us that having the phone made it possible for him to be a dad — calling his children at bedtime to say goodnight, and this was something that really stuck with me. During the pandemic restrictions, being able to have in-cell phones must literally be a lifeline for many people in prison. Having access to computers in-cells also helped keep people connected and probably allowed them to have access to more meaningful activities like education and being able to manage their health care. But it was the importance of the phones and the difference these make which sticks with me.

1. Palmer, E J, Hatcher, R M & Tonkin, M J, Evaluation of digital technology in prisons. Ministry of Justice, 2020. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/899942/evaluation-digital-techology-prisons-report.PDF
2. PIN telephones allow callers to use a Personal Identification Number (PIN) instead of money or a pre-paid phonecard

Our findings certainly made us think that they should be rolled out across the whole prison estate.

MW: What would you want policy makers and prison leaders to consider?

EP: Self-service kiosks were good because they gave prisoners autonomy. The same for the in-cell computers. The P-NOMIS 'on-the-move' hand help devices were not really used that much. But it was the phones that made the real difference. They helped reduce conflict on the wings as well as being good for mental health and wellbeing. The only thing limiting the use of the phones was the cost. It would be good to explore how to reduce the call charges and bring them down to what we pay in the community.

MW: How did the roll out of these digital technologies effect ways of working for staff?

EP: The ambition was that the roll out of self-service kiosks would reduce paper applications and staff time would be freed up as a result. From analysing the task time data, we did find that was the case. Policy makers had hoped this would lead to more meaningful interactions between staff and prisoners, but we found mixed evidence about that. Some staff reported their time taken up with other administrative tasks in the wing office, and so we could not draw any firm conclusions about how the freed-up time was being used.

MW: Were you able to explore any changes in staff culture?

EP: No really. But we did find less conflict between prisoners and staff. I suspect that was mainly due to the in-cell phones.

MW: Did the research findings explore impact on prisoner and prison culture?

EP: There was a lot less conflict on the wings where in-cell phones were available. People were no longer queueing on the landings to use the phones and the flashpoints associated with landing phones decreased. Use of self-service kiosks did not produce any reported conflicts. Prisoners with in-cell computers also had less conflict. Relationships seemed a lot better where this technology was available.

MW: Where the technology was available, did you make any other discoveries?

EP: Prisoners reported that often paper requests and applications got lost in the system and there was a

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lot of uncertainty about getting issues resolved as a result. But with the self-service kiosks and in-cell computers you could sort of monitor what was going on with applications. Prisoners reported that often requests were not responded to any quicker, but they could see how the requests were progressing which reassured them that their application had not been lost. Prisoners appeared happier with this whole process as a result. You can imagine this would indirectly impact on staff prisoner relationships on the wing.

MW: During the pandemic, do you think this digital technology would have helped prisoners and staff?

EP: I think the in-cell phones would have helped massively. Being able to contact the outside world and talk to family and friends is much better than having little or no contact. In-cell computers would have helped too.

MW: New digital technology like Purple Visits were introduced during the pandemic, do you think was helpful?

EP: This was not part of our research. But I did hear anecdotally that people were surprised that the uptake of using video conferencing was lower than they expected when it was introduced. Prisons found ways to incentivise and support prisoners using the technology which helped. I heard the process of getting registered to use Purple Visits was a bit convoluted and this could have put some people off using it. Offering support to those outside of the prison on using the system might help. It would be good to speak to prisoners about this.

MW: Informed by the insights you have, as part of recovering from the impact of the pandemic, what would you like to see being put in place?

EP: I would like to see in-cell phones installed across the whole of the prison estate. That would be the most obvious thing and relatively cheap to do. I would also like to see in-cell computers introduced more widely. I think the content that could be put on these computers could help people a lot and direct them to subjects that would be useful whether its advice, education or delivering (rehabilitation) programmes.

MW: Are you doing any other research on digital technology?

EP: Ruth, Matt and I are currently conducting a physical health needs assessment for the Scottish Prison Service and explored the idea of using telephones and video calls to collect data from prisoners, although this won't be done. So digital technology has the potential to help with conducting research, particularly to facilitate better access to participants, while reducing travel time and make conducting research cheaper. So, I can see the value in doing this in the future.

MW: How has the way you work changed as a result of the pandemic?

EP: Obviously, I was sent home to work. That happened in the middle of March 2020 and I was not asked to come back into the University offices properly until August of 2021. I did go back to the University at one point to deliver face-to-face teaching in Autumn 2020 but that lasted about 5 weeks until the November 2020 lockdown was announced. A lot of our work went online.

MW: What did you learn as a result of having to work differently?

EP: I guess I learned I can do a lot of my teaching online and work from home. I did not go into University, although I missed work. I, like many people, had to juggle the pressures of work and home schooling. I got through it.

MW: Are you still doing as much work online?

EP: Each University and department within them is different. At Leicester, psychology is doing more face-to-face, on-campus teaching, for a variety of reasons. I don't mind this, but I do have to remind students to take covid precautions in classrooms and lecture theatres. There is still a lot of online work though. Last year we had to think about how to deliver teaching differently, and we were encouraged to deliver material in 'bite size chunks' to help students focus and concentrate on the materials so instead of an hour-long lecture, I broke it down into three 20-minute sessions. I also included links to relevant podcasts and videos to help students understand what I was teaching. We also used online electronic discussion boards to talk about learning. The pandemic has made us much more appreciative of individual experiences and encouraged us to be more responsive. Although we are back to face-to-face teaching, we have retained some of the 'new' methods to support our students.

The Ministry of Justice Digital and Technology Service has produced a HMPPS Digital, Data and Technology Strategy that describes what to expect in 2021-2022[3]. One of the strategic objectives in the 2024 vision is to 'give people in our care the digital tools and technology to support their rehabilitation'. This includes continuing the programme to put in-cell phones into closed prisons, implementing in-cell technology in nine prisons and the whole Youth Custody Estate as well as scoping how people on probation can better utilise digital and technology during their sentence.

Digital technology helps HMPPS create a more sustainable future by creating opportunities for those living and working in prisons to deliver better services. Whilst it may take some time to incorporate into ways of working, it is certainly something to embrace.

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3. MOJ Digital and Technology (2021) HM Prison and Probation Service Digital, Data and Technology Strategy: What to expect in 2021/2022. Available to download at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/993861/HMPPS-Digital-Data-and-Technology-Strategy-2021_22-4.pdf