



HM Inspectorate of Probation

*Inquiry into the
National Probation Service's
use of video conferencing for
interviewing prisoners*

AN OCCASIONAL PAPER

2003

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1. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 A limited enquiry by HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) into the use of video conferencing for interviewing revealed that there had been two significant attempts by probation areas to create video conferencing links with prison establishments, although neither of these schemes remained in operation. One was an experimental pilot. The other facility is still in existence, but is currently not being used at all, which is of concern in the light of the expensive set-up costs. Users of the systems have been satisfied that video conferencing is a useful and practical way of communicating with offenders in custody. The response of offenders is also reported to have been generally favourable.
- 1.2 Work was in hand to develop video conferencing in other probation areas, both for interviewing prisoners and as a means of improving internal communications between different offices, including a National Probation Directorate (NPD) regional project in Wales. There have also been instances of the facilities being hired from private providers and of video conferencing being used to a limited extent in probation officer (PO) training.
- 1.3 Video conferencing is a more limited method of communication than face-to-face interviewing, but it is apparent that it can still play an important role in increasing contact and gathering information from prisoners; for example, in the writing of pre-sentence or parole assessment reports at a considerably lower cost. Large rural areas and extensive regions should also find it valuable as an aid to internal communication.
- 1.4 Although there are significant purchase and installation costs, there is evidence to show that these can be recovered within a 12 month period through the savings made on staff travelling costs and time. The potential to make savings of this nature needs to be fully explored at both a national and a local level.
- 1.5 Development of video conferencing has been mainly confined to local initiatives which limits the likelihood of the whole National Probation Service benefiting from it. Its use for other areas of probation work, including work by partnership agencies, has not been systematically explored, although the pilot project provided valuable information about the possible added value that it might provide. There is a clear need for a national strategy, linked to the provision of resources, to respond to what has been learned so far, maximise utilisation of the facility and most particularly establish an effective partnership with HM Prison Service to link with concurrent developments within that organisation.

1.6 As a result of the inquiry, it is recommended that:

The NPD should develop a national strategy to explore the benefits and savings to be gained from the use of video conferencing and implement plans accordingly that:

- (a) build on the learning gained from previous projects;*
- (b) include a cost benefit analysis of its use for a range of probation service work;*
- (c) consider how to use such resources in partnership with HM Prison Service and other organisations;*
- (d) establish precise guidelines for areas on its use;*
- (e) are linked to a training strategy for relevant probation staff.*

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 During 2002 HMIP undertook a limited inquiry into probation areas' use of video conferencing for interviewing prisoners. This had been prompted by an inspection visit in the London Probation Area where a video conferencing studio had been opened to link an office with several prisons in the London North and East Anglia Area of HM Prison Service. The facility had been opened by a Home Office Minister and had therefore attracted some publicity. However, at the time of the inspection visit it was no longer in use.
- 2.2 The aims of our inquiry were to investigate:
- the current availability of video conferencing in the National Probation Service
 - the usefulness and effectiveness of the facility, both in probation offices and prisons
 - local operating conditions
 - whether the facility was being used to its fullest extent, where it was available
 - if this was not the case, the reasons for this.
- 2.3 We wrote to all probation area chief officers (COs) asking for information about the availability of video conferencing facilities, with about ten replies. This was followed by meetings and telephone contact with a number of probation service managers, and a visit to HM Prison Wayland by a prison governor seconded to HMIP.
- 2.4 It should be noted that HM Prison Service is currently introducing its own separate video conferencing system, Video Link. This is designed to connect prisons and remand centres with magistrates' courts to avoid defendants having to be taken to court for their case, especially when the distances involved are considerable and the hearing is likely to be only brief. It was anticipated that by September 2002 57 prisons and 156 magistrates' courts would be linked up and using this system.

3. FINDINGS

The London project

- 3.1 The London Probation Area project arose from links created between the probation area and HM Prison Service managers with plans to install video conferencing in several prison establishments, these being both local and training prisons. Information from a previous pilot scheme in the former Hereford & Worcester and West Midlands Probation Services had been used to inform the setting up of the project.
- 3.2 It was disappointing to find that very little use had been made of the facility, nor had there been any detailed monitoring or evaluation of its overall usefulness. London Probation Area managers attributed the low take-up to the problems prisons had in organising sufficient staffing to supervise video conferencing interviews. This led to difficulties in arranging for these to take place at mutually convenient times and discouraged probation staff from taking the initiative. However, probation staff at HM Prison Wayland, the only prison where the facility was successfully installed, took the opposite view that the problem lay with the London Probation Area. They attributed the difficulties to the reluctance of probation staff to make use of video conferencing, possibly because of the inconvenience of having to travel to the office where it was located. The Wayland facility had at least been put to a good alternative purpose by using it for telephone conferencing, allowing outside POs to take part in prison accredited programme course reviews.
- 3.3 Either way, the above represented a serious waste of an expensive resource. As the project had not been monitored, it had not been established whether probation staff made actual prison visits instead of using video conferencing, or whether the first face-to-face contact between the supervisor and the offender only occurred at the point of release.

Strengths and concerns

- 3.4 The Hereford & Worcester/West Midlands pilot project had run for three months during 1997/1998 but had not been continued from that point, even though the equipment was still available. The findings from the pilot were that video conferencing could result in considerable savings to probation areas in reducing the need for staff to make time-consuming visits to distant prisons. It was estimated that the use of the facility could save over £170 on a visit to HM Prison Channings Wood in Devon, and that the savings on between 12 and 14 such visits a year would cover the costs of installing the equipment. There were also smaller savings in relation to visits to the areas' local prisons. However, there was a general view that despite certain advantages (see below) it had not been popular with staff. More recent attempts to revive the facility had met with a negative response from HM Prison Service. It was also becoming apparent that advances in technology raised questions about the adequacy of the existing equipment.

3.5 The project's evaluation report provided useful information about users' views of the facility:

- probation staff felt that the real value of the system lay in gathering factual information, with the optimum length of an interview being between 30 and 40 minutes
- there was potential from this for it to be used to assist with pre-sentence reports (PSRs), parole assessment reports and pre-release interviews and to promote greater probation service involvement in prison offending behaviour programme reviews and sentence planning meetings
- the ability of video conferencing to facilitate regular contact with prisoners was stressed and, although some officers felt that it should not be used unless they had first become acquainted with an offender, in practice this was not the case in many of the interviews that were undertaken
- it was particularly helpful in being able to make quick contact with prisoners to deal with an urgent matter or when a report was required to meet a close deadline. Although some use of video conferencing was made for PSRs, these were mainly second interviews to get further information rather than a first contact
- video conferencing was seen as being acceptable to most prisoners. There were differences between individuals but relatively few felt uncomfortable and the number of responses was considered sufficient to conclude that it had worked well as a means of communication
- probation staff also commented on the time lapses which often occurred following the release of an offender, before appointments could be arranged with important community facilities such as employment advisors, accommodation providers and drugs counsellors. This often caused considerable frustration to offenders and increased the risk of reoffending. The availability of video conferencing would make it much easier for such contact to take place before release had taken place, especially as it was unlikely in many cases that the organisation would be able to undertake an actual visit
- staff were aware of the impact on offenders and its capacity to cause anxiety, suspicion and fears that the session was being observed by a third party. One way of dealing with this was to advertise the facility to prisoners before it was used, and probation staff planning to use it were also advised to write to the prisoner telling them what would be happening
- there were also concerns about the type of subject matter to be avoided in video conferencing interviews, with the general view that it was unsuitable for discussing information of a sensitive or emotional nature, due to the loss of the inter-personal aspects which accompany face-to-face communication
- there were similar reservations about its usefulness for confrontational or challenging interviews concerning problems or offences.

3.6 The report had concluded overall that the project had demonstrated a number of efficiency and qualitative benefits for the areas concerned and recommended that video conferencing should continue to be used by both the probation services and prisons involved, but this recommendation had not been implemented for the reasons outlined in paragraph 3.4.

Other national developments

- 3.7 The small number of the COs who responded to our inquiry reported that, where there had been discussions regarding potential use, there had been a reluctance by some prison governors to become involved with video conferencing because of the staffing implications for the establishment. HMIP noted that the scheme at HM Prison Wayland had been operated by the probation department rather than by other prison staff.
- 3.8 Apart from the two projects described above, our findings revealed that at present only limited interest was being shown nationally in developing video conferencing either in relation to work with prisons or for other uses:
- Hampshire Probation Area had installed facilities at two of its largest offices but these were said to be underused. Although prisons had been cooperative it had still proved difficult in practice to arrange interviews with prisoners at specific times that suited both the prison and the probation service
 - in North Wales there had been plans to create three studios to link the area's resettlement teams to prisons with video conferencing facilities using the system that linked the prisons to courts. Unfortunately it had not been possible to gain the approval of HM Prison Service and so the project did not proceed. Had it been successful, it would have been of great benefit to this large geographic area
 - a wider study was also currently under way in Wales as an NPD improvement project to evaluate the potential of video conferencing to improve contacts between different probation areas
 - elsewhere, the West Yorkshire Probation Area had on occasion hired facilities from a private provider to avoid the high travel costs associated with visiting offenders located in distant prisons and this was seen as a useful facility.
- 3.9 We also considered the potential which video conferencing might have for improving both internal and external communications in Cumbria. This is a large geographic area with offices up to 90 miles apart and its main local prison being located at Durham, a round trip of some 200 miles for staff at the most westerly offices. In order to reduce travel costs, Cumbria had agreed a formal contract for new PSRs on offenders remanded in custody to be written by County Durham POs. Similar arrangements operated in respect of Lancashire staff writing PSRs on Cumbria young offenders remanded to HM Young Offenders Institution Lancaster Farms. Cumbria staff saw benefits if this work could instead be undertaken by themselves through video conferencing. As in the Welsh areas, the facility would also have the potential to improve internal communication and could be used for staff meetings, supervision and training.
- 3.10 Since this inquiry HMIP, working with the Community Justice National Training Organisation (CJNTO), has also considered how video conferencing has been used to assist staff training for the Diploma in Probation Studies. The findings reveal inconsistent use with similar issues to those described above.

The NPD perspective

- 3.11 Most of the work leading to the setting up of video conferencing facilities took place before the establishment of the National Probation Service. These were local initiatives developed in isolation. However, we found that probation areas have continued to act largely independently and that there is no centrally held database of what is available in different parts of the country, nor has there been any national sharing of information about best practice and difficulties. The NPD has recognised the need for a national strategy. It recently made a bid for funding for video conferencing facilities to be made available for all probation areas but this was not successful. In contrast, the HM Prison Service Video Link project has had the advantage of being directed from the centre, including having all the equipment supplied and installed by a specified contractor.
- 3.12 In the absence of a national strategy there is the risk of a fragmented pattern of arrangements continuing. The history and the present situation also do not fit with the drive for closer collaboration and effective working relationships between the prison and probation services.
- 3.13 Any national strategy will also need to include clear guidance and criteria to probation areas about the use of video conferencing and include a training and familiarisation programme for staff and the provision of equipment of sufficient quality to meet the demands placed on it.