Tools for transforming lives

Using technology to reduce reoffending

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#reformprisons

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Research seminar

Reform also organised a research seminar to consider how digital technology in prisons could impact resettlement outcomes, and is grateful to the 14 individuals and organisations who participated (see Appendix).

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Ideas

Idea 1: The Ministry of Justice should consult with all groups of service users, including prisoners, prison staff of all levels, digital service providers, and rehabilitative service providers, during the design and implementation of digital services. This will ensure that services meet the needs of users. Feedback loops should be built into the process to monitor impact and enable improvements.

Idea 2: To improve prisoners' access to technology, the Ministry of Justice should develop a plan for adapting the entire prison estate to enable in-cell connectivity and to provide in-cell devices, starting with prisons that could already support them. Funding to begin this should be provided through the next one-year spending round.

Idea 3: To ensure that prisoners can have controlled access to the internet for legitimate purposes, the Ministry of Justice should review and update the prison service rules governing internet access, and accompanying guidance, to ensure that these are comprehensive enough to allow for proportionate judgements on risk.

Idea 4: To help prisoners to transition back into the community and navigate support services, the Ministry of Justice should review it's discharge policy and consider providing prisoners who do not own a phone with a low-cost, pre-paid mobile phone with a data allowance.

Idea 5: The Ministry of Justice should consider what training and induction process will be required for prisoners and prison staff at all levels as digital technologies are introduced more widely, to ensure good uptake and effective use.

Idea 6: The Ministry of Justice should consult with their counterparts in other countries, academics, and businesses in the sector on the introduction of prisoner-facing digital services, to review existing evidence, learn from their experiences and best practice, and ensure that the Ministry does not duplicate efforts to design and implement digital services.

Introduction

Prisons have several purposes: to punish people who have committed serious crimes, to act as a deterrent to potential offenders, and to rehabilitate. Reoffending is estimated to cost the economy £18 billion a year.[1] It creates more victims, and too often signals failures to intervene to end a cycle of crime.

Yet a prison sentence can actually weaken the foundations of a stable life – housing, employment, family relationships – creating or prolonging a cycle of reoffending, and 61 per cent of adults who go to prison for less than a year reoffend within 12 months.[2]

This is concerning, but it is also an opportunity: the prison system holds those most likely to commit crime in the future. While prisons must deliver justice by punishing people, they must also prevent future victims. It is therefore vital that prisons can begin to address the causes of offending, and to support people to re-enter their communities.

Technology is fundamental to modern life – now, more than ever – yet government research shows that prisoners are among the most digitally excluded in society.[3] This fits with the objective to punish, but there are clear trade-offs for rehabilitation. Too many people leave prison ill-prepared to navigate a digital world, and, perhaps more strikingly, prisons cannot harness the enormous potential for technology to be used to promote desistance from crime.

Increased digital access is seen as a "luxury"[4] – but while prisoners can watch TV or own a console, they will struggle to access a computer to apply for a job, get treatment for addiction, or study.

This digital neglect not only creates barriers for rehabilitation, it also makes prisons far less resilient to the coronavirus, as services have been paralysed with no digital contingencies in place.

A more balanced approach to technology in prisons must be taken. Pockets of innovation across the prison estate and abroad demonstrate that secure technology can be used by prisoners to improve outcomes in custody, plan for resettlement, and enable continuous support into the community.

The prison system faces persistent high levels of reoffending, overcrowding, and now additional, ongoing pressures caused by coronavirus. This report will assess how the smarter use of technology could help meet these challenges, consider why technology is not yet being used to full effect, and suggest some areas for policymakers to act.

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[1] Ministry of Justice, 'Justice Secretary Urges Evidence-Led Approach to Cut Crime', Press Release, 18 July 2019; Ministry of Justice, *Economic and Social Costs of Reoffending*, 2019.
[2] Ministry of Justice, *Proven Reoffending Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, October 2018 to December 2018*, 2020.
[3] Emma J Palmer, Ruth M Hatcher, and Matthew J Tonkin, 'Evaluation of Digital Technology in Prisons' (Ministry of Justice, 2020), 7.
[4] Joshua Barrie, 'Why Giving Prisoners Access to Luxury Tech in Prison Could Actually Save Money', *Daily Mirror*, 14 December 2017; Joseph Curtis, 'Inmates to Get Their Own Phones and Laptops at HMP Berwyn | Daily Mail Online', *Daily Mail*, 1 March 2017.

1. Technology and desistance

The use of technology in prisons is extremely limited, due both to poor access to computers and to tight restrictions on how they can be used. In all but two prisons prisoners have no frequent access to a computer, and no access to the internet. This means that prisoners and prison staff must work largely without the benefits of technology: improved communication, access to the full range of information and services, and services that are efficient and easy to use.

In an age where many take technology for granted, it is easy to understate the impact of this digital divide, which creates a significant obstacle to meaningful resettlement. More fundamentally, it means that prisoners struggle to return to a society where the internet and technology are essential for daily tasks, such as applying for jobs online – the Government's own research has found that prisoners experience "supercharged" digital exclusion.[5] To help prisons to prepare prisoners to return to society as responsible citizens, the digital divide needs to be addressed.

1.1 The potential of digital services

Just as technology has advanced the range and quality of services that citizens can access, so too can it facilitate more effective rehabilitative services and interventions.[6] It can also enable smarter and more efficient processes, which means both staff and prisoners can use their time more constructively, in ways conducive to promoting desistance.

Most prisons have an education or computer suite with fixed terminals that are shared by hundreds of prisoners. Not only does this limit access to two or three hours a week at best, it also means prisoners have to be escorted to and from their cells to use them. This is a strain on resources, and a poor use of prison officers' time – staffing shortages can mean computer access ceases entirely. Only a handful of prison wings have self-service kiosks that enable prisoners to order meals, book visits, access secure email, and buy goods from the prison shop.

1.1.1 Widening access

In cell devices – which are currently being piloted at two prisons in the UK, and several abroad – allow prisoners far more access to resources and to take more responsibility for their own lives.[7] Rather than being restricted to only a few hours of classroom time a week, a prisoner could undertake self-directed learning, or participate in virtual courses, for several hours a day. This, and allowing for controlled internet access (discussed further in Section 2), could allow prisoners to access a much wider range of resources and interventions to meet individual needs.

[5] Palmer, Hatcher, and Tonkin, 'Evaluation of Digital Technology in Prisons', 7.
[6] Nina Champion and Kimmett Edgar, *Through the Gateway: How Computers Can Transform Rehabilitation.* (Prison Reform Trust, 2013).
[7] Ibid.

This could be a valuable contingency for prisons that are in lockdown, allowing digital services and virtual communication to continue when face-to-face services cannot. The alternative – as was seen during the first wave of COVID-19 – is a total paralysis of services, with serious consequences for prisoners' welfare and for efforts to promote desistance.

1.1.2 Developing staff-prisoner relationships

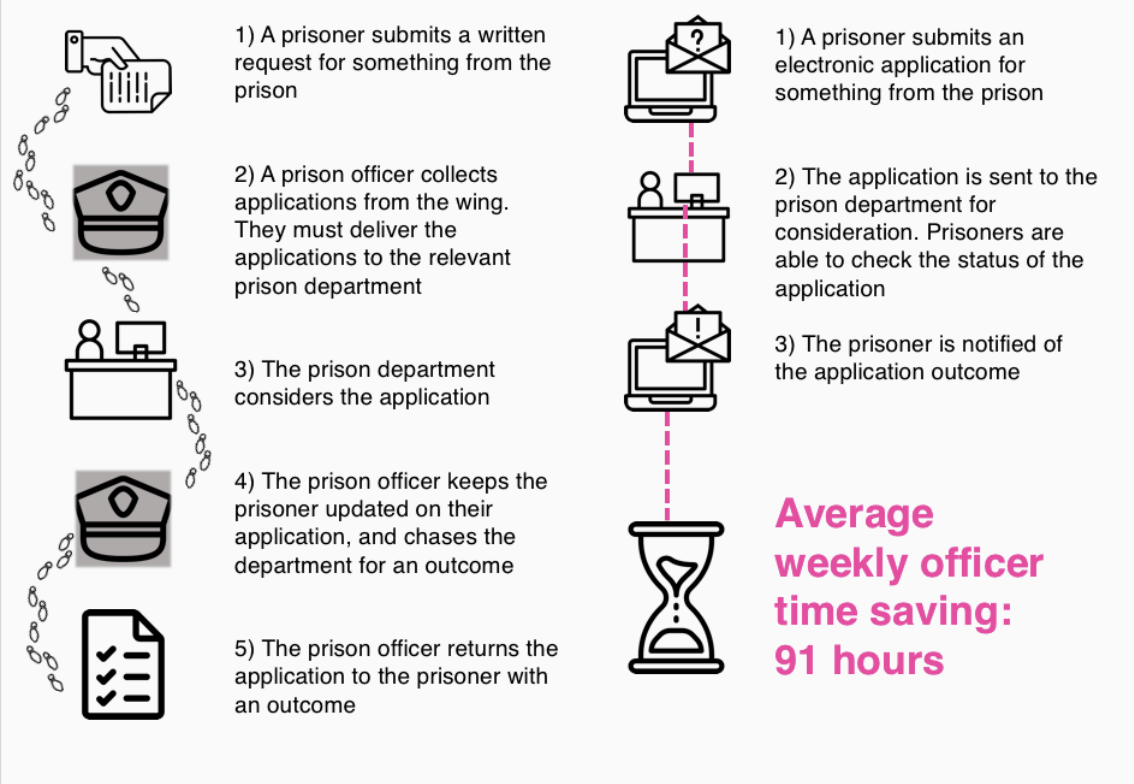
The wider benefit of digital services is that they could allow prison staff to channel more time into developing closer, less tense and more constructive relationships with those in their care. This is important as evidence shows that close and supportive (not collusive) relationships are key to creating a safe and orderly prison environment that is conducive to rehabilitation.[8]

In pre-digital prisons, officers are the first port-of-call for even the most basic enquiries.[9] This represents not only poor value for money, it can itself undermine staff-prisoner relationships: staff can become so "overrun", that they struggle to deliver on prisoners' legitimate requests, which research has shown creates tension, and undermines trust.[10]

Digitising "mundane administrative tasks" saves a huge amount of time, which can enable officers to have "more meaningful interactions with prisoners" (see Figure 1 below).[11] A recent government-commissioned evaluation found that in the prisons considered, self-service technology had reduced the weekly time staff spent chasing prisoners' applications by an average of 82 per cent, or 91 hours per prison – that's equivalent to two prison officers working a full week.

[8] Ben Crewe and Alison Liebling, 'Staff Culture, Authority and Prison Violence', *Prison Service Journal*, no. 221 (September 2015); Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, *Understanding Prison Violence: A Rapid Evidence Assessment*, 2018, 7.
[9] Ben Crewe, Susie Hulley, and Alison Liebling, 'Staff-Prisoner Relationships, Staff Professionalism, and the Use of Authority in Public and Private-Sector Prisons', *Law and Social Inquiry* 40 (March 2015): 323.
[10] Ibid.; Alison Liebling, Helen Arnold, and Christina Straub, 'An Exploration of Staff - Prisoner Relationships at HMP Whitemoor: 12 Years On' (Ministry of Justice, n.d.), 19.
[11] Yvonne Jewkes and Bianca C. Reisdorf, 'A Brave New World: The Problems and Opportunities Presented by New Media Technologies in Prisons', *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 16 (June 2016): 540.

Figure 1: Officer time saved by digital application process



Source: *Reform* research; Emma J Palmer, Ruth M Hatcher, and Matthew J Tonkin, 'Evaluation of Digital Technology in Prisons' (Ministry of Justice, 2020), 46.

Though recent evaluation has been inconclusive on whether digital services reduce tension – and there are few appropriate metrics with which to measure this – one study of self-service kiosks in thirteen prisons reported a statistically significant reduction in prisoner adjudications over a two-year period.[12] In an environment that is by its nature stressful for prisoners and staff, smarter processes can help to remove flashpoints for conflict that are present daily in prison life.

1.2 Tools for transforming lives

The ways that technology is being deployed are very limited. A review conducted in 2013 concluded that technology was being used "mostly for education…less often…for training and employment; much less for resettlement and hardly at all to help maintain family ties".[13] Several interviewees argued that this was still a fair assessment today. Yet, pockets of innovation in prisons in England and Wales, and abroad, demonstrate the huge potential of digital services to promote desistance.

[12] Cynthia McDougall et al., 'The Effect of Digital Technology on Prisoner Behavior and Reoffending: A Natural Stepped-Wedge Design', *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 13 (October 2017).
[13] Champion and Edgar, *Through the Gateway: How Computers Can Transform Rehabilitation.*, 14.

1.2.1 Better education and employment outcomes

Half of prisoners are functionally illiterate[14] – presenting significant challenges both in their personal lives and to finding sustainable employment. Yet prisons consistently show poor results in helping to equip inmates for life outside: as of 2016, three fifths of prisoners leave prison without an identified employment, education, or training outcome.[15]

It is clear that an effective strategy for reducing offending must have education and training at its core. Traditional prison education is constrained by limited classroom space, the availability of tutors, and prisoner escorts. In-cell technology, such as that trialled in HMP Berwyn and Wayland, mean prisoners can learn at their own discretion, boosting the amount of time they spend learning outside the classroom.[16] This can provide a pathway to qualifications, skills, and familiarity with digital technology that will help prisoners to successfully reintegrate on release.

Just as technology is increasingly transforming learning in schools and workplaces, it could do the same in prisons, increasing both access to education and training, and diversifying the content and methods available. This is particularly important for prisoners who struggle with traditional learning methods, such as those with poor levels of reading and writing. In addition, better technology could enable virtual tutoring, where one teacher could teach students across several sites via video link.

1.2.2 Tackling offending behaviours

Resources made possible via digital technology can be used to directly address prisoners' offending behaviours, from addiction to anger management. Studies have shown that computerised cognitive behavioural therapy (CCBT) can be an effective tool with which to tackle addiction,[17] depression and anxiety,[18] and has been deployed in prisons with impressive results (see Figure 2 below).

[14] Brian Creese, 'An Assessment of the English and Maths Skills Levels of Prisoners in England', *London Review of Education* 14 (November 2016): 18.
[15] Dame Sally Coates, 'Unlocking Potential: A Review of Education in Prison' (Ministry of Justice, 2016), iii.
[16] Prisoner Learning Alliance, *The Digital Divide: Lessons from Prisons Abroad*, 2020.
[17] Brent A. Moore et al., 'Computer-Based Interventions for Drug Use Disorders: A Systematic Review', *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 40 (April 2011).
[18] Chris Hollis et al., 'Annual Research Review: Digital Health Interventions for Children and Young People with Mental Health Problems - a Systematic and Meta-Review', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, and Allied Disciplines* 58 (April 2017); Gerhard Andersson and Pim Cuijpers, 'Internet-Based and Other Computerized Psychological Treatments for Adult Depression: A Meta-Analysis', *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* 38 (December 2009).

Figure 2: Breaking Free

It is estimated that 44 per cent of all theft, burglary, and shoplifting offences are committed to fund an addiction,[19] meaning tackling addictions is critical to breaking the cycle of offending.

Breaking Free is an interactive, online recovery support programme, available 24/7, that targets substance misuse, mental health, and desistance simultaneously. It can be configured to help with addiction to 70 different substances, giving prisoners a 'recovery toolkit' to help them change their thought processes and manage risky situations, and mapping progress on a personal dashboard.[20] Prisoners can continue to access the service after release.

Multiple studies have shown that Breaking Free is effective at tackling addiction, depression, and anxiety, and improving psychosocial outcomes.[21] It is the only digital intervention to be approved by the prison service as an 'Effective Regime Intervention', and is accredited by the the Ministry of Justice Correctional Services Advice and Accreditation Panel, an independent panel of experts who certify gold-standard interventions that will reduce reoffending.[22]

Source: Breaking Free Group, *Webpage* (accessed 22nd July 2020).

Computer-assisted therapies can deliver more targeted, bespoke help, quicker than might otherwise be possible in prison. It can take several months to enrol a prisoner in an offending behaviour programme, but digital programmes can be accessed "at the drop of a hat".[23] They are now being trialled to address a wide range of other issues, including helping prisoners with self-management, and managing the risk posed by perpetrators of domestic abusers.[24] Further, compared with more traditional approaches, multimedia sources and animations can be a more engaging way for prisoners to learn.[25]

It is, however, important to note that the best results are achieved by inmates who receive in-person support alongside computerised CBT.[26] This and the importance of

[19] Hannah Mills, Sara Skodbo, and Peter Blyth, *Understanding Organised Crime: Estimating the Scale and the Social and Economic Costs* (Home Office, 2013), 68.
[20] Breaking Free Group, 'Solutions for: Prisons and Probation', Webpage, 22 July 2020.
[21] Sarah Elison, Glyn Davies, and Jonathan Ward, 'Effectiveness of Computer-Assisted Therapy for Substance Dependence Using Breaking Free Online: Subgroup Analyses of a Heterogeneous Sample of Service Users', *JMIR Mental Health* 2 (2015); Sarah Elison, Glyn Davies, and Jonathan Ward, 'An Outcomes Evaluation of Computerized Treatment for Problem Drinking Using Breaking Free Online', *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 33 (April 2015); Sarah Elison et al., 'An Outcomes Study of ETherapy for Dual Diagnosis Using Breaking Free Online', *Advances in Dual Diagnosis* 7 (May 2014); Sarah Elison et al., 'Feasibility of a UK Community-Based, ETherapy Mental Health Service in Greater Manchester: Repeated-Measures and between-Groups Study of "Living Life to the Full Interactive", "Sleepio" and "Breaking Free Online" at "Self Help Services"', *BMJ Open* 7 (July 2017); Sarah Elison et al., 'Implementation of Computer-Assisted Therapy for Substance Misuse: A Qualitative Study of Breaking Free Online Using Roger's Diffusion of Innovation Theory', *Drugs and Alcohol Today* 14 (November 2014).
[22] Breaking Free Group, 'Solutions for: Prisons and Probation'.
[23] Jason Morris, 'Developing Digitally Enabled Interventions for Prison and Probation Settings: A Review', *Journal of Forensic Practice* 20 (2018): 5.
[24] The Intervention Hub, 'Welcome to the Intervention Hub', Web Page, 16 September 2020.
[25] Morris, 'Developing Digitally Enabled Interventions for Prison and Probation Settings: A Review', 2–3.
[26] Andersson and Cuijpers, 'Internet-Based and Other Computerized Psychological Treatments for Adult Depression: A Meta-Analysis', 202; Sally Brabyn et al., 'The Second Randomised Evaluation of the Effectiveness, Cost-Effectiveness and Acceptability of Computerised Therapy (REEACT-2) Trial: Does the Provision of Telephone Support Enhance the Effectiveness of Computer-Delivered Cognitive Behaviour Therapy? A Randomised Controlled Trial', *Health Technology Assessment* 20 (November 2016): viii.

forming trusting relationships with prisoners means that computer-assisted therapies should complement, not replace, in-person interventions.

1.2.3 Maintaining family ties

Lord Farmer's review on the importance of family ties to desistance concluded that prisons should support prisoners to have "the best relationships possible in highly constrained circumstances".[27] The Ministry of Justice has found that prisoners who are visited by their families are nearly 40 per cent less likely to reoffend than those who are not.[28]

Limited means of communication in many prisons makes this difficult. Prisoners are unable to keep in touch with their families via video calls, so between visits, they rely on letter writing and communal telephones shared by an entire wing. This allows for little or no privacy and is a source of tension,[29] while letters are not a practical or efficient way for illiterate prisoners to communicate with their families.

This has been an even greater struggle during the pandemic when prison visits were suspended entirely. Many prisoners and their families were unable to see loved ones for three months.

Virtual communication allows prisoners to have easier and steadier contact with loved ones, and the coronavirus has catalysed its use. An evaluation of in-cell telephony at seven prisons reported that prisoners and staff groups had found improved access to be an "overwhelmingly beneficial development",[30] and staff at each prison said that it had reduced tensions associated with communal phones. Further, 26 prisons introduced video calls during the first lockdown.[31] This is an important step towards better family contact, but technical issues at several prisons have frustrated progress. Reliable infrastructure will be key to realising the potential of virtual communication in prisons, which is discussed in the next chapter.

1.2.4 Preparations for release

In the weeks leading up to a prisoners' release, prisons should take steps to ensure that the person's return to society is as smooth as possible. Too often, outcomes are inadequate; the Chief Inspector of Prisons has said that resettlement services are "pedestrian at best".[32] It is well known that having secure accommodation and an offer of employment significantly improve prisoners' chances of desistance. Yet only a fifth of

[27] Lord Michael Farmer, *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*, 2017, 4.
[28] Chris May, Nalini Sharma, and Duncan Stewart, 'Factors Linked to Re-Offending: A One-Year Follow-up of Prisoners Who Took Part in the Resettlement Surveys 2001, 2003 and 2004' (Ministry of Justice, 2008), 6.
[29] Palmer, Hatcher, and Tonkin, 'Evaluation of Digital Technology in Prisons', 31,34-35.
[30] Ibid., 16.
[31] Prison Reform Trust, *CAPPTIVE: Covid-19 Action Prisons Project: Tracking Innovation, Valuing Experience, Briefing No. 1* (Prison Reform Trust, 2020), 13.
[32] HM Inspectorate of Probation, *An Inspection of Through the Gate Resettlement Services for Short-Term Prisoners*, 2016, 3.

ex-prisoners are in pay-as-you-earn employment a year after release,[33] one in six is released homeless,[34] and many leave custody without even a bank account.

This is an incredibly difficult transition, and ensuring the right support is in place can greatly improve prisoners' prospects. Digital tools can help prisoners to prepare for their release, including hosting a range of advice and information and interview preparation, enabling prisoners to manage their resettlement needs from an earlier stage.

On release, these can be 'carried over' and continue to be accessed by ex-prisoners in the community. Platforms such as *Socrates 360,* which give prisoners access to a customisable range of services in prison, can be accessed via a free mobile app on release.[35] Resettlement services are criticised for supporting prisoners to the gate, but not *through* the gate.[36] This could be one aspect of the solution, to provide greater continuity of support.

More fundamentally, as online access is now the default for most community services, prisoners who are not permitted any internet access up to the point of release face considerable problems. They can already apply for jobs via access to a Jobcentre Plus site hosted on the *Virtual Campus'* intranet, but as the site is not 'live' it can quickly become outdated, and it has been suggested that a prison email address may lead to prisoners being discounted for job opportunities.[37] A new version of Virtual Campus is currently being rolled out, and it is hoped that this will allow for a more responsive intranet. Many community-based organisations that support rehabilitation rely entirely on written letters and visits, which, as several interviews for this paper stressed, can mean prisoners lose touch with support.

A lack of internet access is a substantial barrier to resettlement and participation in modern society. Controlled internet access, and personal email accounts in the 12-week pre-release period, should be allowed for the purpose of applying for jobs, benefits, and bank accounts, for instance, through the whitelisting of websites like Jobcentre Plus, Indeed and Monster.

[33] Ministry of Justice, *Education and Employment Strategy*, 2018, 3.
[34] Prison Reform Trust, *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile Winter 2019*, 2020, 53.
[35] Socrates Software, 'Prisons', Webpage, 23 July 2020.
[36] HM Inspectorate of Probation, *An Inspection of Through the Gate Resettlement Services for Short-Term Prisoners*; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, *An Inspection of Through the Gate Resettlement Services for Prisoners Serving 12 Months or More*, 2015.
[37] Champion and Edgar, *Through the Gateway: How Computers Can Transform Rehabilitation.*, 4–5.

2. Overcoming barriers to digital services

Overall, the application of digital technology in prisons has been slow and piecemeal. Several interviewees expressed frustration that "not much has changed" over recent years and that progress has been "protracted". A government-commissioned review first argued that "private study for prisoners can be facilitated by smarter use of ICT" nine years ago.[38] This has been true of past 'technological' developments: it took 12 years to roll out television, which is now standard.[39] The coronavirus pandemic has exposed how far behind prisons are on digital transformation compared to other public services, and the negative consequences of this lack of progress.

The digital divide between prisons and the community is out of step with the modern world and does not balance the needs of punishment and rehabilitation. This line needs to be redrawn to tackle digital exclusion, realise the potential for digital technology to be used to create a more effective prison system, and to improve prisons' resilience to future lockdowns – but this will take time. Although the coronavirus is likely to accelerate the adoption of technology, longstanding barriers must be addressed.

2.1 Developing a needs-based strategy

Above all, the wider adoption of digital technologies should be led by an understanding of prisoners' and prisons' needs, and not by a desire to introduce technology for its own sake (see Figure 3 at the bottom of this section).[40]

If service users – prisoners, their families, prison staff, digital service providers, and rehabilitative service providers – are not consulted during service design and implementation, there runs a risk that digital services will not meet the needs of all those who use them. In a research seminar for this paper, attendees from each of these groups emphasised the need for user consultation during service design to ensure a good understanding of the problems digital services are trying to solve, and the outcomes that they are trying to achieve.

This will be especially important for particular cohorts. Several attendees at the seminar noted the growing number of elderly prisoners, who may struggle to interact with digital services. They will also have different rehabilitative needs than the rest of the population – for instance, services aimed at improving employment prospects may be less relevant. Similarly, prisoners on remand or serving very short sentences may have greater need of services focussed on resettlement than of longer-running courses or programmes. In these cases, digital services and their interfaces will need to be adaptable.

[38] Coates, 'Unlocking Potential: A Review of Education in Prison', ii.
[39] Victoria Knight, *Remote Control: Television in Prison* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
[40] Steven Van De Steene and Victoria Knight, 'Digital Transformation for Prisons: Developing a Needs-Based Strategy', *Probation Journal* 64 (September 2017).

It will also be necessary to receive ongoing feedback from users to monitor the consequences of digital services. Digital services will increase prisoners' access to information, give them more autonomy, and remove some face-to-face processes. This is likely to have knock-on effects on how prisoners and prison staff interact with and relate to one another.

Creating a feedback loop is also important to ensure that service transformation does not progress in a fragmented way, which is already evident in some parts of the system. Several interviewees noted that education continues to be the main focus of digital services, and their potential to improve outcomes in other areas is given less attention.[41] One example of this is that the Prison Service Order governing internet access for prisoners refers to balancing "security considerations" with "prisoners' access to learning materials", but not to resettlement services or treatment programmes.

Dr Victoria Knight and Steven Van De Steene argue that prisons must develop a digital "needs-based strategy" that considers the needs of service users, and takes a whole system approach to digital transformation, to ensure that digital services are effective (see Figure 4 below). This approach should be central as the Ministry of Justice moves forwards with more prisoner-facing digital services.

Figure 4: A needs-based strategy for digital services in prisons

Guiding principle	Action for HMPPS/prisons
1. Digital technology meets the needs of all stakeholders	1. Consultation in HMPPS, with prison staff, and with prisoners
2. Digital technology is holistically embedded in prisons	2. In-cell devices designed with future applications in mind; can deliver wide range of services in prison, not fixed purpose
3. Develop a single technology solution and framework to govern all processes	3. Single device and operating system to control all digital services
4. Digital technology generates positive outcomes for all users	4. Develop change-management strategy, communicate change to all users and support them through changes
5. Governance and Management are separate: Governance evaluates the needs of stakeholders, directs policy accordingly, and monitors it; Management should ensure policy is following direction set by Governance function	5. Ensure constant feedback between HMPPS and prisons, who are informed by user feedback, on how well digital technology is meeting performing against set objectives

Source: adapted from the ISACA COBIT 5 framework and from Steven Van De Steene and Victoria Knight, 'Digital Transformation for Prisons: Developing a Needs-Based Strategy', *Probation Journal* 64 (September 2017).

[41] Champion and Edgar, *Through the Gateway: How Computers Can Transform Rehabilitation.*, 3.

Idea 1: The Ministry of Justice should consult with all groups of service users, including prisoners, prison staff of all levels, digital service providers, and rehabilitative service providers, during the design and implementation of digital services. This will ensure that services meet the needs of users. Feedback loops should be built into this process to monitor impact and enable improvements.

2.2 Building the right infrastructure

One of the biggest barriers to delivering digital services is infrastructure: to benefit from digital services, and develop digital skills, prisoners need to have ready access to a device with a stable connection to the intranet, or internet.

Currently, this is only a reality in two prisons. A handful of others use tablets that cannot be used unsupervised, so access for most will remain highly restricted. Most prisons do not have the hardware, and their cells have not been retrofitted to enable intranet. Without these, prisoners will not be able to access the benefits of digital services.

More broadly, connectivity in prison education suites is reported to be a problem in many prisons, which hinders technology even when it is available.[42] In prisons with poor connectivity, as one interviewee for this paper explained, content can be so slow to load that multimedia and interactive content "simply won't operate". They went on to say that, in their view, the Ministry of Justice was "spending a lot of money on stuff they can't get the optimal effects from, due to poor infrastructure."

Adapting prisons to enable in-cell devices presents a big challenge. While new prisons such as Berwyn have been, as one interviewee put it, "built with digital in mind", a third of the prison estate is Victorian.[43] Enabling in-cell connections to the intranet or internet will be very expensive – the costs of cabling at six prisons was almost £6 million.[44] The cost will vary from prison-to-prison, depending on their architecture. The same is true of in-cell devices themselves; in the two pilots of in-cell laptops the total cost was £546,000.[45] HMP Berwyn and Wayland had a combined population of around 2,630 in January, which would represent a cost of around £200 per prisoner.[46]

To improve access, the Ministry of Justice will need to invest to improve broadband and purchase hardware across the estate. Although this will require investment over several years, interviews for this paper revealed that a significant number of prisons already have Category Six ethernet cable wired into cells, which could support in-cell devices, meaning the infrastructure is already in place to move forward in some areas

[42] Ibid., 15–16; Prison Reform Trust, *CAPPTIVE: Covid-19 Action Prisons Project: Tracking Innovation, Valuing Experience, Briefing No. 1*, 14; Lucy Frazer MP, 'Prisons: Visits: Written Question' (HC61691, 30 June 2020).
[43] House of Commons Library, *The Prison Estate*, 2018.
[44] Ministry of Justice, 'Contracts Held by the Ministry of Justice with Strategic Suppliers', n.d., accessed 16 September 2020.
[45] Rory Stewart, 'Prisons: Computers and Telephones: Written Question' (HC 132163, 12 March 2018).
[46] Population figures taken from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, 'Prison Population Monthly Bulletin, January 2020', Excel File, 2020 N.B. It isn't clear how many laptops were purchased per prison, so it is not possible to work out a true unit cost. £207 represents the amount paid per prisoner, based on the January 2020 population. .

of the estate. Targeted broadband upgrades may be needed across the estate to enable digital services in prisons where connectivity is currently so poor that they struggle to support them.[47] Without this, the value of this technology – and its potential to promote desistance – cannot possibly be realised.

Idea 2: To improve prisoners' access to technology, the Ministry of Justice should develop a plan for adapting the entire prison estate to enable in-cell connectivity and to provide in-cell devices, starting with prisons that could already support them. Funding to begin this should be provided through the next one-year spending round.

2.3 A balanced approach to risk

A second significant barrier is the tension between increasing access to technology, and the internet in particular, and security concerns. The Prison Service Order Governing prisoners' access to technology and the internet states:

> *"Access to Internet facilities may allow prisoners or offenders in the community to abuse [or harass] victims…and these considerations must be weighed against any perceived advantages…The risk exists that prisoners could use the Internet to commit, prepare for or encourage crime whilst in custody. Additionally they could access material that might endanger the security of the prison e.g. access to bomb-making techniques…**The accessibility of learning materials by prisoners in custody must be balanced against security considerations."*** (Emphasis added.)[48]

On this basis, justifiably, technology and internet access are tightly regulated. Prisoners cannot have "uncontrolled access to the Internet and/or to a computer",[49] all IT systems and devices must be approved by the Ministry of Justice,[50] and all prisoners accessing the internet or technology must undergo an individual risk assessment.[51] This level of regulation will necessarily make it harder for prisons to adopt digital technologies.

Prison security and public safety is paramount. Yet, while interviewees accepted this, several argued that policy was weighted too heavily towards security. Two interviewees gave the example of prisoners being unable to use Microsoft Word, which clearly impacts on education and job applications, due to fears that it could be used to write and conceal code: "the prison service is so risk averse that they won't allow free text technology…they might as well just give people a book".

Multiple interviewees argued that while a level of security would always be necessary, the existing level of concern was "massively outdated", and that technology was advanced enough to mitigate against serious risks. In fact, the recent Government-commissioned evaluation of digital technology in prisons concluded that "[m]isuse of the digital technology was rare, although there were a few incidents reported".[52]

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[47] For one example, see: HMP Brixton Independent Monitoring Board, *Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Brixton*, 2020, 17.
[48] National Offender Management Service, *PSO 25/2014 - IT Security Policy*, n.d., sec. 16.7-16.9.
[49] Ibid., sec. 16.10.
[50] Ibid., sec. 16.11-16.13.
[51] Ibid., sec. 16.12.
[52] Palmer, Hatcher, and Tonkin, 'Evaluation of Digital Technology in Prisons', 27.

Wider use of in-cell devices would entail a higher degree of risk; and require HMPPS cyber security and intelligence units, and prison security departments, to continually assess, respond to, and evolve with the threat. Nonetheless, the current position of prohibiting uncontrolled internet access has led to a *de facto* total ban on internet use by prisoners. This puts England and Wales out of step with several other countries who are facilitating restricted internet access, subject to assessments of prisoners' risk (see Figure 5 below).[53]

Figure 5: Countries allowing restricted internet access for prisoners

Several other countries are now facilitating prisoners having restricted internet access to promote desistance. The extent of this access varies, but in closed prisons in several countries, including Australia, Denmark, Spain, Finland, and Germany, prisoners can access pre-approved websites. In some cases, prisoners can apply for access to be expanded for specific websites.

Several of Denmark's open prisons operate 'internet cafes' that allow prisoners more open access to the internet. This is used for educational purposes, applying for jobs, and communication. Prisoners' use of the internet is monitored, and inappropriate content is blocked.

Denmark permits internet access on three tiers: from internet cafes, to tightly controlled classroom use via a secure network, down to "fairly unrestricted" in-cell access, including the use of e-mail. It was reported in 2018 that the secure network in closed prisons had been shut off due to concerns about the spread of extremist content.[54] In-cell access is approved on a case-by-case basis for education and work purposes. In 2009, on a given day, 2 per cent of prisoners were granted this level of access, but it was reported in 2012 that this had increased.

This model of 'tiered' access could be replicated in England and Wales' open prisons.

Source: Prisoner Learning Alliance, *The digital divide: lessons from prisons abroad* (2020); Peter Scharff Smith: '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 (2012).

The Ministry of Justice should aspire to create an intranet experience that is like a 'walled garden' for prisoners: access to an intranet that mirrors the experience of using the internet, has extensive and easy access to legitimate resources, but restricts access to illegitimate sites.[55]

[53] Prisoner Learning Alliance, *The Digital Divide: Lessons from Prisons Abroad*.
[54] Michael Thykier, 'Ekstremistisk Indhold På Fire Playstations Udløser Totalt Internetforbud i Fængsler', *Jyllands-Posten*, 5 July 2018.
[55] Helen Sara Farley and Anne Pike, *Engaging Prisoners in Education: Reducing Risk and Recidivism*, 2016, 8.

The Ministry should revisit the rules governing internet access, which are broad and subject to interpretation, which is likely to err heavily on the side of caution given the focus on security.[56] Clear and more comprehensive guidance could help prison staff to make better-informed decisions about access to technology, and the internet.

Idea 3: To ensure that prisoners can have controlled access to the internet for legitimate purposes, the Ministry of Justice should review and update the prison service rules governing internet access, and accompanying guidance, to ensure that these are comprehensive enough to allow for proportionate judgements on risk.

Further, in the pre-release period, there is a strong argument for allowing prisoners access to a personal email account so that they can establish the necessary links in the community. Some prisons are already trying to facilitate this with the use of 'departure lounges' – computers with internet access enabled, on site but sometimes just outside the prison gates, where prisoners can make arrangements for their release under supervision. In closed prisons where unrestricted internet access is not possible within security constraints, prisoners could be permitted to use departure lounges, subject to an assessment of risk and their level of need.

However, there is also a need to ensure that prisoners can access digital services *after* they are released.[57] Some prisoners will not own a mobile when they are released and may not have a data allowance, which will be a barrier to navigating services, or continuing to access digital services that they used in custody. Indeed, some will spend their £46 discharge grant on a phone for this reason and be left with no money for anything else.[58]

For this reason, the Government should consider making a low-cost, pre-paid mobile device with a data allowance part of the release package for prisoners without a phone. This would not have to be very expensive; 'trailing-edge', or even second-hand devices, could be provided, with the Government then financing, for a period, the phone contract itself.

Idea 4: To help prisoners to transition back into the community and navigate support services, the Ministry of Justice should review it's discharge policy and consider providing prisoners who do not own a phone with a low-cost, pre-paid mobile phone with a data allowance.

[56] National Offender Management Service, *PSO 25/2014 - IT Security Policy*.
[57] Switchback, *Review of Prisoner Discharge Policy*, 2020.
[58] Ibid., 2.

2.4 Managing change

The digital divide in prisons affects the people who work in prisons as well as the prisoners themselves – one interviewee suggested that the prison service was "institutionalised" in its attitudes to digital. Introducing digital services that were previously exclusively paper-based or face-to-face, is a significant change, and both prisoners and staff may be slow to adapt.

The recent government-commissioned evaluation of digital technology in prisons found that some prisoners were "resistant" to new ways of working and needed "support" to adapt.[59] Similarly, uptake of a new mobile device for prison staff was said to be "low", "stem[ming] from a lack of familiarity with information technology generally, which impacted on staff confidence".[60] This could be a barrier to uptake if digital technologies are used more widely.

Another consideration should be that, as the introduction of digital technologies will be a major cultural shift in prisons, it is likely to affect the prison environment in ways that have not been anticipated. For example, giving prisoners more autonomy over their personal affairs, removing some 'gatekeeper' functions from prison staff, and the prospect of prisoners spending more time in cell for the near future, could all impact staff-prisoner relationships and create risks for the welfare of prisoners and staff. It is crucial that these effects are monitored. Prison staff will not only need practical training on how to use new technologies, but also support to manage changing interactions with the prisoners in their care.

In order to make best use of new technologies, new training and induction processes will be required. Accessing digital devices and services will need to become part of the induction process for new prisoners, therefore prison officers will need to be trained to do this, and to support prisoners on an ongoing basis. The Government's evaluation of digital technology in prisons suggests that this may need to be an intensive effort in the early days of technology being introduced.[61] Governors and those with prison security within their remit will also need to be supported to make well-informed decisions on what services prisoners can use and how they can use them.

Idea 5: The Ministry of Justice should consider what training and induction process will be required for prisoners and prison staff at all levels as digital technologies are introduced more widely, to ensure good uptake and effective use.

[59] Palmer, Hatcher, and Tonkin, 'Evaluation of Digital Technology in Prisons', 27.
[60] Ibid., 28.
[61] Ibid., 27–28.

2.5 Partnerships and knowledge-sharing

To design and procure digital devices and services for prisons, effective partnership working will be crucial. Previous research has shown that "disjoined commissioning [can] imping[e] on prisoners' experience of using ICT", due to services being run by different organisations with separate targets and objectives.[62] In order to deliver holistic services that work for all users, commissioning will need to be coordinated as in-cell technology is used more widely.

A wide range of digital devices and services are now available, and some have been described in this paper. However, interviews for this paper suggested some tension between HMPPS and digital service providers surrounding procurement.

On the one hand, it was claimed that there was a mature market of UK-based providers who were already engaged in helping prison services abroad, but that it was difficult to engage with HMPPS. Interviewees suggested that HMPPS were trying to develop services in-house when a suitable option was already available from the private sector. It was also claimed that prisons could be blocked from purchasing solutions from the market. Anecdotally, a respondent to a recent survey by the Prison Reform Trust echoed this, relating how a prison "very quickly" purchased computers to enable virtual calls during the lockdown, but was blocked by the Ministry of Justice "because they preferred [them] to use the system they were developing. But this wasn't yet available."[63]

On the other hand, it is important that services are not purchased in haste so that the needs of users are well-understood, and that a consistent approach is taken to service transformation. To date, procurement has been patchwork, with separate solutions being designed and implemented for different functions, rather than there being a single, integrated solution. This makes management of such infrastructures complex and potentially limited.

An interview with a representative of HMPPS stressed that different prisons purchasing different products, or separate products for different digital services, could result in systems "not speaking to each other", and notes that this could make the "long-term vision" of a single digital solution "much harder to achieve". They suggested that commissioning would need to be centrally managed in order to avert this.

While digital transformation needs to be managed carefully to avoid inconsistency, it is important that HMPPS does not duplicate solutions that already exist – several interviewees for this paper used the phrase "reinventing the wheel". At key stages in the development of digital solutions, there should be consultations to enable open dialogue between HMPPS digital and market providers, both so that HMPPS are aware of existing solutions, and so that providers can, where appropriate, work to the specifications required by HMPPS to offer their services.

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[62] Champion and Edgar, *Through the Gateway: How Computers Can Transform Rehabilitation.*, 23.
[63] Prison Reform Trust, *CAPPTIVE: Covid-19 Action Prisons Project: Tracking Innovation, Valuing Experience, Briefing No. 1*, 14.

Figure 6: *Digital services in Belgium and Singapore*

PrisonCloud

is a world-leading solution for digital prison services, developed for the Belgian prison service. It is a consolidated platform for digital services, providing a single-point of access for a full range of services that includes entertainment, communication, requests for library and canteen services, behavioural programmes, resettlement services, and access to court records. It is accessed via a monitor installed in-cell.

Digitisation of Inmate Rehabilitation & Corrections Tool (DIRECT)

The Singapore Prison Service has developed DIRECT tablets to provide access to a customisable suite of apps, including learning resources, entertainment, and news and information. Prisoners can also stay in touch with their families via 'e-letters'. The tablets are shared among inmates and can be accessed in-cell.

Source: Victoria Knight and Steven Van De Steene, 'Digitising the Prison: The Light and Dark Future', *Prison Service Journal* 231 (May 2017); Singapore Prison Service, *Annual Report* (2018).

HMPPS digital should also engage with their international counterparts in countries where digital services are more advanced, (see Figure 6 above). In an interview for this paper, Steven Van de Steene, a consultant and expert on technology for corrections, said "prison systems are always assuming that they are unique", and suggested that agencies could learn from each other. The experience of countries like Belgium and Singapore, which are advanced in their use of technology for rehabilitation, could provide good guidance for the Ministry of Justice to develop digital technology.

Idea 6: The Ministry of Justice should consult with their counterparts in other countries, academics, and businesses in the sector on the introduction of prisoner-facing digital services, to review existing evidence, learn from their experiences and best practice, and ensure that the Ministry does not duplicate efforts to design and implement digital services.

3. Conclusion

Prisons are decades behind the rest of the public sector in their use of digital technology, but it is increasingly recognised by the public, and the Ministry of Justice, that this needs to change. The digital divide has meant that prisons cannot draw on technology to answer some of the most difficult social problems society faces, prisoners cannot access services to address their offending, and those who will be released from custody – the overwhelming majority of prisoners – are not prepared to be independent, digitally-capable citizens. The divide has become so pronounced that giving prisoners access to very limited technology is seen as a 'luxury'. Instead, the focus should be on supporting prisoners to desist from offending, which in turn will mean fewer victims of crime.

Digital services can be one element of the Government's efforts to do this, and they will be an essential contingency during continued coronavirus lockdowns. Yet, as one interviewee for this paper summarised, "this is not going to be a quick fix. There is an inevitability that prisons are going to be digitised, [but] the digital revolution is just beginning." The prison estate is not yet widely equipped to deliver digital services, and it will continue to be the case that security concerns must be balanced against efforts to rehabilitate and resettle ex-prisoners.

As digital devices and services are introduced more widely, there should be a coherent strategy for the estate to ensure that they meet the needs of prisoners and staff, and overcome siloes in the ways that services are commissioned and delivered. This will require more detailed guidance for prisons on how to balance security concerns with the potential for technology to be harnessed for good. This will be a leap into the unknown for the prison service if it does not draw on the examples of best practice from abroad.

Appendix

Reform organised a research seminar to consider how digital technology could improve resettlement outcomes, and is grateful to the 14 individuals and organisations who participated:

Alice Noakes, Service Owner, HMPPS Digital

Dr Daniel Brown, Head of Business Development, Meganexus

Helen Dyson, Head of Justice and Health, Nacro

Imogen Schartau, Strategic Lead for Health Partnerships in the Community, Reducing Reoffending Directorate, HMPPS

James Levy, Business Development Director, Socrates Software

Josh Mitchell, Area Resettlement Manager, Kent Surrey Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company

Laura Boorman, Resettlement, Governance and Workforce Lead, Reducing Reoffending Directorate, HMPPS

Monique Williams, Head of Delivery, Switchback

Nicky Park, Senior Manager, St Giles Trust

Norah Keller, Head of Reducing Reoffending, HMP Berwyn

Patrick Sutherland-Harris, Client Partner, BT Central Government

Rachel Tynan, Policy and Practice Lead, Unlock

Sean Furlong, Volunteer, User Voice

Dr Victoria Knight, Senior Research Fellow, School of Applied Social Sciences, De Montfort University

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