



Update and restart

Post-pandemic prison digitisation in England and Wales

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Executive Summary

In 2013, the Prison Reform Trust published a report called *Through the Gateway*, together with Prisoners' Education Trust, which called for "interactive, updated and secure web content" to be made available in prisons.¹ Over 10 years and one pandemic later, we reviewed prisons' digitisation progress in England and Wales. We spoke to prisoners, staff, leaders, and service providers from the private and voluntary sectors, as well as academic experts in prison digitisation. Through our conversations with these stakeholders and through prison visits, we saw an emerging digital culture in prisons, prompting us to pay attention to how prisoners are experiencing digitisation, and explore how human factors affect digital rollout. Culture and user experience are two domains which have been identified globally as crucial factors influencing prison digitisation trajectories,² and England and Wales is no exception. In this report, we first describe where progress has been made in five key areas: family contact; self-services; health and wellbeing; education and resettlement. We then move on to describe what we saw and heard about experiences of digitisation, which spanned the five key themes outlined below.

The availability of digital technology in prisons has been transformed since the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost all prisons now have virtual methods for people to stay in touch with their loved ones, and provision in self-service; health; wellbeing and education has significantly expanded. All of these have had positive benefits for prisoners.

But the digital wall between prison and the community continues to impact resettlement. The lack of internet access in the weeks preceding release severely hampers prisoners from making practical arrangements. This affects how they spend their time under release on temporary licence (ROTL), when many frantically try to make the most of internet access in the community to undertake resettlement tasks. The stress and unfamiliarity of doing so undermines their digital confidence. Prison staff are acutely aware of this problem and try hard to support prisoners within the boundaries of what is possible. 2024 saw positive progress in the recruitment of specialist roles to support prisoners with accommodation, employment and finance, but the digital wall limits what can be achieved and how swiftly. This results in many people still leaving prison without suitable housing, employment, ID or banking arrangements.

Digitisation is changing relationships with people in and outside prison. Being able to speak to loved ones in a variety of ways; in privacy; for a longer period; and without the need to travel have all helped people to maintain family ties. The text messaging service, currently only available in private prisons HMP Parc and HMP Five Wells, was especially appreciated for its relational benefits, and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) should consider making this available in public sector prisons. Digitisation is also changing relationships inside prison, with evidence of improved communication between prisoners and civilian staff, better leadership visibility, and technology proving new opportunities for building community and peer mentoring. However, there is some fear among staff about technology replacing quality person-to-person contact, which can inadvertently introduce additional disadvantages particularly for vulnerable prisoners.³ International experts have urged vigilance against unintended consequences of this nature, and against solutionism that utilises technology to solve problems without addressing root causes (such as staff shortages limiting time for quality interactions).⁴ The relational impact of digitisation clearly varied by context and leadership, and both positive and negative consequences should be closely monitored for learning purposes.

Digitisation is changing many aspects of prison life, including going some way to addressing entrenched problems, but also temporarily creating digital inequality. Self-services have created a framework for digital audit trails, greater transparency, speedier responses, and enhanced self-responsibility. This has been welcomed by staff and prisoners alike as a solution to the many problems of traditional prison bureaucracy. However, this transformative effect is also changing the way some prisoners think about progression, with people at highly digitised prisons saying they would be reluctant to move to less digitised establishments even in lower security categories. Hence while digital rollout

1 [Champion, N. & Edgar, K. \(2013\). *Through the gateway: how computers can transform rehabilitation*. Prisoners Education Trust & Prison Reform Trust.](#)

2 [Knight, V., Ross, S. & Wood, M. \(2024\). Digitalising corrections. *Journal of Criminology*, 57\(3\), 263-274.](#)

3 [Peplow, D. & Phillips, J. \(2024\). Communication repair in parole oral hearings: Comparing remote and in-person settings. *Journal of Criminology*, 57\(3\), 352-371.](#)

4 [Knight, V., Ross, S. & Wood, M. \(2024\). Digitalising corrections. *Journal of Criminology*, 57\(3\), 263-274.](#)

remains only partial, with open prisons a lower priority for digitisation, a new digital divide is being created. In the community, lack of access to technology can create disadvantage and exclusion.⁵ Previously, attention has been called to the digital exclusion of prisoners as a whole group,⁶ however this issue is now compounded by variation within the prison estate. There have been calls to treat access to technology as a fundamental human right for prisoners rather than simply a privilege,⁷ and embedding technology in prisons increasingly means certain forms of technology are seen as an important facet of good treatment and conditions.

Attitudes and beliefs towards digitisation matter, and they affect how technology is utilised in prisons. Leadership must be strong and staff buy-in high in order for prisons to face the teething problems that come in the early days of digital installation. There must also be a high degree of commitment to upskilling both staff and prisoners. Without good communication and training, we heard about the risks of both groups becoming cynical and disillusioned. We saw that in order for digitisation to work effectively there must also be a clear vision of what and who it is for. We generally found a strong belief that digitisation's primary purpose is to support prisoners, and consequent commitment is to tailoring content to their needs and making it accessible. But there were also reservations about digitisation serving a hugely expanded market of providers, and a belief that digitisation should not automatically be seen as a solution to all prison problems.

Prison digitisation has been a truly remarkable collaborative effort, and it is vital that the frameworks for effective cooperation are maintained and improved. There were sources of tension between public, private and voluntary sectors, between prisons and headquarters, and between prisoners, staff and providers. This is unsurprising, and there are international examples of tensions between digital and penal culture which can result in more conservative design choices.⁸ Digitisation can be inherently disruptive, and it therefore remains important that communication between all stakeholders remains clear and mutually receptive.

One of the most significant findings was how prisons are responding to digital risks and navigating the path between security and rehabilitation-related goals. What we saw was in many ways not new. Prisons have been managing the security of their establishments for a long time, and the methods they deployed for managing risks were adaptations of methods already known to be effective. These included monitoring communications; controlling accessible content; risk-assessed access; and using gradual rollouts to identify and fix problems. Prisons are now increasingly reliant on the technical expertise of private providers to make devices secure, but private providers have a clear interest in doing this well, in order to secure lucrative Ministry of Justice contracts. There is as yet no available data on security breaches. It would be unrealistic to expect that there are none. In time it is likely that prisons (and society) will reach some degree of understanding about level of tolerated risk posed by technology in prison, in the same way that it does for other items that prisoners are allowed access to. In the meantime, despite the extraordinary pace of innovation in the last few years, risk management is very much business as usual, and we spoke to many staff who were committed to finding digital solutions that balanced rehabilitation, wellbeing, and safety.

Overall, the update and restart of technology in prisons since the pandemic has been a very positive development. However, as with any new innovation, improvements could be made. Our recommendations are detailed below. Some are related to decision-making and culture, and would be relatively cheap to implement. However, the rollout of further digital provision is inevitably costly, and our main recommendation is continued investment in equipping prisons with the basic digital infrastructure to move forward in important areas, such as resettlement provision, family contact and self-services.

5 [Park, S. \(2017\). *Digital capital*. Palgrave Macmillan.](#)

6 [Jewkes, Y. & Johnston, H. \(2009\). "Cavemen in an era of speed-of-light technology": Historical and contemporary perspectives on communication within prisons. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 48\(2\), 132–143.](#)

7 [Knight, V. & Van De Steene, S. \(2020\). The digital prison: Towards an ethics of technology. In P. Birch & L. Sicard \(Eds.\), *Prisons and community corrections* \(pp. 57–71\). Routledge.](#)

8 [Ross, S., Wood, M. A., Baird, R. & Lundberg, K. \(2024\). Shaping the techno-social landscape of corrections: How values, technology, and culture influence the design of correctional service delivery applications. *Journal of Criminology*, 57\(3\), 294-312.](#)

Recommendations

The Ministry of Justice should continue to invest in digital infrastructure for prisons. We heard how digital initiatives in prison must almost always start with substantial upgrades to infrastructure, which carry additional complexities in secure environments. They are also very costly. HMPPS is now in a very positive position in its understanding of how to digitise. The Ministry of Justice should ensure that this position is sustained through adequate investment which allows HMPPS to embed infrastructure necessary for both current ambitions and future resiliency.

HMPPS should digitise resettlement services available in the 12 weeks before release. Being unable to make practical arrangements online disadvantages prisoners. Providing information is not enough. HMPPS should develop a model of service for prisoners nearing release, which allows them to engage in processes such as organising accommodation; applying for jobs; getting ID and banking beyond the digital wall. It should allow direct access to a limited number of key websites to enable prisoners to sort out their own resettlement needs. Prisoners should be provided with a resettlement email address to manage their affairs. Access should be risk assessed and monitored. The model should be piloted and evaluated in a resettlement prison, with lessons learnt for further rollout.

HMPPS should conduct a pilot project in an open prison, providing direct internet access to a select group of risk-assessed prisoners who would otherwise be accessing the internet while on ROTL. Digital progress can be hampered by fears about risk and public perception, yet other jurisdictions have experimented with direct internet access for some prisoners as part of broader rehabilitation and resettlement services. A small-scale controlled pilot in England and Wales would help to evidence risks and benefits of controlled internet access in a managed way, and cross what may appear to be an impenetrable barrier. HMPPS should deploy its considerable expertise in risk management, and such an exercise could produce evidence-based guidance on logistics and security in an ever-digitising world.

HMPPS should explore the introduction of text messaging to public sector prisons. The facility to send and receive texts was hugely valued by prisoners at HMP Five Wells, and the ability to communicate with loved ones in real time distinguished text messages from other forms of family communication. HMPPS should explore options for introducing the text messaging facility to public sector prisons, in parity with the national rollout of other digital communication methods.

HMPPS should complete in-cell telephony rollout to open prisons. The lack of in-cell telephony in open prisons has made the offer of open conditions less appealing to prisoners. This has consequences, as open prisons provide many other resettlement benefits and are a safe way of progressing people towards release. Prisoners should not be discouraged from this progression because of a digital divide between open prisons and others.

HMPPS should expand in-cell devices to more prisons. We will outline in this report the many benefits that in-cell devices have brought to family contact; self-services; health and wellbeing; education and resettlement. The Ministry of Justice has exceeded the previous government's commitment to installing in-cell devices in 15 prisons, with devices available in 19 prisons at the time of writing. It should make an updated commitment to further expansion.

The Ministry of Justice should coordinate digital content to avoid un-necessary duplication or uneven provision. There are multiple providers of digital content in prison. In particular, the Virtual Campus, Ministry of Justice Content Hub, Coracle and Socrates all provide content on overlapping subjects. Diversity and choice are positive, but there should be an overarching strategy and oversight of what is provided, to ensure that prisoners receive a reasonably equivalent selection of content across prisons (and know where to find it). The Ministry of Justice should ensure there is an overall coordinator of content. The integration being provided by Launchpad, HMPPS's digital platform⁹ is a positive step towards achieving this recommendation.

HMPPS should provide support to prison leaders for embedding a digital culture. Prison leaders were crucial in steering digital rollout, communicating key messages and securing buy-in from staff and prisoners. HMPPS should ensure that prison leaders have opportunities to receive support from and learn from each other when engaging in digital rollout across their prisons, and have access to the necessary expertise, tools and resources to embed a digital culture.

⁹ [Ministry of Justice. \(2024, 6 September\). Launchpad Home is live!](#)

HMPPS should invest in upskilling staff and prisoners. We heard of instances where technology was not used as much as it could be because staff and/or prisoners lacked confidence, and because there was not adequate time available for training. Peer mentoring helped, and some staff were making considerable efforts to help less confident prisoners learn digital skills. HMPPS should develop a framework for training staff and prisoners in digital skills as a core part of training and education offers.

At every level, decisions should be taken in line with the principle that digital solutions should complement human contact, not replace it. Digitisation has allowed prisoners to exercise choice over how they learn, relax, manage their affairs and stay in touch with loved ones. These choices should remain, and digital solutions should not replace the role of human contact in these areas. In particular, providers of human services like healthcare and rehabilitation programmes should not have their face-to-face contact with prisoners curtailed, or be passed over in favour of digital providers.

The Ministry of Justice, together with international stakeholders, should establish a Managing Digital Risk forum to facilitate implementing the principle of normalcy in a digital age. The principle of normalcy refers to not subjecting people to further restrictions than necessary for imprisonment, and in its most progressive form, to shaping prison life to closely mirror life outside prison.¹⁰ It was clear that prisons are applying their knowledge of risk and security to digitisation, while retaining commitment to the principle of normalcy in many instances. It was equally clear that the balance between normalcy and security can be achieved in different ways, as demonstrated by international prison jurisdictions. The field is undergoing a considerable degree of innovation, and there is an opportunity to embed new ways of working that at one time may have seemed unthinkable. HMPPS stands to learn a great deal from other countries, and to contribute knowledge from their own digital rollout. Establishing a multi-disciplinary international forum would help good practice to flow into and out of England and Wales through information sharing, learning, innovation, international consultation, and shared thinking in how to safely implement the principle of normalcy in prisons through digitisation.

¹⁰ [van de Rijt, J., van Ginneken, E. & Boone, M. \(2023\), Lost in translation: The principle of normalisation in prison policy in Norway and The Netherlands. *Punishment & Society*, 25\(3\), 766–783.](#)

Background and context

Most people in the UK use the internet. In 2024, people spent an average of four hours and 20 minutes a day online. Only one in 20 people report not having internet access at home.¹¹ Digital technology is not a luxury but a normal part of everyday life; it is integrated into virtually every facet of our lives. People go online to access information, for entertainment, to work, shop, study, access services and to keep in touch. But the ubiquity of digital technology has introduced a new form of disparity. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has warned that “those who are not engaging effectively with the digital world are at risk of being left behind” in a digital divide that is giving rise to inequalities.¹² Digital exclusion is likely to lead to financial exclusion; disrupt access to healthcare, education, or jobs; increase social isolation; and make it harder to find housing.¹³ A 2020 study of digital skills estimated that nine million people, 16% of the population, cannot independently complete basic tasks like connecting to Wi-Fi or opening apps, and a further 2.7 million lack the skills to use the internet to its full advantage. Poor internet literacy is associated with lower income, having higher household bills, and claiming benefits.¹⁴

One group that is institutionally offline is people in prison. The HMPPS IT security policy states:

*Prisoners must not be allowed uncontrolled access to the Internet and/or to a computer or IT system whilst in custody that has software installed enabling Internet connectivity without seeking approval from security group, the IPA team and the completion of a thorough risk assessment.*¹⁵

Living artificially in a pre-internet age risks significant consequences for prisoners’ ability to study, work, communicate with loved ones and access a range of services. These kinds of restrictions can limit their prospects for reintegration. According to standards set by the Council of Europe and the United Nations (UN), people in prison should not be subject to further restrictions than necessary by virtue of their imprisonment:

*Life in prison shall approximate as closely as possible the positive aspects of life in the community.*¹⁶

*The prison regime should seek to minimize any differences between prison life and life at liberty that tend to lessen the responsibility of the prisoners or the respect due to their dignity as human beings.*¹⁷

Neither the European nor UN rules explicitly establish a right of access to the internet. However, its absence could be considered to contravene the principle of normalcy. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that prisoners’ rights have been violated by being denied access to specific websites to carry out legal research¹⁸ and access education-related information.¹⁹ However, in both cases, the court instructed that prisons do not have a general obligation to allow access to the internet or even specific websites. Access can be restricted in pursuit of the legitimate aim of protecting the rights of others and preventing disorder and crime. There are good reasons to restrict certain people in prison from accessing certain websites, including public safety. However, this must be balanced against the new risks posed by digital exclusion and the question of whether poor resettlement outcomes are accepted as the price for eliminating the risk of misuse of the internet while in custody. Public protection is likely to suffer in the long-term if prisons fail to prepare people for life after release.

11 [Ofcom. \(2024\). Online nation: 2024 report. Ofcom.](#)

12 [Office for National Statistics. \(2019, 4 March\). Exploring the UK's digital divide.](#)

13 [Stone, E. \(2021\). Digital exclusion and health inequalities. Good Things Foundation.](#)

14 [Lloyds Bank. \(2020\). Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020. Lloyds Bank.](#)

15 [HM Prison and Probation Service. \(2014\). Prison Service Instruction 25/2014: IT Security Policy. HMPPS.](#)

16 [Council of Europe. \(2006\). European Prison Rules. CoE.](#)

17 [United Nations General Assembly. \(2015\). The Nelson Mandela rules: Standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners. UN.](#)

18 [Kalda v Estonia. \(2016\). European Court of Human Rights. Application no. 17429/10.](#)

19 [Jankovskis v. Lithuania. \(2017\). European Court of Human Rights. Application no. 21575/08.](#)

In 2013, the Prison Reform Trust published a report calling for “interactive, updated and secure web content” to be made available in prisons, together with Prisoners’ Education Trust.²⁰ But strategic commitments to digitisation only accelerated during and after the pandemic. The Conservative government made clear, in its 2021 Prisons Strategy White Paper, that improving access to technology for people in prison was high on its agenda:

As well as modernising the physical prison estate, we must also scale up our use of digital, data and technology by modernising the technological infrastructure in prisons and transforming our legacy systems. Prisoner-facing technology can be transformative: in-cell laptops and kiosks permit prisoners to study towards qualifications and develop skills, complete transactional services online including accessing menus and ordering food, checking pin-phone credit and account balances, and making use of the emailing service for prisoners. ... Better data and in-cell technology can more effectively support family ties, and a safe and secure environment to live and work in. This reduces the administrative burden on our hard-working staff, freeing them up to spend more time engaged in meaningful contact with prisoners whilst also increasing prisoners’ sense of agency over their own affairs.²¹

The white paper also committed to continue offering virtual visits, and plans to enable prisoners to interview for jobs in the community via video technology. The plans also covered telemedicine, including appointments with community substance misuse services pre-release (subject to service evaluation).

These commitments were reflected in strategic priorities. The Ministry of Justice’s 2022 to 2025 digital strategy has a prisons strand with an overarching aim of delivering “digital prison services that replace legacy systems and support rehabilitation”, through services that:

- Standardise processes and increase efficiency.
- Use data to support risk management.
- Support prisoners to take control of their lives by empowering them to take charge of their own administrative and other tasks.

These aims, while including an enhanced focus on normalising digital technology for prisoners, are also largely concerned with the broader modernisation of the Ministry of Justice. The HMPPS Digital, Data & Technology Strategy²² took a similarly broad approach, and aimed to complete the following by 2024:

- Provide staff with up-to-date IT equipment and applications, so they can work effectively, efficiently and collaboratively.
- Replace legacy systems with simpler, clearer, faster digital services, allowing staff to focus more time on the individual and their needs, rather than the administration of their case.
- Give people in prison the digital tools & technology to support their rehabilitation.
- Make video conferencing accessible to everyone, building rehabilitative relationships for people in prison & on probation, their families & friends and staff supporting them.
- Capture, store and share high quality data across our services leading to better and faster decision-making about people in prison.

Within the strategy are more concrete commitments, such as working towards every prisoner in closed prisons having access to a laptop or tablet.²³ Laptops will provide access to transactional services and to Content Hub – a platform providing educational, vocational mental health and wellbeing content.²⁴ This initiative is known as the Launchpad programme.

While by no means completed by 2024, remarkable progress has been made in just a few years. The infrastructure to enable internet access in prisons has expanded, and prisons have introduced various digital devices, including in-cell telephones, wing-based kiosks, and in-cell laptops. Private prisons were particularly quick to introduce these services and HMPPS has invested in rolling them out more widely in the last few years. In response to Covid-19, the government introduced video call technology for social

20 [Champion, N. & Edgar, K. \(2013\). *Through the gateway: How computers can transform rehabilitation*. Prison Reform Trust & Prisoners’ Education Trust.](#)

21 [Ministry of Justice. \(2021\). *Prisons strategy white paper*. Ministry of Justice.](#)

22 [HM Prison & Probation Service. \(2021, 15 June\). *HMPPS digital, data and technology strategy: What to expect in 2021/22*.](#)

23 [Ibid.](#)

24 [House of Commons written question 121763, 21 February 2022.](#)

visits across prisons in the UK, and it is now rolled out across the prison estate. But full digital provision is not yet available to all, with some prisons providing more services than others. For example, at the time of writing, in-cell devices providing a range of content and services were only available in 19 of 124 public sector prisons, although 86 prisons are able to supply laptops specifically to support prisoner education.²⁵

The ongoing strategic focus on replacing legacy systems also points to the sheer scale of the challenges to modernise the basic digital infrastructure in prisons. Significant investment is required because IT equipment and services are outdated, although HMPPS have made progress on updating digital technology for staff.²⁶ Experts have also pointed out that progress will require action on more fronts than technological capability, including navigating ethical concerns, prison culture(s), partnerships, and meeting the diversity of prisoners' needs.²⁷ While we recognise the importance of reliable digital equipment for staff, this report is about digital technology for use by prisoners. For a global audit of prison systems' digital capability, see Knight et al. (2023).²⁸

Almost a decade after *Through the Gateway*, we are revisiting internet access in prisons, to look at post-pandemic progress in embedding digital technology. We drew on published materials, interviews with prison staff, prisoners, and digital experts in addition to comparative evidence from other countries.

The first section of the report describes the role of digital technology in family ties, prisoner self-services, health and wellbeing, education, and resettlement. The second section discusses an emerging digital culture in prisons, and how digitisation has been experienced by people who live and work there. The third section details key findings and recommendations.

25 [House of Commons written question 15988, 4 March 2024.](#)

26 [HM Prison & Probation Service. \(2021, 15 June\). *HMPPS digital, data and technology strategy: What to expect in 2021/22.*](#)

27 [Knight, V., Reisdorf, B. & Van de Steene, S. \(2023\). *Digital maturity of prisons: A global survey*, DeMontfort University.](#)

28 [Ibid.](#)

Sources of evidence

This study drew on a range of evidence. Sources of information included a literature review, consultation, visits, desk research, and advice from international experts. The aim was to conduct a review that would reflect a range of experience and views regarding digital technology in prison. We consulted people from a range of voluntary sector organisations. These included: Working Chance, Children Heard and Seen, Families Outside, NEPACS, St Giles Trust, Learned Ex, Make Time Count, and Safe Ground. We also heard from digital providers, including Meganexus, Unilink, Wifinity, Acivilate and APDS. We learned much from discussions with academics who study prison digitisation, including Victoria Knight, Peter Scharff Smith, and Stephen Van de Steene.

Between October 2021 and December 2022, visits were undertaken to four prisons, and a prison in a different jurisdiction (Guernsey). On most visits, the relevant senior leader was consulted, digital technologies were demonstrated, and – wherever possible – people in prison were asked for input on their experience of the technology. We also met virtually with academics and senior prison staff from other jurisdictions. In total we consulted:

- 14** current or former prisoners (half in an open prison, half post-release)
- 10** people from the voluntary sector
- 10** leaders in the prison service and secure hospitals
- 5** people working for digital technology providers
- 5** prison leaders from other jurisdictions
- 3** academic experts in prison digitisation
- 2** prisons, through site visits where we spoke to a range of prisoners and staff, and observed technology in action

Digitising prisons: An updated picture

This section provides a descriptive update of digital rollout in five key domains of prison life. The pace of rollout has been swift, and any update will inevitably be out of date almost as soon as it is written: a testament to the commitment of HMPPS to ramp up digital capability. However, we have endeavoured to provide as accurate a picture as possible. International examples of services not currently available in the UK are provided, to demonstrate possible directions for further innovation.

Maintaining family ties

Technology can radically improve the ease with which families can stay in contact with people in prison. Current communication provision includes in-cell phones, voicemail, video calls, emails, and text messaging (in two private prisons only). In 2024, all English and Welsh private prisons and public sector closed prisons had complete in-cell telephony coverage. The remainder without coverage are men's open prisons.^{29,30} Voicemail (both sending and receiving) and social video calls from supervised areas are available across almost all English and Welsh prisons. Prisoners may have either one 60-minute or two 30-minute video calls per month. Email services are also available across England and Wales, though only a few prisons have an entirely digital service, with many still requiring staff to print and deliver emails to prisoners. The availability of text messaging lags far behind other communication methods. At the time of writing it was only available in two privately run prisons: HMP Parc and HMP Five Wells. However, it was clear from speaking to prisoners at Five Wells that this is an enormously valued service because of its instant communication facility, mirroring what is available in the community. For example the ability to simply say 'good morning' to loved ones was highly valued.

Service	Availability at time of writing	Management of use
In-cell telephony	All public sector closed prisons One public sector open prison (of 15) All private prisons	Calls to pre-approved numbers only Limits on hours of use Limits on length Ability for people outside prison to stop unwanted contact Call monitoring facility
Voicemail	All Welsh prisons All English prisons except three private and one public sector	As above
Video calls	All prisons	Encrypted connection Only available in supervised areas of the prison Limit on number of devices that can be called Visits with pre-approved individuals only Facial recognition of visitors Limit on number of individuals who can be present on a call
Email	All prisons	Secure transmission Content monitored by staff
Text messaging	HMP Parc HMP Five Wells	Secure device that only allows texts Tethered to telephone Pre-approved numbers only

29 [House of Lords written question HL1420, 24 January 2024.](#)

30 Ministry of Justice. (2024, 13 December). *Personal communication.*

International innovation

In the **Netherlands**, prisoners can book laptops to use in their cells for video-calls.

In the **United States**....

- Families and loved ones can make video calls to people in prison without making an appointment.³¹
- People in prison can send and view pictures, short video clips and greetings cards.
- Imprisoned parents can play virtual chess with their children.³²

In **Iceland** and **Denmark**, people in open prisons have direct email access via the internet.^{33,34}

Self-services in prison

Prison administrative processes are gradually shifting from paper-based to digital. In prisons with the digital capability, prisoners can make applications, book visits, place menu orders, order items from the prison shop, check account balances, and top up PIN phones via a self-service system. They can also look up prison-related information, including policies; regime information; job opportunities and upcoming events.

There are three main methods of self-service currently operating. Some prisons have installed kiosks in communal areas of prison wings, which prisoners can use when they are unlocked. Others provide services through in-cell laptops which operate within a secure intranet environment, and are managed via HMPPS's Launchpad programme. Lastly, WayoutTV is a television-based service available in over 70 establishments, which provides a range of programmes that include key prison-related information.

Service	Availability at time of writing	Management of use
Wing-based kiosks ³⁵	England and Wales 29 prisons	Wall/floor mounted in communal areas Resistant touchscreens No ligature points Fingerprint login
In-cell devices ³⁶ (Launchpad)	England and Wales 19 prisons	Offline mode in-cell Closed network Risk-assessed access
Wayout TV	England and Wales 70 prisons	One-way communication through in-cell televisions

Health and wellbeing

In the community, access to healthcare increasingly depends on technology, often known as telehealth. Telephone appointments with healthcare practitioners have been in place for decades, and people can now access services through video calls, live online chats and instant messaging. Telemedicine services expanded rapidly during the pandemic, and prisons were no exception.

In some prisons, prisoners can now use self-service kiosks to book healthcare appointments. Access to health information has enormously expanded since Covid-19. The HMPPS Content Hub, an information

³¹ [Florida Department of Corrections. \(n.d.\). Multimedia tablets and kiosks.](#) Accessed 17 January 2023.

³² [Cook County Sheriff's Office. \(2022, 13 October\). Checkmates for kids – Cook Country Sheriff's Office project.](#)

³³ [Scharff Smith, P. \(2012\). Imprisonment and internet access: Human rights, the principle of normalization and the question of prisoners access to digital communications technology. National Journal of Human Rights 30\(4\), 454–482.](#)

³⁴ It is not clear whether this is via a conventional email service provider (such as Gmail or Outlook), or via a prison specific service.

³⁵ [Unilink. \(n.d.\). Prisoners helping build prison kiosks to help prisons run better.](#) Accessed 26 February 2024.

³⁶ More prisons have in-cell devices but these do not necessarily include self-service facilities or prison information.

service available in-cell in 19 prisons, enables people to access information about healthcare. For example, in two women's prisons the Hub provides, "content from basic pages, the NHS, simple videos and podcasts", including information about health issues people might find it embarrassing to ask about, such as cervical screening tests.³⁷

Similarly, telehealth appointments have now become a reality in prisons. Medical appointments outside a prison are often dependent on staff availability for escorting the patient. Driven by the pandemic, the HMPPS digital team and the NHS worked remarkably quickly to approve virtual health appointments from inside prison, with national changes enacted in just four days to allow the use of technology. Prior to Covid-19, just two prisons had telemedicine systems approved. This shift is an extraordinary example of how a digitised service can be embedded when there is political will to do so. The momentum has continued, with some prisons piloting digital services that increase access to crisis support and social services.

Technology has also long been an important tool to support wellbeing. Entertainment and fun activities can provide fulfilment, distraction, boost mental wellbeing, and stave off the boredom that is such a feature of prison life. Improvements in this area have been more gradual, but were also accelerated during the pandemic, when prisons were rightly worried about the impact of extended lock-up times, often 23 hours a day.

Domestic innovation

In **HMP Oakwood**, healthcare appointments are managed by peer administrators who send reminders to patients, a system which has reduced non-attendance.

At **HMP Wayland**, prisoners can send confidential messages to Samaritans, 24 hours a day using in-cell devices.

During the pandemic, **HMP Styal** made use of a video booth so women could contact social workers and psychologists in the community.³⁸

In October 2021, prisoners from **HMP Wandsworth** and **HMP Hollesley Bay** competed in an international chess tournament online.³⁹

International innovation

Beveren prison in **Belgium** introduced in-cell computers in 2016, which prisoners can use to access music and films.⁴⁰

In the **United States**:⁴¹

Prisoners can speak confidentially to clinicians using digital messaging on in-cell tablets.

Prisoners can use tablets to access ebooks and audio books, games, news, music and the radio.

37 [Ministry of Justice. \(2022, 4 March\). *Creating content for women*. Justice Digital.](#)

38 [HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. \(2022\). *Report of an unannounced inspection of HMP & YOI Styal, 20 September and 4–8 October 2021*. HMIP.](#)

39 [The Guardian. \(2021, 13 October\). *UK prisoners allowed to play chess in global online tournament*.](#)

40 [BBC News. \(2016, 22 April\). *Prisoners allowed access to adult films and internet*.](#)

41 [Florida Department of Corrections. \(n.d.\). *Multimedia tablets and kiosks*. Accessed 17 January 2023.](#)

Education

There is a growing consensus in support of digital technology in prisons for educational purposes, particularly internet access. In her 2016 review of prison education, Dame Sally Coates recommended that risk-assessed learners in prison should have controlled in-cell internet access.⁴² Likewise, the House of Commons Education Committee (2022)⁴³ recommended that prisoners have restricted and monitored in-cell internet access for educational purposes. The Association of Colleges cited benefits prisoners would gain from using applications and software. They called for a broader range of digital learning tools, such as virtual reality, to be rolled out across prisons.⁴⁴ The government recently committed to “develop a plan for and start delivering digital education in prisons.”⁴⁵ However, the digital infrastructure in prisons is insufficient to provide education of equivalent quality available to learners in the community.

Currently the main digital education platform in prisons is Virtual Campus. This is a secure, monitored platform which allows access to educational websites that have been checked and security cleared (known as “whitelisted”). It is only accessible in classrooms and libraries under tutor supervision. Examples include City and Guilds, DVSA, BBC Writers room, and local college websites. The Open University has gone further, and developed a virtual learning environment for prisoners that replicates their external digital environment. Teachers can also request access to websites beyond those available to students in their establishment. Virtual Campus also has some degree of learner interactivity, through the ability to submit assignments digitally;⁴⁶ communicate with tutors via messaging; save files which they can retrieve at other establishments or in the community; and Digital Learning plans recording targets and achievements are being rolled out.⁴⁷ A slimmed-down version of Virtual Campus has been rolled out on some in-cell devices⁴⁸ following a successful pilot in 2022. Another longstanding digital educational resource is WayoutTV, which has one dedicated visual and one audio education channel, and collaborates with other organisations to provide content.

A more recent innovation in English and Welsh prisons is the Content Hub, a Ministry of Justice product. It is effectively a secure intranet of content for prisoners. It includes a large amount of education and training material, but actually traverses multiple areas highlighted in this section of the report, as it also includes prison-related information, and content related to health, wellbeing and resettlement. Following pilots at HMP Berwyn and HMP Wayland in 2021, Content Hub is now available on in-cell devices in the 19 prisons with in-cell laptop provision. Another more recent provider of digital educational content is Coracle, who provide 2,500 laptops across 86 prisons. Unlike the Virtual Campus and HMPPS models, these devices operate entirely offline and come pre-loaded with a range of educational resources.

As well as providing access to content, HMPPS is developing a standardised tool for capturing and reviewing prisoners’ education, work and skills progress.⁴⁹

42 [Coates, S. \(2016\). *Unlocking potential: A review of education in prison*. Ministry of Justice.](#)

43 [House of Commons Education Committee. \(2022\). *Not just another brick in the wall: Why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity*. HC 86 incorporating HC 56. House of Commons.](#)

44 [Association of Colleges. \(2022\). *A vision for prison education*. AoC.](#)

45 [HM Prison & Probation Service. \(2021, 15 June\). *HMPPS digital, data and technology strategy: What to expect in 2021/22*.](#)

46 [Virtual Campus YouTube. \(2019, 9 May\). *The student hub live*.](#)

47 [Weston College. \(2021\). *Supplementary written evidence to the Education Committee Inquiry on prison education*. Education Committee.](#)

48 [Novus. \(2023, 18 May\). *HMP Thameside’s in-cell technology supports prison education*.](#)

49 [House of Commons written question 15987, 4 March 2024.](#)

Service	Availability at time of writing	Management of use
Virtual Campus ⁵⁰	All prisons (under supervision)	“Whitelisted” website access Tutor supervision As per in-cell laptop management
WayoutTV	70 prisons	One-way communication through in-cell televisions
Content Hub	19 prisons	As per in-cell laptop management
Coracle ⁵¹	86 prisons	Offline content

Domestic innovation

At **HMP Lindholme**, six learners took part in an LGV (driving) course delivered remotely via iPad. All six then moved to Hatfield open prison to complete the practical element of the course.⁵²

At **HMP Hewell** and **HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall**, young people were provided with Augmented Reality (an interactive technology that superimposes computer-generated images onto the user’s view of the world) to increase their interest and engagement in learning.⁵³

International innovation

In the **United States**, teachers and students interact in real time in a virtual classroom environment.

In **Denmark**, six of the eight open prisons have internet cafes, which are used for educational activities.⁵⁴

In **Guernsey**, prisoners have a roaming virtual profile that syncs between the education department and their in-cell device, allowing them to complete work seamlessly between locations. They also have access to a Microsoft Office suite.

Resettlement

Resettlement from prison into the community upon release is a complex and difficult process. It encompasses housing, finances, benefits, job searches, rebuilding relationships, and meeting licence conditions. The walls between prison and community (both physical and digital) mean that prisoners are often released without practical arrangements in place, such as a job, a place to live, ID or benefits. Resettlement is made even more challenging by the societal shift towards digital services in all of these areas, which many prisoners struggle with if they have not had pre-release access, or even the opportunity to update their digital skills.

⁵⁰ [Meganexus. \(n.d.\). Case study: His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service. Accessed 08 April 2025.](#)

⁵¹ [Coracle. \(n.d.\). Main page.](#) Accessed 26 February 2024.

⁵² [HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. \(2021\). Report on a scrutiny visit to HMP Lindholme, 13 and 27-28 October 2020.](#) HMIP.

⁵³ [Shrewsbury Colleges Group. \(2021, 25 February\). SCG starts third year of project to deliver digital support to prison inmates.](#)

⁵⁴ [Prisoner Learning Alliance. \(2020\). The digital divide: Lessons from prisons abroad.](#) PLA.

We have life-sentence prisoners who have been in prison for 10 years plus. Technology moves at such a pace now. It is absolutely essential. You cannot survive without it in today's society. For example, you cannot book a GP appointment; you cannot book a dental appointment; people need to scan QR codes to get into places now; there is contactless payment. All these basic IT things should be taught in prison before people are released.⁵⁵

There is some very limited whitelisting for employment-related material. The Virtual Campus platform enables prisoners to create a CV and view approximately 150,000 live jobs. This system operates in tandem with the HMPPS service called New Futures Network (NFN), which was set up in 2018. NFN acts as an intermediary between prisoners nearing release and employers looking to hire prison leavers, making use of Virtual Campus to advertise positions. In a 2021 white paper, the government announced plans to use technology to increase employment opportunities for people leaving prison through building “a new digital platform to match prisoners to jobs” and introducing “video technology for prisoner interviews”. The government also committed to enabling prisoners to interview for jobs in the community via video technology.⁵⁶ These developments have not yet materialised.

Other resettlement processes lag far behind employment in digital provision. There is no facility for prisoners to search for housing. The Ministry of Justice is planning to introduce a system whereby people can submit a claim for Universal Credit while in custody, and to ensure that people leaving prison have an ID and bank account.⁵⁷ At present, prisoners cannot claim Universal Credit until the day of release. Furthermore, if they do not claim on the day of release, claims are not backdated. To make a claim, they must have ID, a bank account, and proof of housing costs,⁵⁸ all of which remain difficult to secure while still in prison. Digital provision alone cannot circumvent the claim rules which disadvantage prisoners, but it can help to mitigate them through allowing advance preparation.

Presently, prisoners are able to make the most meaningful use of digital resettlement tools while on release on temporary licence (ROTL); a time-limited period of release into the community, usually towards the end of their sentences, and from open prisons. The aim of ROTL is to facilitate resettlement. While on ROTL, prisoners are allowed a mobile phone (this must be handed in upon return to prison) and can use the internet like any other citizen. For many this includes learning to use technology for the first time.

International innovation

In **Denmark**, most open prisons have internet cafes where people can search for housing and jobs.⁵⁹

Finland is developing infrastructure to allow prisoners access to online banking.⁶⁰

Germany has trialled access to resettlement-related websites for prisoners.⁶¹

In the **Netherlands**, prisoner reintegration centres allow access to resettlement related websites; correspondence with potential employers; and video calls with voluntary sector organisations.

In the **United States**, people can take part in virtual job interviews from prison; access services and contact their probation officers via tablets.

55 [Burns, D. \(2021, 14 December\). Oral evidence to Education Committee inquiry into prison education. House of Commons.](#)

56 [Ministry of Justice. \(2021a\). Prisons Strategy White Paper. Ministry of Justice.](#)

57 [House of Commons written question 127421, 28 February 2022.](#)

58 [Department for Work and Pensions. \(2025\). Supporting prison leavers: a guide to Universal Credit. DWP.](#)

59 [Prisoner Learning Alliance. \(2020\). The digital divide: Lessons from prisons abroad. PLA.](#)

60 [Ibid.](#)

61 [Taugerbeck, S., Ahmadi, M., Schorch, M., Unbehaun, D., Aal, K. & Wulf, V. \(2020\). Digital participation in prison – A public discourse analysis of the use of ICT by inmates. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 3, 1–26.](#)

Digital culture in prisons: What people in and around prisons say

So far, we have attempted to provide an overview of prisons' digital capabilities. But the impact of digital services is about far more than availability; it is about the culture that grows up around services, and the people who both develop and use the technology. We spoke to people about their experience of digital prison culture, including prisoners; prison staff; senior staff tasked with implementing digital services; and providers of digital solutions to prisons. Their voices have provided a unique snapshot of what prison digitisation has really been "like"; its benefits and problems as they are experienced on the frontline; the beliefs that drive digitisation forward or slow it down; and the human dynamics that shape its development.

Digitisation is changing relationships

Relationships with people outside prison

Digitisation has radically altered relationships in prison, mostly for the better but occasionally for the worse. This is most noticeable in what prisoners say about family relationships. Many people spoke about the benefits brought about by increased contact via in-cell phones, text messaging, and to a lesser degree, email. The most powerful effect of these facilities was the expanded timeframes in which prisoners could contact their loved ones. This allowed them to fit contact around their family's commitments, be part of key family moments like children's bedtimes, to call family for support when they felt lonely in the evenings, talk in privacy, and sort out practical issues more quickly. All of this contributed to normalising social contact with loved ones in the outside world, and bringing it much more in line with how relationships are usually conducted. This in turn brought about social benefits. Prisoners felt much more able to maintain a meaningful role in their family, which was positive for how they felt about themselves. Digital methods also reduced the anxiety and tension often brought about by not being able to have seamless two-way contact:

It's those long hours between bang up and morning open up, to be able to talk to somebody other than your cellmate, if you've got a cellmate... I used to always ring my wife about half past 10, 11 and say 'goodnight'... Hearing your wife saying she's in bed, you know that the house is secure, and you're able to sleep, you're not worrying about her. It's like a full stop at the end of the day.

Although it is the least widely available form of contact, it was clear that the text messaging service offered at HMP Five Wells was especially valued by prisoners and their families. Currently families cannot call in to in-cell phones, and voluntary sector workers powerfully described how this created anxiety if a prisoner did not call at the usual time, and generally contributed to hypervigilance and paranoia about the phone ringing (or not ringing). Text messaging allows two-way contact in real time, which not only reduced anxiety and tension, but provided care and support:

That's the one thing that keeps me going. Every day my mum texts me saying she loves me.

Virtual visits are also enhancing the amount of social contact possible for prisoners whose families find it difficult to travel; and particularly for foreign national prisoners whose families are in other countries. Crucially, virtual visits are also making social contact more diverse. Removing the need for visitors to travel has opened up a range of meaningful and fulfilling ways of maintaining relationships. People in prison mentioned being able to read their children bedtime stories; attend funerals; speak to relatives at the end of their life; see their pets; and interact more naturally with their children who feel more relaxed in their home environment. Enhanced family ties can foster resilience in a number of resettlement outcomes,⁶² and the system also benefits families in their own right by reducing the cost, time and emotional burdens of visits.

Introducing virtual visits has not been without difficulties, however. Poor signal, security features that frequently make visits cut out, and locating technology in visits centres rather than on the wings can all contribute to disrupted, terminated or missed calls, leading to sadness, disappointment and frustration on both sides. The enormous popularity of virtual visits means that prisons can also struggle to provide

⁶² [Markson, L., Lösel, F., Souza, K. & Lanskey, C. \(2015\). Male prisoners' family relationships and resilience in resettlement. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 15\(4\), 423-441.](#)

enough access to meet demand. As with in-person visits, virtual visits are shaped by prison security requirements, now with added technical difficulties.

The voluntary sector has been broadly supportive of prisons' efforts to facilitate greater family contact, and people we spoke to particularly praised the impact on positive parent-child relationships, as well as the greater accessibility options. But they wanted to see a swifter pace of innovation that continued to bring diversity to prison contact. Examples included allowing multi-screen calls with family members in different locations; creating more play options with children in a virtual environment; and allowing prisoners to be part of parent-teacher meetings. Prison managers took a pragmatic view of what could be safely and realistically achieved, but we heard many examples of hard work to continue rolling out services. Overall, there is broad recognition across multiple parties that technology is helping to normalise contact with loved ones outside prison, and that this is a positive development.

Relationships inside prison

A relatively overlooked impact of digitisation is its effect on relationships inside prison. The picture here is more nuanced. Digitised self-services have improved contact between civilian staff and prisoners. For example, OMU staff can now contact prisoners without having to visit the wings, which allows practical matters to be communicated and resolved more swiftly. A 2020 Ministry of Justice evaluation found that digitised self-services significantly reduced time officers spent on administration,⁶³ but whether this translates to more meaningful staff-prisoner relationships is less clear. Other prison jurisdictions have found this is not necessarily the case, and improved staff-prisoner relationships was not a salient theme in our conversations with participants, though technology did allow prison leaders to have greater visibility across the prison. The most recent HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2022) inspection of HMP Berwyn, a prison with good digital capability, drew attention to the quality of staff-prisoner relationships being impacted by staff shortages and inexperience,⁶⁴ which suggests that digitisation alone cannot compensate for wider staffing issues. There is a good opportunity to monitor the impact of digitisation on staff-prisoner relationships through future inspections of the most modern digitally enabled prisons: Berwyn, Five Wells and Fosse Way.

There were differing views on how digitisation is affecting relationships between prisoners. On the one hand, technology is providing increased opportunities for building a sense of community, through prisoner-produced digital content, peer training in digital skills, and new roles such as the peer-led Healthcare Advisory Service (HAS) at HMP Five Wells. HAS workers are able to call prisoners' in-cell phones to remind them about appointments, let them know if they've been changed, and query non-attendance. This has reduced missed appointments.

On the other hand, there is concern (particularly, but not solely, from education staff) that digitisation will reduce vital forms of in-person contact in prison:

They consistently bang on about the importance of the digital agenda without any reference to the fact that it should be as part of other things, because otherwise groupwork will just die a horrible death.

To locate people as part of collectives is really important, and to give people the opportunity to understand themselves as part of a group is actually vital to our development.

The assumption is that, 'oh that was nice but we can't do it anymore'. It's not just a logistical or practical resource thing, it's a real-life experience thing.

It's the human element that makes a difference. There's enough impersonality in prison. Prison's a very dehumanising place as it is. You want a real person coming in.

The day we rolled out tablets, we opened people up for association and no one came out.

Participants clearly sensed the danger that, as in wider society, technology was being used to patch over the problems of prisons, rather than addressing their root causes. However not all staff shared this view.

⁶³ [Hatcher, R., Palmer, E. & Tonkin, M. \(2020\). Evaluation of digital technology in prisons. Ministry of Justice & University of Leicester.](#)

⁶⁴ [HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. \(2022\). Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Berwyn, 16–17 and 23–27 May 2022. HMIP.](#)

Some observed technology facilitating prisoner interaction:

People will say, 'have you seen this?' [on in-cell tablets]. They might be sat on the landing with one headphone in, but they're not in their cell listening to their radio or watching TV. Don't ever lose sight of the fact that people need to interact with people.

Taken as a whole, relationships are arguably where digitisation has had the most profound impact, and also the most positive impact. They serve as an example of where technology has greatly contributed to enacting the principle of normalcy, and this drive should continue. In particular, text messaging should be rolled out to more prisons. Stakeholders should work together to identify further opportunities and solutions for virtual visits to replicate contexts for meaningful social interaction.

Digitisation is changing prison life

The difference between my last prison where there was two phones on the landing and the tablets here is like the difference between a pedal car and a spaceship.

In some prisons, digitisation is powerfully changing how people feel about prison conditions, and altering the nature of 'typical' prison problems of the last few decades.

Procedural justice

Bureaucratic illegitimacy is a powerful determinant of prison climate.⁶⁵ Historically, much prison administration was completely dependent on a paper-based system administered by staff. Loss of applications; delays in responding; and poor explanation of decision-making all contribute to poor staff-prisoner relationships, dissatisfaction and unrest. Prisoners and staff alike have long been frustrated by the limited capacity for prisoners to manage their own affairs, from parole paperwork to toilet roll. In some prisons, digitisation has meant introducing self-services either through wing kiosks or in-cell devices. The impact of these innovations is marked. People described a substantial increase in components of procedural justice, which include transparency, and fair processes carried out in reasonable time. This was largely because digital services create a trail that has virtually eliminated lost paperwork, allowed swifter responses, and in many cases introduced a tracking system where prisoners can see the progress of their applications.

The prisoner has a record, so things like complaint processes should be more robust because you can't stick it in a bin, and you can't say you've sent that when you haven't. It protects everyone.

Before you'd never know how much money you had in your account. With the kiosk you can print out your accounts and your timetable.

Got peace of mind that your ROTL application's gone through... It'd say 'received' or 'pending'.

To reduce bureaucratic illegitimacy in prison is a huge achievement. The impact was greatest in prisons with self-service on in-cell devices. This was due to the fact that in-cell technology allows prisoners to take time to compose their applications, and look up supporting information first. There has been a significant push by the Ministry of Justice to support prisoner access to information and policy through initiatives like the Content Hub. While such information is often available on wing kiosks, the public location and queues for access often discourage prisoners from taking time to browse.

[Prisoners] said to me, 'We have such limited time. I've never looked at the FAQs section'. Having those computers in their cells, they'd be able to have longer to find out what's available to them in the prison.

Self-service was clearly popular with staff and prisoners (barring instances when the technology was glitchy, as was sometimes the case with kiosks). It was more transparent, often quicker, and allowed prisoners to manage their own affairs, again enhancing the principle of normalcy.

⁶⁵ [Auty, K. M., & Liebling, A. \(2024\). What is a 'good enough' prison? An empirical analysis of key thresholds using prison moral quality data. European Journal of Criminology, 21\(5\), 725-753.](#)

Enhancing safety

Another effect of some digitisation was altering the landscape of violence in prison. In HMP Five Wells, prisoners deeply valued in-cell tablets and the text messaging facility, and stated that it stopped them engaging in rule breaking behaviour. For example, devices eliminated motivation to smuggle phones, and the threat of having them removed acted as a disincentive for getting into fights. Staff also observed a positive effect on safety:

There needs to be a bit of a PR exercise into what goes on in custody. Our self-harm and violence really reduced when we introduced the in-cell phones.

A 2020 Ministry of Justice evaluation using proven adjudication data across 11 prisons found no difference in violence levels pre- and post-digital installation⁶⁶ and ‘equivocal’ views from prisoners on whether technology reduced tension and conflict.⁶⁷ However this study is now quite dated relative to the pace of rollout. Our conversations with staff and prisoners at HMP Five Wells indicated some grounds for optimism about safety when valued technology is fully embedded across a prison. The relationship between technology and safety should continue to be explored.

Digitisation as decency

The benefits that came with technology were enormously valued by prisoners, particularly in-cell devices and text messaging. People explained that they had become so accustomed to these benefits that they came to see them as a fundamental part of decent prison life, and found it hard to imagine being without them. This led them to appraise their pathway through the prison system in terms of the technology available to them, rather than other more traditional markers of “better” prisons.

One of the biggest privileges at this prison is text messages. If they take that off you when you move to a different prison you’ll have less contact with your family. It’d have a big impact on my mental health if I moved and lost those morning greetings.

Staff also recognised this change in prisoners’ appraisal of the prison they were in, and the problems therein:

We’re now condemned in the prison service to working in two modes: working in one mode with prisoners who’ve got in-cell tech and working in another way with the others, and how can you reasonably move people across the estate when you’re taking away a good thing?

This new digital divide between prisons underscores the need for rolling out technology that has proved successful, and making efforts to ensure that some prisons are not left behind technologically. This is not a new problem in terms of upgrading prison facilities, but it is a live problem currently, and efforts should be made to ensure even provision as soon as is practicable.

Facilitating self-responsibility

A benefit of digitisation that people were particularly enthused about was when services allowed prisoners to manage their day-to-day lives. Being able to look up information; book visits and appointments and other administrative tasks was valued by both staff and prisoners, and frequently provided a clear steer on how to best utilise the technology. Because this benefit was so valued, there was a high degree of frustration that resettlement processes are still largely dependent on staff. Although resettlement-related information can be provided, prisoners cannot access external websites to be able to, for example, search for jobs or housing, apply for ID, register with a GP or get a bank account.

In an ideal world the ability to do most if not all things would be within the hands of prisoners themselves. Had a guy here yesterday, he hadn’t been able to stop his direct debits. I had to ring his bank for him. To help people now I rely on them telling me what their problems are. Some people might not be forthcoming. They should have the ownership to do it themselves rather than having to tell their story to multiple different people. We register them with a doctor. In terms of preparing them for release they should be doing that and we should be supporting them.

⁶⁶ At the time of the study this meant in-cell telephony, self-service kiosks, in-cell laptops and staff devices.

⁶⁷ Palmer, E., Hatcher, R. & Tonkin, M. (2020). *Evaluation of digital technology in prisons*. Ministry of Justice & University of Leicester.

There was support for a system of increased internet access towards the end of people's sentences, to allow them to address resettlement issues:

It should be in the 12-week period before release you get controlled access to the internet to set things up yourself. They could have a resettlement session a couple of times a week where we give them a list of things they need to set up.

Attitudes and beliefs towards digitisation matter

Installing digital infrastructure in prisons is only part of the story. There is a world of difference between a prison with technology and a digital prison, and that difference is mediated by the attitudes of staff and prisoners towards the technology.

Leadership and staff-buy in

Leaders who are positive about digitising their prison are crucial. We met several prison leaders who were clearly passionate about the benefits that technology could bring, which manifested in dedication and persistence in getting it up and running. It was common to hear about technical issues, glitches, faults, crashes and security issues. Leaders had the responsibility of resolving these, and of securing buy-in from other staff. They also had to maintain a good grip on key issues and ensure good communication with prisoners about progress. The latter was especially important in limiting cynicism and disillusionment:

It'd be helpful to get bulletins to tell us what's up and running and when things will be introduced. The lack of communication causes us to talk amongst ourselves and get the wrong end of the stick with gossip and misinformation. A regular bulletin would be good to stop rumours. What we want is honesty. All I'm hearing about is the teething problems and excuses and not solutions.

The gossip comes from a place of disillusionment. People are used to being let down so they won't believe it until they see it.

Getting staff on board with digitisation was also crucial, as it generally fell to them to resolve prisoners' daily problems with technology, and make efforts to enhance prisoners' digital skills. This could be more challenging when staff themselves lacked digital confidence.

One guy, before he got the tablet he'd never held a smart device before. For a lot of of people they're very expensive doorstops. You go in every day and explain it all again.

Staff have been supportive of in-cell tech. They can see the benefits for prisoners and themselves. Some officers can be a little worried because they don't understand it, when they're not very PC-literate.

When technology was not located in-cell, there remained a reliance on staff to facilitate access, which could sometimes result in a significant financial investment being under-utilised:

A lot of this technology exists but when you ask prisons, 'ok so you've got 20 of these laptops, where are they?' they'll say 'oh well they're actually locked in this cupboard because we can't actually release them into cells'.

It was clear from both English/Welsh prisons and international comparators that these kinds of issues can be and have been overcome when a positive culture is built around digitisation, backed by confident staff. Many problems are also to be expected in an era where digitisation is still novel and not yet normalised across the estate (though rapidly becoming so).

Beliefs about the purpose of digitisation

Embedded in our conversations with participants were strongly endorsed beliefs about what, and who, technology in prisons should be for. There was a lot of frustration from the voluntary sector and civilian staff at the perceived attitude from prisons that technology is a privilege not a right. Prisoners were also sensitised to this view:

I don't think some staff are happy with it. You're prisoners, you should be getting punished. They've not said that but it's the vibe you get and actions speak louder than words.

Prison leaders we spoke to did not share the view that technology should be a privilege, but they were pragmatic about managing access according to risk:

Kiosks are part of the in-cell solution because they are a back-up plan for people that can't have a laptop or consistently break them, because once a prison has converted to running in a digital way, that's it, you can't have half the prison working with paper, and half not.

Most people we spoke to were clear in their view that digitisation should primarily be for the benefit of prisoners, and were positive about its potential for family contact, self-responsibility, health, wellbeing, education, rehabilitation, and resettlement. There was a high degree of concern in some quarters about the “Daily Mail” factor, and the risk that digital progress could be stalled or even scaled back if specific technologies were seen as “soft” or “luxury”. But despite these fears, there was a strong commitment to responding to prisoner need, especially in regard to meaningful content on the Content Hub, and accessibility for people with additional needs.

You've got stories about people who say for the first time I know what I'm going to get to eat [due to seeing symbols].

Support included easy-read text; keyboards that supported spellcheck; use of images, audio and video; read-aloud functionality; and a user feedback system for continuous improvement. All of these underscored a commitment to making content accessible and useful:

It's not enough for us to just put up a wall of information in text form and expect our users to read or engage with it.

However, alongside the broadly positive beliefs about digitisation, some people had clear concerns that the ‘digital movement’ was not primarily serving prisoners’ interests. Staff and prisoners both questioned whether digitisation was being used as a convenient sticking plaster to avoid dressing the deeper wounds of the system:

Great, you want to talk about digital education and access? People aren't getting to see a dentist, people aren't getting phone calls and people aren't getting food.... if we have to choose an order of priorities can we get it straight?

If you had 1000 people in a secure institution it would be a very different proposition than having 85,000 people in a secure institution and knowing that they're coming out to unemployment and insecure housing. I wonder whose interests it actually serves...

Altogether, it was clear that ‘the vision’ for digitisation mattered at both national and prison level, and steered the direction of rollout. When the benefits and purpose of digitisation were clear, and backed by competent leaders and staff, prisons were better equipped to navigate the inevitable pitfalls of rollout, and to innovate in ways that responded to prisoner need. In most cases the available technology matched or nearly matched the vision, but resettlement lagged behind other areas because of the remaining digital wall between prison and the community. At the time of writing, HMPPS told us they were aware of this issue and were piloting a digital resettlement tool in nine prisons, aimed at organising, planning and recording key resettlement information that smoothed transition between custody and community.

Tension and cooperation between stakeholders

We spoke to members of multiple stakeholder groups: prisoners; prison staff; senior leaders; voluntary sector workers; and commercial technology providers. Digitisation has required a high degree of cooperation between all of these groups, and we saw plentiful evidence of this. However, each group has differing views, interests and priorities in regard to digitisation, which could sometimes result in tension about what was the “right” way forward.

Some views on the use of commercial providers reflected views about private sector government contracts more broadly. People questioned whose interests were really being served, and were concerned about the potentially large and lucrative market that prisons offered to tech companies once cultural and risk-related reservations were overcome. These concerns centred on whether digitisation would end up sidelining quality in-person service provision through cheaper solutions.

We have seen how the outsourcing and privatisation of new services in prisons has gone, with healthcare, with mental health services, with catering and with the outsourcing of whole prisons... it's certainly no better than the public service delivery and I think the creation of all these new contracting opportunities is not made with participants' direct benefits in mind.

Prisoners and staff also felt the sting of costs for family contact, with both groups commenting that it was unfair when costs were higher to prisoners than people in the community.

Currently prisoners have to pay.....and it cannot be right to be charging people for a service that most of us think of as free...I think we should be doing everything we can to reduce financial pressure on families and prisoners.

All these companies want to make money. Why should we give all our money to them? We only get paid £17 a week. It's a business, let's see it for what it really is.

These views of commercialisation were not solely from the public/voluntary sector, however. Technology providers also had definite ideas about “fair” pricing structures, and the use of social enterprise models. Some favoured a subscription model, for example, rather than paying per call/email/text message.

Technology providers were keen to work with prisons, and prisoners, with several employing people with prison experience who had a good sense of the practical benefits and applications of technology in prison. These three parties often shared the same basic ideas about what needed to be done, but there was sometimes tension with the Ministry of Justice, who were sometimes perceived as slowing down the pace of innovation that both providers and prisons wanted. There was also some resistance to the ministry's choices to develop certain products in-house:

The MoJ is not a software vendor. If we do it, we earn £100,000,000 a year in taxes for the UK government if things go super super well. Whereas if they do it themselves they crowd out British investment in technology firms and they don't export and profit from these opportunities. So why don't you let a British company do it and try and help them lead the world?

These differences of opinion, while expressed with some vigour, do not seem to have fundamentally detracted from the prison digitisation effort. However, there is a risk as things progress that multiple providers could lead to duplication and redundancy. For example, there are now multiple providers of digital content on available hardware, all of which are making efforts to provide a range of content related to education, rehabilitation, wellbeing and prison life. This risks being confusing for prisoners, and not primarily serving their needs. It will be up to the Ministry of Justice to carefully steer the developing landscape in a way that provides the best service for prisoners in a digital era, and ensures that digital provision complements rather than replaces human service provision.

Risk and rehabilitative cultures in a digital age

Prisons have long been characterised by a culture of risk management and security. However, in more recent times there has been a push to embed rehabilitative culture. The narrative surrounding prison digitisation has intersected with both these cultures. On the one hand, rehabilitation is often touted as a benefit of digitisation. On the other hand, the perceived risks of digitisation are framed as the major barrier to implementation, with internet access being a particular stumbling block. It was clear from our conversations with participants that these two perspectives are not necessarily opposed. On the contrary, in many cases prisons are innovating to address the new risks posed by technology, drawing upon their experience in managing risk more broadly. The goal of safe but effective use is also supported by the fact that technology companies actively want to develop secure solutions for their clients and are contributing their expertise in digital security.

Social justice thinktanks have pointed to the high social risks posed by perpetuating digital exclusion, including recidivism rates.⁶⁸ All stakeholders we spoke to were aware of the importance of this, and recognised the role prisons must now take in preventing a digital divide between (ex)prisoners and the rest of society. Prisons are tasked with balancing this against core security principle that applies to all forms of communication in prison: prevent the transfer of information that might aid crime; threaten prison security or aid escape from custody. Current policy also mandates that protection of victims must be paramount in regard to internet access.⁶⁹ Such risks must be taken seriously.

One of the features that distinguishes digitising prisons is the (relatively) new risks that it poses. “Old” risks are less threatening because they are either well-known and well-managed, or the risk they carry is deemed acceptable in light of the benefits they bring. For example, a kettle is “technology”, and boiling water has been used as a weapon in prison, sometimes inflicting terrible damage. Risk management procedures are in place to try and ensure this does not ever happen, but there is no question of completely removing kettles from prison. Rather, prisons must use their considerable experience of managing a secure environment to mitigate the risk.

It is clear that prisons have already progressed well in managing digital risks, using some age-old methods and some new ones. Virtual visits are monitored by staff, and have a clear framework of rules to manage communication and establish visitor identity. Phone and email communication can be monitored using random or intelligence-led methods, and restricting access in cases of heightened risk. The specific logistics may vary, and comprehensive monitoring may be more challenging when the majority of prisoners are using these communication methods, but fundamentally prisons were using similar acumen to manage the risks presented.

In-cell devices, or any devices that have the potential for an internet connection can be more problematic. They are isolated from the wider internet either by being completely offline and having pre-loaded content; operating on a secure intranet; or only allowing access to certain approved websites. Prisons managed the risk that prisoners might “crack the system” and gain wider access through common procedures for managing new initiatives: roll them out on a small scale at first; pilot them; monitor for misuse or other problems; work out how to resolve the problems. These procedures helped to limit harm:

It took five hours for a prisoner hack in. The computer boffs got onto it and they rectified it very quickly.

They'll roll it out, test it, make sure people aren't breaking it and then roll out the next element.

Below, we describe the main methods that prisons adopted to manage the evolving risks that came with digitisation.

Commitment to the principle of normalcy

Contrary to perceptions of unnecessary risk aversion, security staff were pragmatic about addressing the risks of technology, and the natural progression of it in modern life:

We closed off the USB port originally, but there's USB shavers and all that they can buy on the canteen, so we said we'll have to roll with it. It's that balance of accepting that it's now a way of life... everything's going USB...so you have to embrace it.

⁶⁸ Centre for Social Justice. (2021). *Digital technology in prisons: Unlocking relationships, learning and skills in UK prisons*. CSJ.

⁶⁹ HM Prison and Probation Service. (2014). *Prison Service Instruction 25/2014: IT Security Policy*. HMPPS.

But this acceptance did not prevent continual efforts to upgrade security to match identified risks:

Security's all over it. We had one particular prisoner that was writing to other prisoners talking about drug offences in the community. On the new offer there's heightened security measures, so they can't do none of that.

Controlling accessible content

At present, no prisoners have unrestricted internet access. Controlling content is a major method of balancing risk and rehabilitation cultures, and content tends to be steered by the perceived purposes of imprisonment, as well as health, safety and wellbeing. The risks that prisoners may break through into wider networks are managing through developing firewalls, separate networks, and by automated⁷⁰ and manual monitoring activity on individual devices.

The in-cell terminals did throw up a whole load of security questions. We had to have a separate network because [prison leads] were very twitchy about prisoners being able to hack into our staff network.

One digital provider explained the measures they took on their side to ensure access was restricted:

- An entirely offline platform.
- A tracking system that can detect if devices have accessed the internet (no breaches to date).
- Regular reviews and security testing.
- Devices lack Bluetooth, camera, microphone and active USB ports.
- Physical inspection of devices and what they are being used for.

While creating a parallel internet for prisoners does not exactly adhere to the principle of normalcy, it does substantially improve it. There were instances where despite restricted access, the content that was accessible helped prisoners feel part of something bigger:

When the queen died the news app made you feel a bit more part of the national mourning process.

Controlling who can access what

Another method of risk management is selecting who has what level of digital access. In this way, digital matters become incorporated into established risk management procedures, where tailored plans are made to manage identified risks posed to the individual.⁷¹ Prisoners also understood the rationale for risk assessed access:

A lot of it would obviously depend on the crime... Somebody could have been in for internet fraud, so there'd need to be restrictions. So it can't be across the board; it has to be related to the prisoner.

Prisoners were also sensitive to the reward power of technology, and suggested that the threat of removal prompted self-policing behaviour.

I'm sensible enough not to do it, I mean I'd lose everything.

The benefit of risk assessed access is that, unlike more technological security solutions, risk management is grounded in good knowledge of people and lends itself to established skills in prison. However, one reservation expressed by some was that higher risk individuals could stand to benefit most from what digital access has to offer, and denying them that access could ultimately perpetuate their problems and risk of recidivism. However this is ultimately true of digital and non-digital services alike.

Another issue for many was that restricted access made less practical sense as somebody approached release, as a lack of internet access greatly limited resettlement arrangements that could be put in place prior to release. It was suggested that enhancing access to relevant websites 12 weeks prior to release would be a sensible and balanced measure. Such access could also be monitored and risk assessed.

⁷⁰ [House of Commons written question 121763, 21 February 2022.](#)

⁷¹ [HM Prison and Probation Service. \(2014\). Prison Service Instruction 25/2014: IT Security Policy. HMPPS.](#)

In open prisons in particular, such access would free up time on ROTLs for building family relationships. Prisoners described spending time on the internet sorting out practical issues while they could; and they found the lack of trust in prison compared to the community confusing:

You are getting trusted to go out every day, to go out into the community, go to work, and you're going on your ROTLs, your home leave... If you are getting trusted for open, for this, that and the other, then why not have that facility to have that internet?

I'm working with a lady in prison ... She's working with us to try and turn her life around and move away from the influences she had...[but] she can't research where she wants to move, where there's a school, where she could get a cheap rental. So that's really stopping her.

Time is so precious when you're with your family, and I'm sat there on the laptop chasing up job applications... Having that opportunity while you're sat inside to work on something productive, I think would just be invaluable.

Gradual rollout

A model of piloting, testing, fixing and expanding was generally being adopted by prisons—following on from the swifter rollouts during the pandemic. Prisons described a more cautious and pragmatic approach to identifying what was working and what was not, using pilots, deliberate efforts to “break” systems and test their capability, and user feedback channels. This model was crucial to swiftly identifying and containing risks.

They'll roll it out, test it, make sure people aren't breaking it and then roll out the next element.

Monitoring use

As with other contact with the outside world, digital communication in prison is monitored. In some instances, digitisation has enhanced monitoring ability because more material is recorded:

Staff can listen in, so if a conversation starts to go sideways, they can end the call right away. Plus everything's recorded and stored, so if something comes up later, they can pull the video and see what happened.

Alongside physical monitoring there are safeguards like the automatic screening of emails, with software that can detect specific watch words, and scan images for inappropriate content. Security staff can then decide whether to redact part of an email or withhold it entirely.

International examples

The international evidence gathered for this study sheds light on how other jurisdictions balance risk and benefit, the choice between white-listing and black-listing content, controlling connectivity, risk-assessed access, and managing the risks of misuse.

In the Netherlands, in-cell laptops are allowed for educational and legal purposes. They have a range of restrictions to prevent internet access:

Some people have a laptop in cell, but the wireless internet is shut, Bluetooth is shut down, they can't save any data on the laptop...The cameras are shut down, there's no connectivity possible, when you shut down the laptop it erases the hard drive, so it boots up clean every time again, so they can't communicate with someone else.

There is an accepted a margin of risk in their whitelisted websites:

Everything is hackable. The rule we have is 95% of our system is safe and we have a 5% risk analysis that inmates can get outside the whitelist.

Detecting people misusing the internet was seen as an opportunity, rather than a failure:

We have prisoners who are in prison for child abuse. When you give them internet and they're looking for child abuse again, [staff] don't think it's a big mistake. They want to know if he's looking for it again, then they can talk about it, and they can look for how to solve his problems... The psychiatrist looks at what they've done on the internet and they speak about it.

These examples demonstrate that the risks posed by digitisation can be addressed and mitigated in a variety of ways, and that sharing best practice and learning may be a useful way of addressing concerns and perceived limitations about what can be safely achieved.

Case study of a digital prison: HMP Five Wells

Without the IT solutions we'd just be a run of the mill prison.

HMP Five Wells is an illustrative example of a modern prison built with digital capabilities in mind. Prisoners have resident mobile devices (RMDs) which can be used in-cell and provide a variety of functions. Prisoners can keep in touch with loved ones via call and text, and build within-prison digital communities centred around interests like gardening or football. There is also in-cell telephony; self-service kiosks; virtual visits; and WayoutTV.

The devices also allow prisoners to manage many of their own in-prison affairs, like ordering items from the canteen, and organising their timetable for the week. They can access prison information, as well as selected external sources like BBC News and NHS digital content.

Despite this extraordinary capability compared to other prisons, Five Wells had ambitions to expand digital provision further, integrating more resettlement functions, TV, radio and additional content with the RMDs.

Five Wells was using the RMDs to experiment with key prison functions. One example was the Healthcare Advisory Line (HAS). HAS workers (prisoners) were able to call into people's cells to issue appointment reminders; let people know about changes or cancellations; or query non-attendance, something which had reduced missed appointments.

Illiteracy and bureaucracy is a toxic mix. We're trying to move away from paper apps to make it similar to out there.

It was clear that Five Wells staff had a commitment to make digital devices and content as accessible and useful as possible to prisoners, for example by introducing speech to text converters. Staff from different functions could request relevant content, for example installing material from GamCare (a support service for people with a gambling addiction), through a relationship with the provider of the RMDs.

Five Wells had suffered some teething problems with rolling out various digital functions. Tablets and kiosks had suffered from glitches and crashes, some content was not yet active, and, as in many areas of modern life, wifi signal outage could now cause problems across the prison. Prisoners wanted a regular bulletin detailing progress, in order to stop misinformation spreading about what was happening.

Prison leaders were well aware of this problem, and of the need to communicate transparently with prisoners. They described the challenges of getting staff in different functions to use digital methods of communication, and move away from a paper based system; something made more difficult when there wasn't sufficient time or resource to upskill both staff and prisoners. Leaders also had the additional challenge of dealing with multiple stakeholders in digitisation, including three different providers of digital infrastructure and the Ministry of Justice, who had to sign off every innovation.

At Five Wells the vision's ahead, but we can't say we're ahead yet in terms of what we've rolled out.

What seemed to help Five Wells through these difficulties was a clear vision of how technology can benefit prisoners, and a strong commitment to continual improvement. The prison was energetic in its efforts to make digitisation work, with recognition of the benefits they were already seeing for prisoners in terms of mental health, wellbeing, education, community and self-responsibility.

Five Wells operated what could be described as a 'walled garden' approach to the digital world, with prisoners being able to access a range of content that was allowed inside the wall, but they were not able to reach outside of it. This was particularly frustrating for their resettlement function, where many services still lay outside the wall.

Prisoners at Five Wells were also in a good position to comment on the new issues introduced by going digital. One particularly unpopular and distressing consequence was a recorded message at the beginning of phone calls telling a person outside that they were receiving a call from prison. This was introduced to ensure compliance with legislation about data monitoring, as calls may be listened to or recorded. But it caused distress to prisoners and their families, with some ceasing to call loved ones.

My wife hates the announcement on the call. She hates the reminder that I'm in prison. She's already been through the public protection unit for approval, so why do they need the message?

I've stopped having contact with my daughter because of that message. She doesn't know I'm in prison.

My brother won't answer the phone to me if he's with his family because of that message.

Other issues included character limits reducing the ability to explain problems in applications and the prohibitively high costs of text messaging.

Overall, Five Wells is demonstrating the possibilities and pitfalls of digital prisons and how to manage them. The experiences of those who live and work there should be noted by policymakers, as well as ideas from the ground about how to make digitisation best serve prisoners' needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our review of digital technology in prisons has drawn on insights from people in prison, others in the community post-release, digital technology providers, prison staff and policymakers, academics, and the voluntary sector. The speed of change means that an audit of what is happening would be out of date before it could be printed. However, we set out to present a broad update on prison digitisation in England and Wales and digital prison culture, as experienced by people living and working in prison.

We found that prison digitisation has continued at a remarkable pace, but that gaps remain in resettlement provision. Digitisation has fundamentally altered some aspects of life in highly digitised prisons, mostly for the better, but also creating new issues such as a divide between prisons with and without digital provision. We saw that people are crucial to digitisation, with digital culture shaped and mediated by prison leaders, staff and prisoners, with communication being vital to securing buy-in. Prisons are adopting a pragmatic and comprehensive approach to risk management while also showing commitment to the principle of normalcy. Digitisation could be extended further by creating opportunities for prisons to learn from each other and internationally.

Overall, the opportunity to “update and restart” following the pandemic has given prisons the drive, resources, ministerial buy-in and investment to move forward, and in many cases that opportunity has been seized. What’s more, many initiatives appear to have been rolled out without the feared consequences that were prevalent in a pre-digital age, although this report could not determine that with certainty. But what is clear is that prisons have had the opportunity to test digital solutions and we are starting to see their benefits, as well as the ways in which prisons can manage digital risk. The momentum behind this drive forward into a digital era should not be lost. Below, we set out suggested recommendations to help it continue.

The Ministry of Justice should continue to invest in digital infrastructure for prisons. We heard how digital initiatives in prison must almost always start with substantial upgrades to infrastructure, which carry additional complexities in secure environments. They are also very costly. HMPPS is now in a very positive position in its understanding of how to digitise. The Ministry of Justice should ensure that this position is sustained through adequate investment which allows HMPPS to embed infrastructure necessary for both current ambitions and future resiliency.

HMPPS should digitise resettlement services available in the 12 weeks before release. Being unable to make practical arrangements online disadvantages prisoners. Providing information is not enough. HMPPS should develop a model of service for prisoners nearing release, which allows them to engage in processes such as organising accommodation; applying for jobs; getting ID and banking beyond the digital wall. It should allow direct access to a limited number of key websites to enable prisoners to sort out their own resettlement needs. Prisoners should be provided with a resettlement email address to manage their affairs. Access should be risk assessed and monitored. The model should be piloted and evaluated in a resettlement prison, with lessons learnt for further rollout.

HMPPS should conduct a pilot project in an open prison, providing direct internet access to a select group of risk-assessed prisoners who would otherwise be accessing the internet while on ROTL. Digital progress can be hampered by fears about risk and public perception, yet other jurisdictions have experimented with direct internet access for some prisoners as part of broader rehabilitation and resettlement services. A small-scale controlled pilot in England and Wales would help to evidence risks and benefits of controlled internet access in a managed way, and cross what may appear to be an impenetrable barrier. HMPPS should deploy its considerable expertise in risk management, and such an exercise could produce evidence-based guidance on logistics and security in an ever-digitising world.

HMPPS should explore the introduction of text messaging to public sector prisons. The facility to send and receive texts was hugely valued by prisoners at HMP Five Wells, and the ability to communicate with loved ones in real time distinguished text messages from other forms of family communication. HMPPS should explore options for introducing the text messaging facility to public sector prisons, in parity with the national rollout of other digital communication methods.

HMPPS should complete in-cell telephony rollout to open prisons. The lack of in-cell telephony in open prisons has made the offer of open conditions less appealing to prisoners. This has consequences, as open prisons provide many other resettlement benefits and are a safe way of progressing people towards release. Prisoners should not be discouraged from this progression because of a digital divide between open prisons and others.

HMPPS should expand in-cell devices to more prisons. We have outlined in this report the many benefits that in-cell devices have brought to family contact; self-services; health and wellbeing; education and resettlement. The Ministry of Justice has exceeded the previous government's commitment to installing in-cell devices in 15 prisons, with devices available in 19 prisons at the time of writing. It should make an updated commitment to further expansion.

The Ministry of Justice should coordinate digital content to avoid un-necessary duplication or uneven provision. There are multiple providers of digital content in prison. In particular, the Virtual Campus, Ministry of Justice Content Hub, Coracle and Socrates all provide content on overlapping subjects. Diversity and choice are positive, but there should be an overarching strategy and oversight of what is provided, to ensure that prisoners receive a reasonably equivalent selection of content across prisons (and know where to find it). The Ministry of Justice should ensure there is an overall coordinator of content. The integration being provided by Launchpad, HMPPS's digital platform⁷² is a positive step towards this recommendation.

HMPPS should provide support to prison leaders for embedding a digital culture. Prison leaders were crucial in steering digital rollout, communicating key messages and securing buy-in from staff and prisoners. HMPPS should ensure that prison leaders have opportunities to receive support from and learn from each other when engaging in digital rollout across their prisons, and have access to the necessary expertise, tools and resources to embed a digital culture.

HMPPS should invest in upskilling staff and prisoners. We heard of instances where technology was not used as much as it could be because staff and/or prisoners lacked confidence, and because there was not adequate time available for training. Peer mentoring helped, and some staff were making considerable efforts to help less confident prisoners learn digital skills. HMPPS should develop a framework for training staff and prisoners in digital skills as a core part of training and education offers.

At every level, decisions should be taken in line with the principle that digital solutions should complement human contact, not replace it. Digitisation has allowed prisoners to exercise choice over how they learn, relax, manage their affairs and stay in touch with loved ones. These choices should remain, and digital solutions should not replace the role of human contact in these areas. In particular, providers of human services like healthcare and rehabilitation programmes should not have their face-to-face contact with prisoners curtailed, or be passed over in favour of digital providers.

The Ministry of Justice, together with international stakeholders, should establish a Managing Digital Risk forum to facilitate implementing the principle of normalcy in a digital age. The principle of normalcy refers to not subjecting people to further restrictions than necessary for imprisonment, and in its most progressive form, to shaping prison life to closely mirror life outside prison.⁷³ It was clear that prisons are applying their knowledge of risk and security to digitisation, while retaining commitment to the principle of normalcy in many instances. It was equally clear that the balance between normalcy and security can be achieved in different ways, as demonstrated by international prison jurisdictions. The field is undergoing a considerable degree of innovation, and there is an opportunity to embed new ways of working that at one time may have seemed unthinkable. HMPPS stands to learn a great deal from other countries, and to contribute knowledge from their own digital rollout. Establishing a multi-disciplinary international forum would help good practice to flow into and out of England and Wales through information sharing, learning, innovation, international consultation, and shared thinking in how to safely implement the principle of normalcy in prisons through digitisation.

⁷² Ministry of Justice. (2024, 6 September). *Launchpad Home is live!*. Justice Digital.

⁷³ van de Rijt, J., van Ginneken, E. & Boone, M. (2023). Lost in translation: The principle of normalisation in prison policy in Norway and The Netherlands. *Punishment & Society*, 25(3), 766–783.

Almost all prisons now have virtual methods for people to stay in touch with their loved ones, and provision in self-service; health; wellbeing and education has significantly expanded.

In order to write this report we spoke to prisoners, staff, leaders, and service providers from the private and voluntary sectors, as well as academic experts in prison digitisation. Through our conversations with these stakeholders and through prison visits, we saw an emerging digital culture in prisons, prompting us to pay attention to how prisoners are experiencing digitisation, and explore how human factors affect digital rollout. Culture and user experience are two domains which have been identified crucial factors influencing prison digitisation trajectories. In Update and Restart, we describe where progress has been made in five key areas: family contact; self-services; health and wellbeing; education and resettlement.

Overall, the rollout of technology in prisons since the Covid-19 pandemic has been a very positive development. However, as with any new innovation, improvements could be made and this report sets out practical recommendations for change.