

## **Video links and Legal Aid**

### **Prisoners and Lawyer Contact**

Contact with prisoners is extremely difficult. Visits have been stopped. Phone contact relies upon the prisoner making the call. Many prisons where there are no remand prisoners do not have video link facilities. This reduces contact between prisoners and family and prisoners and lawyers. Many serving prisoners have ongoing cases such as POCA Confiscation hearings, which require a lot of discussion.

Sodexo, who run HMP Northumberland have stated to me [letter dated 9 June, received 15 June from Michael Cook OMU Case Admin]:

**“ We already have video link facilities installed at HMP Northumberland to be used for court appearances. At present the facilities aren’t available for legal representation in advance, only for on the day of court appearance prior to a hearing taking place (usually around 15 minutes prior to start time).”**

This isn’t good enough. It doesn’t actually cost a lot to install video technology. It requires a tablet or laptop and broadband. Tablets or laptops don’t need to be brand new or that expensive. Increasing and improving video connectivity would help families and prisoners keep in touch; would save on a lot of travel and waiting for families and lawyers; would reduce security risks for the prison and would allow prisoners to get proper-and detailed-legal advice. Writing letters isn’t an options as mail into and from prisons takes so long and is often lost when delivered.

Could you raise with HMPPS and the Secretary of State for Justice the question: what efforts are being made to facilitate more video conferences and what budget has been allocated to this?

### **Legal Aid and Magistrates’ Courts**

Firms and barristers are only paid when a case concludes.

Little is being done to conclude cases.

Greater use of video technology would allow those who are self representing in the Magistrates’ Courts to participate in a hearing eg for road traffic, drink driving, exceptional Hardship and minor criminal matters, without having to attend at Court and wait all day, these reducing the backlog. It would allow those who are represented to have their minor cases concluded as well.

This ensures Justice is done and Health risks minimised.

It seems to me that Solicitors and barristers could be recruited as Magistrates to hear such cases and or better still indeed Recorders (currently twiddling their thumbs) could be allocated to the Magistrates’ Courts to assist in this regard.

There really doesn’t appear to be any radical action plan to address the growing backlog of criminal and motoring cases that coronavirus has made worse.

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