

Research examines the impact of new technology used in video court hearings

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The Video Enabled Justice (VEJ) Independent Evaluation was led by academics from the University of Surrey's Department of Sociology and the Centre for Translation Studies in the School of Literature and

Languages. Sponsored by the Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner Katy Bourne, the report investigated the impact of a new booking tool used in the organisation of first appearance remand hearings in video court. Drawing on data from observation of over 600 video-enabled and traditional in-person hearings in magistrates' courts, and semi-structured telephone interviews with court users and stakeholders, the study provides new insights into the performance of the booking software used in the court listing process, as well as other pertinent features of video courts when compared to traditional in-person courts.

The evaluation found that the impact of the introduction of the [booking](#) tool on court processes was benign but relatively modest. Positive effects were identified, such as improved oversight of the court's list. However, resource and infrastructure constraints across the court and police estates inhibited the tool's optimal functioning. Booking software is closely integrated with the audio-visual infrastructure of the courts, and its optimal functionality is only achieved with high quality courtroom AV and suitably trained court staff.

Comprehensive planning across all criminal [justice](#) agencies whose staff have a role in the court process was found to be essential in order to reduce disruption to live hearings. An expansion in the number of end-points from which parties at [remote locations](#) can join a [hearing](#), as well as improved internet access, was required to enable secure and reliable access to online hearings. The research also suggests that investment in audio-[video](#) equipment, as well as attention to the audio-visual environment in both the courtroom and remote video booths (such as those in remand centres and police custody suites), are required to improve the experience of participating in video hearings.

Since the parties involved in video court hearings are at different locations, such hearings pose additional challenges not found in traditional in-person contexts, highlighting the importance of enhanced

digital working. These challenges are aggravated when the complexity of hearings increases, e.g. due to the involvement of an interpreter. For interventions such as the booking tool to realise their full potential within the court listing process there is a need to ensure that such investments are developed hand-in-hand with more comprehensive solutions for electronic protocols in court.

Professor Nigel Fielding, lead author and a long-standing researcher in criminology and the justice system, said: "Our report provides valuable insights on video-enabled justice for the court service and [court](#) users just as the Covid-19 pandemic seems poised to lead to a dramatic rise in the use of technology and other innovations to ensure the effective continued administration of justice. They will be using existing AV equipment on a 'whatever is to hand' basis, with many courts having relatively basic AV equipment and very few courts being equipped with booking software. We are delighted to be able to offer an evaluation that will help equip those who will deliver and experience this expansion of video-enabled justice with insights that should help ensure benefits are secured and challenges mitigated."

Provided by University of Surrey

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