



In brief...

Families' Experiences of Video Calls to Prisons ('Virtual Visits')

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Key Points

- Capacity for video calls to prisons was underused.
- Families had access to devices but needed support to use them for video calls to prisons.
- Families needed to understand why applications for video calls were rejected.
- Video calls were highly valued but should supplement rather than replace in-person visits.
- Concerns about cost, privacy, and obsolescence of IT need to be addressed.

Introduction

Video calls ('virtual visits') were introduced in Scottish prisons in June 2020 as an additional way of maintaining contact with people in prison. Uptake of these visits has been low, averaging at about a third of capacity. To understand more, Families Outside conducted a short online survey asking families to share their experiences of using video calls to prisons. The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and Scottish Government subsequently commissioned Families Outside to conduct a short piece of work targeting families who had not made use of video calls. The aim of these surveys was to increase understanding around what might make this experience better, and to help more families stay in touch.

Forty-two families responded to Families Outside's online survey, 88% of whom had used video calls to speak with their family member in prison. An additional 33 families were reached for the SPS- and Scottish Government-commissioned survey.

The findings supplemented a survey from UniLink (the provider of video calls in Scotland) of 2,629 people that found that 77% of families thought the calls were easy to book; 75% felt the video sessions were positive; and 89% said they would use these again.

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Unsuccessful attempts to visit

Half of the respondents (48%) said they had been unsuccessful at least once when attempting to book a video call. Many of them said they were not told why their visit had been rejected, making it difficult to rectify the issue.

Respondents who knew the reason their attempt was unsuccessful primarily flagged issues with identification, and the fact that families are given no choice around days or times, meaning that other commitments such as work may force them to reject the time slot offered. People also noted that their request has been unsuccessful if they tried to book a call too soon after another one, and in one case the prison staff forgot to bring their family member to the visit.

My son's in HMYOI Polmont. When you request a visit you aren't given a choice of days/times which suit, you simply request a visit & the prison comes back with one specified slot. On many occasions the slot given to me hasn't suited (as I work full time) so I can spend days at a time rejecting & re-requesting visits as the slots being allocated to me aren't suitable.

Had many rejections with no reason why.

The video system can reject people if they appear not to meet certain criteria. 62% of people surveyed stated they had a request rejected, again with many saying they were not provided with an explanation. Some reasons included people trying to book more calls than the person in prison is allocated each month, problems with identification, and in one case a visit being double-booked.

No idea. I assumed it was because I had just had one.

I cancelled a visit due to work and required a new one but was rejected when I phoned up after 10 tries I was told it's because there was one active for the day I had cancelled I tried to explain this to the switchboard who told me if I want to complain I've to put it in writing.

Help with video calls

The SPS released a video to assist families with registering and booking a video call, and staff from Families Outside and prison visitor centres were available to help families with the process. Despite this, 60% of people who completed the survey said they did not receive any help. This may be because many families possessed the confidence and proficiency to complete the process without assistance. Another possibility was that some families were not aware help was available.

Of those who did receive help, the most common sources were prison visitor centres and Families Outside, followed by the (then) SPS helpline and UniLink. 81% reported that, with the help, they were able to resolve the issue. Those who were not able to resolve it reported issues with not having appropriate identification, or an incompatible device.

Type of support needed

Regarding support that would be useful, respondents suggested having someone to talk them through the process to set it up. They also made requests for general technical support, help resolving technical issues, support over the weekends, and help with using older devices. Unfortunately, the issue around older devices is unlikely to be resolved, as IT applications are often updated for security reasons. Ensuring that families have access to newer devices would resolve this, but obsolescence of IT will be an ongoing issue.

Someone to talk you through the initial set up. Also couldn't get virtual visits to work on my phone, luckily I have access to a laptop but not everyone does.

Many respondents also voiced how the visits could be improved, such as through increasing the number of visits allowed each month, extending the duration of the visits, and having the option to select times that are suitable for them.

Booking our own time. When I book the theatre, a concert or cinema I can book a seat using a plan. Why can't there be a time table with available times to choose from? Also real visits were in the evening, why are video visit not?

Some families requested that prisons reduce confusion by accepting the same types of identification (something that happens in theory but not in practice). Respondents also made requests for evening visits and for ensuring people were brought to their visits. Some also requested more distance between individuals taking part in video calls so that others' conversations could not be heard or seen.

One person expressed concern that the person held in prison may not be told the reason when the prison cancels a visit, leaving the person in prison wondering why this has happened:

...if the prison cancels the visit, ...the automatic email sent to the person in prison [should say] that and not that the visitor has cancelled.

Difficulties with video calls

The main difficulty for people who had used video calls were IT-related (41%) and having a suitable device for video calls (33%), while a small number noted that access to WiFi or enough data was problematic. IT-related issues included problems registering with the service, photo ID, and poor connection.

Interestingly, 96% of the families in the SPS-commissioned survey of people who had not used video calls said they had the equipment they needed: rather, the main issue was knowing how to use it for video calls to prisons. Over half (58%) said they had no particular worries

about video calls. Those who flagged concerns mentioned technical problems; concerns about being overheard or seeing other people in the background; and difficulty with technical specifications such as identification. One reported inconsistencies between prison staff regarding children being allowed on a video call, and one found the '5-minute warning' towards the end of the call to be intrusive. Nevertheless, 67% said they were interested in using video calls in future, especially if they had help with this, and all said they would like video calls to continue to be available in Scottish prisons.

Experience of video calls to prisons

Families' experiences of video calls were largely positive. Since people had no opportunity to see their families during pandemic-related lockdowns, video calls offered relief, as they could see how their family member was doing, and the respondents greatly appreciated this reassurance.

Me and ex-husband not able to get up [to prison] at the moment [so] virtual visits are great.

Relieved my anxiety about my son after no visits in Scottish prison during lockdown.

People spoke about the challenges of travelling to a prison when they live quite far away and found that video calls alleviated this barrier and allowed their children to see their parent more frequently.

Means everything. Kids get to see their dad as sometimes can't make the visit as too far to travel.

One respondent pointed out that the video calls are a "life-line" for people in the deaf community, who could not make use of phones calls and therefore have been even further removed from their loved ones than most.

Having a telephone in a cell is as much use to a Deaf person as a chocolate teapot is for making tea! Video Visits should be available to everyone, they save time, money and endless travel. Long may they continue.

Conversely, people who were hearing-impaired but not deaf said video calls were less helpful. Other concerns related to background noise from other calls or from prison staff. A few mentioned that the calls were too short, particularly if the call started late. The system also appeared to have 'teething problems' such as poor connections with the video or audio freezing.

Notably, the visits were often a highly emotive experience, particularly when families had not had contact for so long in the first few months of the pandemic. One also noted that seeing their home after being away can be upsetting for people in prison, suggesting that prison staff could usefully offer support to people in prison after these calls.

A few people expressed that video calls do not compensate for physical visits and that, while seeing their family member's face was positive, the experience was comparatively distant: video visits were good to complement physical visits but not to replace them.

Honestly, I find them distant & in no way compensate for a social visit in normal times. Great to see my son's face but a virtual visit is not a visit, it's a phone call with a face.

Awesome seeing my other half after 103 days of barely any contact. Doesn't replace hugs but is an outstanding resource.

Future use of video calls

93% of people who completed the online survey said that they would use video calls in the future.

Definitely. I would really appreciate them at all time as I cannot manage visits and this has reassured me that my loved one is well.

One respondent asserted that video visits must continue to be free of charge. Only one person who had used a video call said they would not do so again.

In the SPS-commissioned survey of people who had not used video calls, 67% said they would be interested in doing so, though 28% of these said they would need assistance for this. These families underlined the importance of keeping in touch, that video calls were useful for their children, that they were less expensive, and that they provided an easier option for people with poor health.

People who were not interested in video calls (33% of those who had not used them) explained that they were happy to make contact by telephone or that their family member was now out of prison.

Further comments from families included the desire to have longer visit times and more video calls allowed per person. Allowing more space to control noise pollution was also important. Some claimed that the visits were very difficult to set up initially; that the process shouldn't be so complicated; and that the system needs improving.

It lets me see my partner so I'm glad they introduced them. It would've been a long year without them but they need to sort some technical issues out with them.

Being able to select a time that is suitable for the family and doesn't clash with other commitments was raised repeatedly. Participants felt that late arrival at visits should result in time being added on, and that staff should be sure that if they end a call early, they have justification to do so.

Finally, families reiterated that they wanted to be clear that the video visits do not compare with physical visits and should supplement and not replace them. Despite the criticisms, families recognised the value of video calls to prisons and appreciated their availability.

Families Outside is the only national charity that works solely to support the families of people affected by imprisonment in Scotland. Our purpose is to improve outcomes for children and families affected by imprisonment so they can live lives free from stigma and disadvantage.

For information and support:

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