

SURREY POLICE AND CRIME PANEL

REMOTE VIDEO EVIDENCE UPDATE

5 APRIL 2019

1. Introduction

Criminal Justice partners are committed to working together to improve the system-wide utilisation of resources and to modernise processes. Part of this ambition includes a national programme undertaken by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS) to rationalise the number of courts to improve efficiency. Recognising the impact this might have in terms of journey times to court, the Ministry of Justice consultation on court closures in 2015 set out a commitment to provide alternative ways for the public to access the justice system.

For police witnesses (officers and staff), 'live links' for video evidence are now in place in Surrey saving considerably on the resource cost of travel to court. The purpose of this paper is to update the panel on this development and the wider status of the Sussex-led video enabled justice programme.

2. Police witnesses

2.1 Remote evidence

Three 'live link' rooms have now been installed across the Surrey Police estate at Staines, Reigate and Guildford police stations. These provide police witnesses (officers and staff) with the facility to give evidence remotely via video.

Staines Police Station went live first in January 2017, followed by Reigate Police Station in May 2018. Due to significant building works at Guildford Police Station there was a lengthy delay, before commencing "live link" operation in February 2019.

2.2 Savings

For the period 1 October 2018 to 31 December 2018, operational police time savings realised up to 1,290 hours by officers and staff.

2.3 Funding

Funding for this project was agreed by Surrey Police with each "live link" room costing in the region of £12,000 plus additional costs for any refurbishment/lighting upgrades where required. On-going hardware/software costs per annum per site are approximately £3,000 (as part of a 5 year contract started in 2017).

3. Civilian witnesses

3.1 Giving evidence at trial court

To give evidence at court, witnesses across the country require multi-agency involvement including the police, Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), HMCTS and the Citizens' Advice Witness Service. Witnesses' needs include:

- a) to be warned to come to court by police Witness Care Unit (WCU) and updated on the progress of the trial in advance of it taking place
- b) to receive from the WCU support, guidance, negotiation, persuasion or, as a last resort, the issuing of a court summons, as deemed necessary by CPS
- c) when they arrive at court, to be greeted and told where to go by a CA Witness Service (volunteer)
- d) when at court, to be met by the CPS before the start of the case
- e) to be updated on the progress of their trial by CPS and CA Witness Service
- f) to be given their statement to read by CPS
- g) if agreed, to be able to give evidence from another part of the court (listed and agreed by HMCTS), with an usher responsible for the equipment and support from CA Witness Service volunteer

3.2 Remote evidence

Special arrangements have to be made in all cases for witnesses to give evidence from a different location other than in the trial court, because there is no system in place to receive a service. To open up easy access to justice for witnesses, the main barriers to overcome are detailed below:

- Responsibility for providing lists of witnesses warned to attend court lies with the CPS. When this changes, as it very often does, all other agencies need to be aware of amendments.
- Many courts will have days when there are no trials and thus no CA Witness Service to support witnesses or ushers available to run a remote link. In these circumstances, a volunteer would need to be found to come in specially to support the witness.
- But by far the biggest barrier for remote evidence, is how witnesses receive their statement from CPS, which they need to read just before going into court to refresh their minds. In the host court, there will be no direct knowledge of the case and it will require either the time of a CPS administrator or barrister to locate a statement for a case completely unrelated to their day's responsibilities and convey this to the witness.

A national steer from the CPS relating to this third barrier is awaited.

4. Defendants

4.1 Remote evidence

Use of remote video links from prison for defendants on remand has been common for some time.

5. Future developments

5.1 Other remote links for witnesses

Sussex is one of a handful of forces which has benefited from central funding and has been able to establish a remote link for vulnerable witnesses in West Sussex. There, the Citizens Advice Witness Service has agreed, *exceptionally*, to provide witnesses with their statements via a police computer in the link. Possibilities for a similar arrangements in Surrey are being explored via sub-group of the Local Criminal Justice Board.

5.2 Video Enabled Justice

The centrally funded and Sussex-led Video Enabled Justice programme is currently delivering a pilot scheme in Kent. This centres around a technology based booking and video connection solution for overnight remand prisoners being held in police custody. The system will be subject to evaluation before further extension beyond Kent. The VEJ programme is much wider than just remand hearings. It is both ambitious and complex and covers London and the South East. Sussex PCC Katy Bourne is the senior sponsor, with the project operating out of Sussex OPCC.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Panel notes the report.

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