

The Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice
Ministry of Justice
102 Petty France
London
SW1H 9AJ

15th July 2020

Dear Lord Chancellor,

Rollout of video calling in prisons

Thank you for your letter of 13 July. It was good also to receive Lucy Frazer's letter of 2 July indicating that there is to be further investment in digital technology in prisons. I hope the department will consult about the detail of that programme so that it achieves the very best outcomes, and prisoners and their families can have a reliable idea of when improvements may happen on the ground.

Unfortunately, your letter overlooked the specific question that I asked in my letter of 10 June. Perhaps I can frame it more clearly, and restrict it to the single issue of access to face to face visits for the sake of simplicity.

At present, prison rules give prisoners an entitlement to face to face visits each month. The assurance I seek is simply that a video call – which will be a very welcome addition to that entitlement – will never be a substitute or alternative for any part of it. To put it in terms that prisoners and their families will understand:

- they will never have to surrender a VO (visiting order) in order to get a video call, and
- they will never be told that they must have a video call instead of a face to face visit (including a closed visit)

Prisoners and their families may well make individual choices as the technology develops and becomes universally available, but my point is about maintaining access to face to face contact if that is their preference.

There is an opportunity to make a significant addition to the ways in which family ties can be maintained and strengthened – something we all agree serves the interests of public protection through rehabilitation. I am asking merely that you commit to not giving with one hand while taking away with the other. But your repeated reticence to give that assurance does now create some anxiety. I hope it will be a simple task to remove that concern.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Dawson', written in a cursive style.

Peter Dawson
Director