

REWIRING THE RULEBOOK

How video enablement is transforming the experience of criminal justice in the UK



Her Majesty's Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) is responsible for the administration of criminal, civil and family courts and tribunals in England and Wales. In HMCTS's view, the use of video in justice will become a key component of how justice will be delivered in the future, enabling courtroom processes to be carried out more cost-effectively and speedily—while also improving the experience for all involved.

The Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner, in collaboration with Police Digital First and HMCTS, is now working with police forces in the South East of England to embed video solutions into magistrates' courts. Video Enabled Justice (VEJ) has the stated goal of delivering a transformed, modern justice experience for all users of the courts and benefiting the taxpayer.

Accenture is the technology partner helping to develop, deliver and implement a consistent VEJ solution to achieve this ambition, working with three police forces at present—Norfolk, Suffolk and Kent—and soon to include Sussex and Surrey. Accenture is also working with Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to facilitate the use of video for remanded prisoners to attend hearings from prison via video link. When fully operational, the solution will support prison-to-court video links, virtual court appearances for first appearance and bail applications, live-link court appearances for police witnesses, and victim and witness live-link court appearances.

“For a vulnerable victim, giving evidence via video link can completely reduce the emotional stress when they're involved in the court system. If you've ever had to go as a victim or witness to court, you will often have to travel long distances and wait in areas accessible to family and representatives of offenders, media and so on—and that in itself is an amazingly stressful situation. To be able to give evidence from a discreet location somewhere completely different via video link is really powerful.”

Katy Bourne, Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner

THE CHALLENGES TO DELIVERING VEJ AT SCALE

VEJ has been a policy proposal in the UK justice system for many years. But, to date, there have been major challenges in delivering VEJ at an industrial scale large enough to realise the full potential benefits. An important barrier was the lack of technology to create a user-friendly

environment for key users including custody officers and legal bench managers. A further barrier was a lack of an agreed operating model between the key agencies—namely courts, police and prosecutors—together with other critical actors such as defence and probation.

Accenture, working in partnership with the Police and Crime Commissioners programme team, adopted a human- and user-centric approach to design and build new digital tools. Starting with Kent Police and its partner forces, Accenture designed the solution to reflect the way the users actually work—enabling VEJ to be delivered in a way that optimises the experience for all concerned, encouraging and incentivising uptake and usage.

Alongside the issues around user experience, other challenges arise from the fact that VEJ has very different requirements from a typical business video conference. At the most basic level, a VEJ solution has two key elements. The first is automatically co-ordinating the appearances by the witnesses and the defendants to fit into the hearing slots provided by the court. The second is managing the on-the-day activities, including connecting the endpoints so the links between the court and the video suites are established at the right time. A vital success factor is the ability to be flexible in terms of when the call goes ahead—a requirement that's in stark contrast to most business video conferences, which have fixed start and finish times.

A further, overarching challenge is the need for the organisations involved to work in a collaborative and “boundaryless” way, sharing information and processes with other parties in the criminal justice ecosystem. Making VEJ work effectively requires collaboration between several agencies that are very different in terms of their programmes, policies and constitutional positioning. Getting those partnerships to run smoothly while respecting the different interests of the participants requires significant effort and a new, more open mindset.

THE SOLUTION: START SMALL —AND THEN SCALE UP

Accenture began by engaging with all the other participants to establish an agreement to work together collaboratively. This agreement was soon struck between the Sussex Police Crime Commissioner, the Courts, the Probation Service, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the Police Forces involved. With this commitment in place, a strategic decision was taken to start the project small and scale it up over time. The chosen approach was to focus initially on the summary courts, taking tools already deployed in the US and upgrading them to be fit for purpose for the UK criminal justice system.

A multi-skilled, 20-strong Accenture team set to work, using Agile methodology to iteratively land new versions of the software, demonstrate prototypes, get feedback and evolve new versions. The clients and users contributed ideas continually, helping to ensure their needs would be met. Throughout, the citizen experience remained front and centre of the design process, alongside the potential to reduce the time and costs of delivering justice.

The solution is currently in its initial roll-out phase, and is up and running in Medway Magistrates Court in Kent, where the first remand hearings are now being linked up. This will mean defendants in remand hearings and police witnesses in summary trials can attend court via video link, saving a lot of transport time and cost in police travel and ferrying defendants to and from court. The benefits include less detention time in police cells, less need for contracts for transporting defendants, savings on accommodation in court cells, and less wastage of valuable police time waiting for court appearances.

Over the next year, the project will continue to expand. Additional releases of the tool will be rolled out to handle scheduling and on-the-day video links, allowing other participants to take part along with prosecutors and defence lawyers. The solution will then be embedded into the remand and summary courts of the South East region, opening the way to wider uptake by other courts and regions across the country.

An important by-product from the project has been the creation of a 'justice dashboard'. In developing the VEJ system, Accenture built a new dashboard that manages and monitors cases from event to outcome, and can track the progress of specific individuals through the justice system. This means it provides unprecedented insights into attrition rates, sentencing, and the use of bail decisions in relation to different crime types and social factors.

REAL BENEFITS STARTING TO EMERGE

The results are already beginning to flow. Stakeholders are already pointing to better, faster handling of cases, a more responsive approach to the needs and experience of citizens, and further benefits around the efficiency and speed of related processes such as case file management. Tony Blaker, Deputy Chief Constable of Kent Police and the Senior Responsible Officer for the VEJ programme, comments: "Lots of surrounding issues have been dealt with on this journey—and we are in a really strong place now with a good partnership and evolving technology."

"I've seen great improvements in the way that hearings are being held and the consistency of those hearings. We're starting to see some real benefits in terms of getting cases dealt with promptly and effectively. Police Forces have had to change how they work to make sure the files get there on time, so there are a lots of other things we've identified that weren't part of the programme's scope, but which—when we looked at it—we found needed fixing anyway. So we're sweeping those up as we go along, making sure that the right defendants appear by video, and that the ones who are vulnerable and need to have an in-person hearing are identified and brought to the courts."

Tony Blaker, Deputy Chief Constable, Kent Police and VEJ Senior Responsible Officer

Katy Bourne, Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner, assesses the scale of the potential time savings for police officers. "Currently, officers devote an average of about 5.5 hours to each court case," she explains. "But they may only actually be giving evidence for half an hour of that time. On top of that, they often have to travel to and from the court, with all the time and bureaucracy that involves." However, she adds that the focus has now widened towards expanding VEJ to include other parties, from the CPS to the defence to prisoners on remand.

"We started by just looking at police officer time. But eventually we would like to extend this and make it possible for the CPS to prosecute via the video link as well. Defence solicitors could also give defence support via video link and ultimately a prisoner on remand could do so too. So while using video link isn't new, this is about taking that technology and making it even more efficient than it already is—making the entire system a lot more efficient."

Katy Bourne, Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner

In any country, the criminal justice system is actually made up of several different systems working together. At its root, the VEJ joint project supported and delivered by Accenture is about making all these components—and the data that flows through them—collaborate and interact more efficiently and effectively, from end to end. Which means lower cost, higher adaptability and speed, and a better experience for everybody involved.

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