

Virtual Courts implementation Project

Introduction and Concept

There is increasing pressure on the criminal justice system (CJS) to deliver simple and timely justice that makes the best use of all available resources. A key lever for achieving this is the innovative use of technology to reduce inefficiencies, speed up processes and improve engagement with the CJS for all involved.

The London virtual courts initiative looks to build upon the positive use of video conferencing technology within some parts of the CJS by linking up police stations to magistrates' courts to allow first hearings (and, in some cases, sentencing) to be heard without the need to produce a prisoner at court. Additionally, they would be a catalyst for other change to remodel and transform outdated practices, for example, by extending and aligning court sitting times to better meet demand, by increasing the number of expedited files produced by the CJS, and by improving document and media management.

Virtual courts have the potential to contribute to the achievement of a number of key CJS PSA targets and objectives, as well as to support findings of recent reviews from the Home Office and the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. They also align well with the principles of the Prison Service's decency agenda.

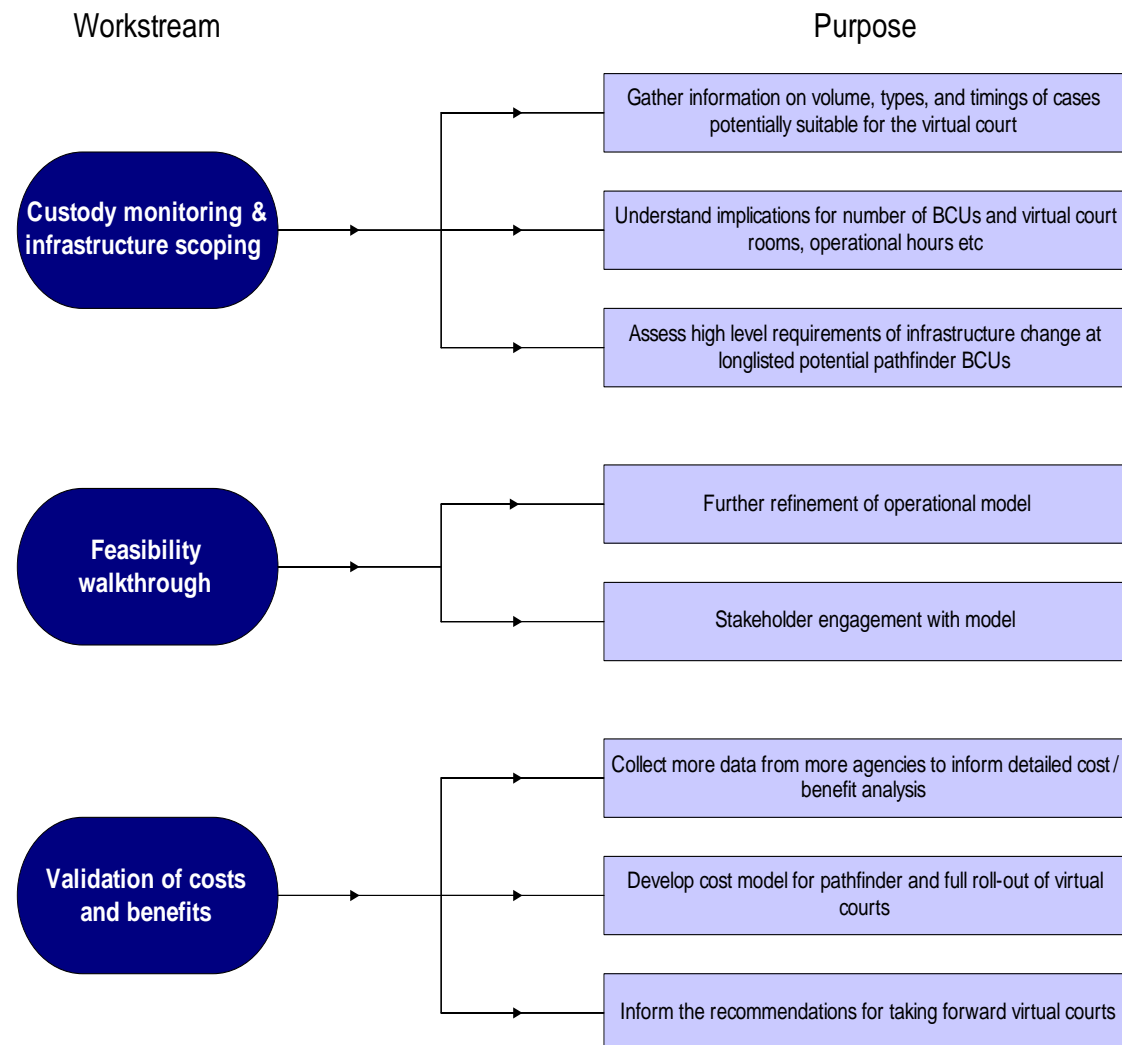
Legislation

Changes to incorporate the use of video conferencing links between police stations and Magistrates Court for plea and sentence by way of consent for both 'in custody' and 'bail' cases will be discussed at the third reading date for the Police and Justice Bill on 18th October 2006.

Work To Date

An operational model has been developed which explores potential scenarios for virtual courts and how they could impact on the various CJS agencies. This model has been used as a consultation tool with a number of key stakeholders, including the LCJB (and its executive group), a workshop of borough leads from the various CJS agencies and a number of defence solicitors.

A feasibility study was undertaken during September, with the following key workstreams:



Findings of the feasibility study have been incorporated into the comprehensive business plan.

Benefits and Costs

The most obvious benefits that could result from virtual courts, if implemented appropriately are:

- Reduced prisoner movements from police station to court (e.g. improved security, better treatment of prisoners, financial savings);
- Speedier disposal of high volume, low level cases (e.g. 'same day' justice for defendants and victims, increased early guilty pleas, improved use of expedited files);
- The potential to significantly reduce the number of Failure To Appear (FTA) warrants (e.g. time and cost savings, improved public protection); and
- Better use of CJS resources (e.g. staff, buildings, money).

The main financial costs can be split into set-up (one-off) costs and operational (ongoing) costs. These will comprise:

- Set-up costs
 - Infrastructure work to create virtual courts; and
 - Project costs (financial and opportunity costs).
- Operational costs
 - A proportional share of the managed service costs (under a framework contract);
 - Call charges; and
 - Additional staffing of virtual courts.

Early scoping work has identified the potential for the following annual net savings, given a level of capital investment. It must be stressed that both costs and savings are **highly indicative** at this stage, based as they are on a number of assumptions and estimates. Foremost among these assumptions is that **70% of all cases are heard at virtual court**. This reflects a wider target for the use of Prison Video Link in other parts of the CJS. These assumptions will only be able to be validated once a detailed operational model has been agreed, or by testing virtual courts in practice.

For 33 MPS BCUs, it is estimated that effectively run virtual courts **have the potential** to deliver significant cashable and cash-releasing savings:

Next Steps

The scoping work and feasibility study indicate that, with the necessary legislative changes, appropriate capital investment, and cross-agency participation, virtual courts have the potential to deliver both financial savings and operational benefits.

The next stage will be a detailed design phase, which will build on the consultation already undertaken to refine the operational model and find solutions to some of the challenges identified. It will start to develop standard operating procedures, training and marketing packages, at the same time as sourcing the various technical and infrastructure solutions that will be required. This will be with the aim of starting a Pathfinder phase during 2007.