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PRISONVOICEMAIL®
An Initial Evaluation

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Introduction

The UK prison population currently stands at just under 86,000 (Ministry of Justice, 2017) and the average cost per prisoner is approximately £35,000 per year (Ministry of Justice, 2013). The acknowledged reoffending rate for adults released from custody is 44.1% (Ministry of Justice, 2017b) with reoffending estimated to cost in excess of £80,000 per offender (De Las Casas et al, 2011). In times of austerity, the Ministry of Justice is under pressure to reduce number of prisoners and reduce offending and reoffending.

Added to the financial costs, imprisonment is often a traumatic time for those imprisoned, and their families. In 2016, 119 self-inflicted deaths were recorded in prisons in England and Wales, a record high; there were 37,784 incidents of self-harm, an increase of 23% from the previous year (Ministry of Justice 2017c). A significant factor related to suicide and self-harm in custody is family ties. Prisoners who have attempted suicide have been found to miss their families more and to have reduced contact with them (Liebling, 1992). The pains of imprisonment thesis (Sykes, 1958) argues that prison often places significant strain on personal relationships resulting from the physical separation and emotional trauma resulting from, often sudden, separation. A failure to maintain family relationships can lead to increased emotional instability during imprisonment and limited social ties for release (Adams, 1992; Cochran, 2013). This may manifest in further negative behaviours inside prison such as violence and general misconduct (Burnett and Maruna, 2004).

Conversely, familial attachments and contact during prison sentences have been reported as crucial for helping people in custody cope with the pressures of prison life, such as the feelings of isolation associated with imprisonment (Agnew, 1992); can contribute towards decreased misconduct whilst in prison (Maruna, 2001); and provide support and hope for release (e.g. Agnew, 1992; Rocque et al, 2013). Family ties provide a sense of belonging, security and happiness (De Las Casas et al, 2011). Desistance literature also reports that there is a vital role in family bonds for reducing reoffending (Sampson and Laub, 1993). More specifically, men who maintained contact with their children during imprisonment, demonstrated improved resettlement outcomes (Visher, 2013). Prisoners who improved their family relationships during their sentence resulted in lower levels of reoffending,

higher levels of employment and lower levels of drug use on release than those who did not improve relationships (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2016). Identifying opportunities to maintain and strengthen family relationships while a person is incarcerated may, therefore have a significant contribution to improving safety in prisons, limiting reoffending and aiding resettlement.

Families themselves also suffer as a result of imprisonment. Families have to cope with practical, financial and emotional consequences which can subsequently have a further impact on relationships. Loss of income, isolation, relationship deterioration and extra childcare commitments can increase the sense of loss and hopelessness experienced by families (Loucks, 2004; Murray, 2005; Codd, 2007). Loss of income is exacerbated by increased expenditure on visits, telephone calls and sending money to imprisoned relatives (Braman and Wood, 2003). Furthermore, it is estimated that 160,000 children in the UK are affected by parental imprisonment (Social Exclusion Unit, 2007) and they can suffer a range of problems during the incarceration period including depression, aggression, eating problems, sleep problems and school related issues (Boswell et al, 2002). However, increasing family contact is thought to moderate these effects. For example, maintaining family ties has been found to increase the resilience of children (Garmezy and Rutter, 1983).

It is clear that maintaining and improving family ties while a person is imprisoned can have a significant impact on both the prisoner and their family with regard to increasing safety, improving resettlement, reducing the effects on the family and ultimately decreasing recidivism. Despite this, prisoners have limited means to keep in contact with their families. They can receive visits but this process is often fraught with challenges for those visiting such as distance to travel to the prison, employment commitments, poor staff attitudes and difficulties in accessing information (Codd, 2007). They can send and receive letters by post or e-mail, if they are sufficiently literate. They can make phone calls, but these are limited to certain times of the day when prisoners are allowed outside their cells, often resulting in queues for the limited number of available phones. The majority of prisoners have no legitimate access to mobile telecommunications and information technology that dominates personal communication in the community (Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, PPO, 2014). While the PPO calls upon all prisons to support family ties while still ensuring

security and public protection (PPO, 2014), family and friends are still unable to make a simple telephone call to the imprisoned person. Alongside this, it has been widely publicised that there is decreased staffing and resource levels within UK prisons (e.g. The Howard League, 2016) both of which impact negatively on phone access.

Prison Voicemail

It is against this backdrop of complex prison challenges that the social start-up, Prison Voicemail, has emerged as a potentially significant moderator for these issues.

Piloted at HMP Lincoln in 2015 as a telephone voicemail service, Prison Voicemail is now operational in 100 of the 121 prison establishments currently operational across England and Wales (www.justice.gov.uk, 2017). The service allows prisoners and their families or friends to exchange voicemails to and from prison. Each prisoner and their family/friends are assigned a unique landline number which is attached to a specific mobile number. The person in prison can listen to the voicemails from their family/friends and reply should they wish. Family and friends are able to purchase a package of minutes to leave voicemails for people in prison on a 'pay as you go' or monthly subscription basis and the cost to the person in prison is the same as calling a UK landline. Messages can be left anytime and are immediately available on the receiving end so they can be retrieved at any time. Messages can be sent and retrieved by family and friends from mobiles and landlines in the UK and abroad. The service was developed by Phonehub IO Ltd in collaboration with HMPPS (previously NOMS) to ensure that it complies with Prison Service Orders relating to security and public protection. The service requires no additional phone lines within prisons and the administration by prisons is minimal with most of the work undertaken by Prison Voicemail staff. Prison Voicemail can be set up online or over the phone and in 2017 Prison Voicemail launched a mobile phone app version for family and friends.

Prison Voicemail evidences lots of anecdotal feedback on their website (www.prisonvoicemail.com) and Twitter feeds (@PrisonVoicemail). However, to date there has been no formal evaluation of the service. The University of Lincoln was commissioned by Prison Voicemail to undertake an initial exploratory evaluation and this is detailed in this

report. The evaluation took three phases: surveys to prisoners, surveys to families/friends and interviews with families/friends.

Method

Ethical considerations: The evaluation was approved by the National Offender Management Service National Research Committee and The University of Lincoln School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee and was carried out in line with The British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct. Data collection was carried out between February and June 2017. Participants for all stages of the research were provided with unique numbers to contact Prison Voicemail in the event that they wished to withdraw their data from the research within 2 weeks from completion of the survey/interview. No one chose to withdraw. Further ethical considerations are detailed below.

Participants: Potential participants for the surveys were identified by Prison Voicemail using the criteria that they had called the service at least 5 times within the previous 30 days. This minimised sending surveys to prisoners who had already been released and to target active users. 169 surveys were sent to prisoners and 81 responded. 169 surveys were sent to family/friends and 77 responded.

Participants for more detailed interviews were identified from those completing the family/friend survey. The survey contained the following statement: 'Please leave your details only if you would like to be contacted by telephone to provide further feedback about Prison Voicemail'. 32 respondents provided their details to allow further contact. This information was shared with the researchers via a password protected zip file. From this, individuals were contacted and 18 interviews completed.

Further information regarding the characteristics of the respondents is provided within the results section.

Materials: The surveys used were developed to assess a range of demographic and social issues relevant to their use of the Prison Voicemail service. The questionnaire was developed for prisoner completion with a slightly amended one for use by family/friends. The surveys were designed to ascertain some background information including age, location and custody status (e.g. remand/sentenced, length of sentence), some information about how they found out about Prison Voicemail, who they use it with and how often;

followed by and a series of evaluative statements with the following response options: not applicable, strongly disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, strongly agree. There were also 3 open questions to gather qualitative data. The first question asked, if people did not use the reply service, why not? However, all respondents indicated they used the reply service so no further comments were made. The second question asked, if there were any improvements participants could think of and the final question asked, if there was any other feedback or comments they'd like to give. The survey also consisted of an information sheet detailing ethical considerations including voluntary participation, right to withdraw, sources of support, confidentiality and a consent confirmation. A debrief sheet was attached to the end of the surveys to explain what would happen next and about data protection considerations.

Procedure: Prison Voicemail posted paper copies of the surveys to the prisoners at their prison address. A self-addressed pre-paid envelope using Business Reply Plus was sent with the survey so that they could be returned at no cost to the prisoner. Prison Voicemail scanned and anonymised the surveys before sending them on to the researchers using a secure password protected 'We Transfer'. The researchers entered, coded and analysed the quantitative data using IBM SPSS version 23.

The families surveys were made available online using Google forms. Prison Voicemail collated the data into an anonymised excel spreadsheet to send to the researchers using a password protected zip file. The data was recoded into SPSS for analysis.

The researchers contacted the people who had provided their contact details and asked if they would still like to provide further feedback regarding Prison Voicemail. All of the 18 people who were able to be contacted were willing to go ahead with the interviews. They were offered the choice of whether to do the interview straight away or if they would like to arrange a more convenient time. Some made alternative arrangements, usually due to work commitments. The 14 non-participants either did not answer their phone or the phone did not connect. Respondents were contacted on three different occasions (during a weekday, during a mid-week evening and during a weekend) before being removed from the list. At the start of the interview, an explanation was provided regarding the ethical

requirements of the study including; confidentiality, data protection and right to withdraw before verbal confirmation of consent.

The interviews were semi structured with 8 guide questions but the interviewer occasionally asked further questions to clarify or draw further information out. The questions were:

- Tell me your thoughts and experiences generally about Prison Voicemail
- What did you think when you first found out about Prison Voicemail?
- How did you find setting up and using Prison Voicemail?
- What sorts of messages would you use Prison Voicemail for?
- What do you think are the benefits of using Prison Voicemail to you and the person in prison?
- What do you think about the cost?
- Are there any improvements you think Prison Voicemail should make?
- Is there any further comments or feedback you'd like to give?

The interviews were conducted in pre-booked enclosed private workspaces within the University with only the interviewer present to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were conducted using a pay as you go mobile (with the phone number withheld) purchased for the research, used on loudspeaker and recorded using an encrypted dictaphone. The phone numbers were deleted from the mobile after use. The interviews were deleted from the dictaphone once transcription was complete. Automatic transcription was trialled using 2 free transcriptions services but was not found to be accurate and therefore transcription was completed manually. The level of detail from the interviews did not allow identification of participants but occasionally first names were spoken and these were removed from the transcripts.

The qualitative data from the surveys and interviews was subjected to a Thematic Analysis using the principles detailed by Braun and Clarke (2008).

Results

1. Prisoner surveys

Participant information

The average age of prison respondents was 40.48 years, with an age range of 19-71 years. This suggests that the age profile was largely representative of the UK prison population (Allen and Watson, 2017).

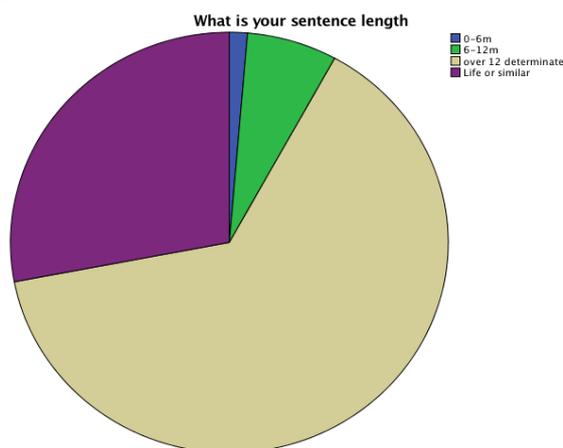
All but one respondent reported English as their first language. Individuals who have English as a secondary or other language appear to be under represented with (foreign nationals represent approximately 15% of the prison population in England and Wales). It is not clear whether there are fewer foreign nationals using the service or whether people with English as a secondary or other language were just less likely to participate in the research.

Prison status

For most respondents it was their first time in custody (73.4%) which could indicate higher usage amongst first time prisoners. Although about 20% of users were on remand, the majority were sentenced both at the time they completed their survey (85.2%) and at the time they started using Prison Voicemail (79.5%).

A majority of participants were serving sentences of over 12 months (64%) or Life/indeterminate (28%). This is an over-representation of longer sentences when compared with the general prison population (Allen and Watson, 2017). This is indicative of a greater need to keep in touch (using Prison Voicemail) within those on longer sentences. There were no users who were serving less than 1 month. Sentence length breakdown is shown in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Sentence length of users



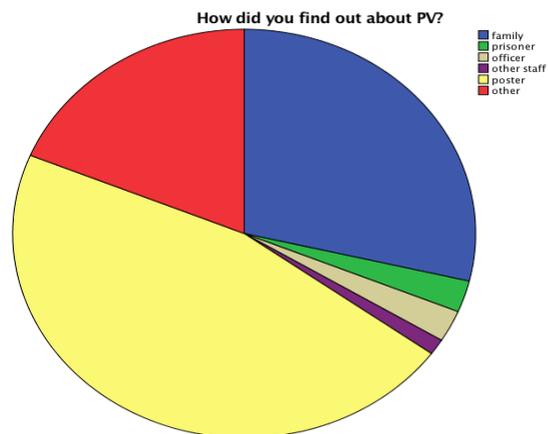
31.6% identified themselves as being located on vulnerable prisoner wings. However, it was noted that some prisoners in sex offender only prisons noted themselves as main wing prisoners. Due to the nature of these prisons and sex offenders being regarded by HM Prison and Probation Service as vulnerable, these were recoded as vulnerable prisoners and the number of vulnerable prisoners within the sample increased to 43%. This demonstrates that Prison Voicemail is being used by both main location prisoners and vulnerable prisoners. There were no respondents in the sample located within Care and Separation Units (CSU) which may suggest that prisoners located in CSUs are not utilising Prison Voicemail although it is unclear that those in CSUs are aware of, or have access to, the service.

Participants were located in 56 different prisons spread geographically across the prison estate and across all 4 prison security categories (Category A-D). 25.4% of the sample had moved prison since commencing the use of Prison Voicemail.

Patterns of use

In total, 81% of respondents were not located in a prison in the same town as the family/friend they communicated with resided. Most prisoners found out about Prison Voicemail from a poster (45.7%), followed by being told by a family member (28.4%) while others included being told by someone else's family, finding out through their Peer Supporter role, national prison radio, or a combination of ways (see figure 2).

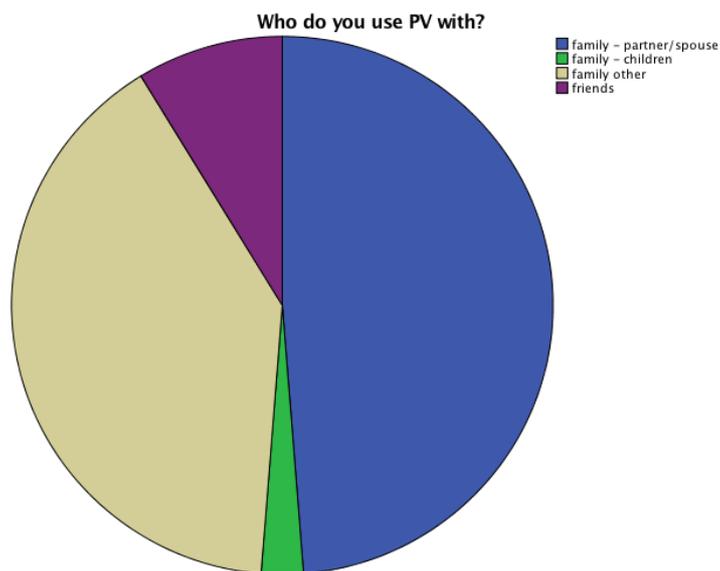
Figure 2: How prisoners found out about Prison Voicemail.



The mean number of times prisoners used Prison Voicemail each week was 6.68 with a range from 1-50 times.

The largest group, used Prison Voicemail with their partner or spouse (48.9%) followed by other family members (40.0%). The relationship between prisoners and who they used Prison Voicemail to communicate with is depicted in figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Who do you use Prison Voicemail with?



Evaluation

Overall there was a high percentage of positive responses to each evaluation statements where a positive response was to slightly or strongly agree with the statement (see Table 1). Positive responses indicate favourable views to using Prison Voicemail with the exception of statement 3 which is reversed and where slight or strong disagreement is the positive response. A higher mean score (from a range of scores 0-3) also indicates a favourable response except for statement 3 where a lower mean score is more favourable.

Table 1: Prisoner Evaluation

Statement	N	Strongly disagree %	Slightly disagree %	Slightly agree %	Strongly disagree %	% Positive response	Mean score (Standard Deviation)
1. Prison Voicemail is easy for me to use	78	0.0	1.3	10.3	88.5	98.8	2.87(0.373)
2. Prison Voicemail is easy for my family/friends to use	78	0.0	1.3	7.7	91.0	98.7	2.90 (0.345)
3. I have had difficulties using Prison Voicemail	71	54.9	4.2	31.0	9.9	59.1	0.96 (1.127)
4. Prison Voicemail is helpful to me	78	0.0	0.0	12.8	87.2	100	2.87 (0.336)
5. Prison Voicemail is helpful to my family/friends	78	1.3	1.3	9.0	88.5	97.5	2.85 (0.486)
6. Prison Voicemail is helpful to my solicitor	11	27.3	9.1	18.2	45.5	63.7	2.85 (0.486)
7. Voicemails make me feel better	72	1.4	2.88	22.2	73.6	95.8	2.68 (0.601)
8. Voicemails make my family/friends feel better	75	1.3	4.0	13.3	81.3	94.6	2.75 (0.595)
9. Voicemails make me behave better in prison	48	25.0	12.5	27.1	35.4	62.5	1.73 (1.198)
10. Voicemails help me find out what is happening with my family/friends and how they are	77	2.6	0.0	16.9	80.5	97.4	2.75 (0.588)
11. Voicemails help my family/friends find out what is happening with me and how I am	77	3.9	1.3	16.9	77.9	94.8	2.69 (0.693)
12. Voicemails help me get practical issues sorted faster	71	1.4	8.5	23.9	66.3	90.1	2.55 (0.713)
13. Voicemails help my family/friends get practical issues sorted faster	73	1.4	8.2	24.7	65.8	90.5	2.55 (0.708)
14. Voicemails are making my time in prison easier	71	4.2	4.2	28.2	63.4	91.6	2.51 (0.772)
15. Voicemails are making it easier for my family/friends while I am in prison	74	4.1	4.1	21.6	70.3	91.9	2.58(0.759)
16. Voicemails allow me to have better contact with my family/friends	76	1.3	3.9	18.4	76.3	94.7	2.70 (0.611)
17. I think my relationships with my family/friends are better because of Prison Voicemail	72	5.6	11.1	38.9	44.4	83.3	2.22 (0.859)
18. Using Prison Voicemail is likely to help stop me re-offending in the future	47	38.3	6.4	25.5	29.8	55.3	1.47 (1.283)

To summarise, prisoners gave overwhelmingly positive responses to the use of Prison Voicemail. Most prisoners felt that Prison Voicemail was easy to use, despite some familiarisation difficulties, for both parties, and reported that they felt Prison Voicemail:

- Was helpful
- Made prison life easier
- Made them feel better
- Helped them find out what was happening with each other
- Allowed them to maintain better family contact
- Helped them get practical issues sorted faster

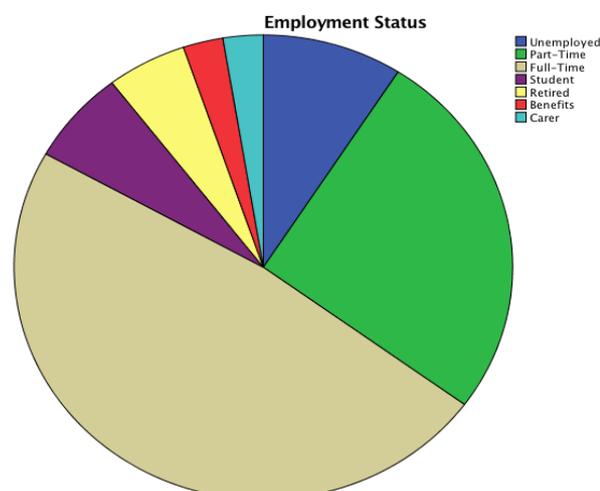
Importantly, almost two thirds of respondents reported that it made them behave better in prison and over half said they felt it was likely to help stop them reoffending.

2. Family/friend surveys

Participant Information

The age profile of family/friend respondents largely matched that of the prisoner respondents with the average age being 44.21 years and a range from 18-75 years. 6 participants identified that English was not their first language (7.8%) and 64 participants (83.1%) reported that it was the first time in custody for the person they communicated with in prison. A majority of family/friend respondents were employed (74.1%) on a full-time (48.1%) or part-time (26.0%) basis. A breakdown of the employment status is provided in Figure 4 .

Figure 4: employment status of family/friends using Prison Voicemail



Patterns of contact

As expected, family/friend respondents reported that 84.4% of them did not reside in the same city as the prison where their friend/family member was located. The average distance from the prison was 90.78 miles although this varied widely with a range from 5-500 miles. Approximately 10% said there had been a decrease in the number of visits since they had started using Prison Voicemail while 7.8% said they had increased.

All respondents reported that they used other methods in addition to Prison Voicemail to keep in contact including; visiting (81.8%), letters (84.4%), phone calls (87%) and e-mail (61%). The mean number of times per week that Prison Voicemail was used was 6.14 with a range from 0-28. Most (97.4%) reported that their friend/family member used the reply function to respond to their voicemails.

Most family respondents found out about Prison Voicemail from a poster (48.1%) followed by the person they communicated with in prison telling them (42.9%). Only a small number were told by staff (1.3%). This is shown in figure 5 below:

Figure 5: Ways that family and friends found out about Prison Voicemail

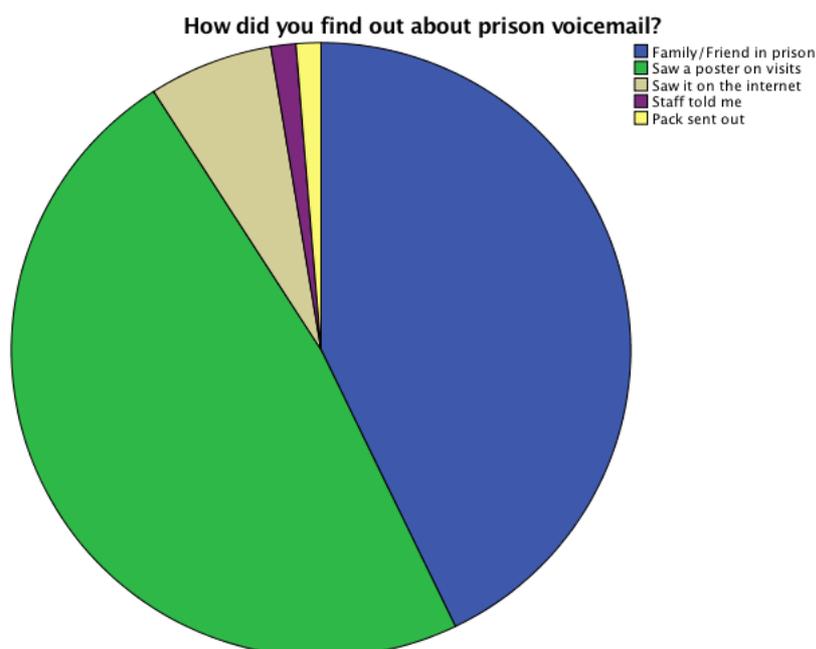


Table 2 below reports the percentage of positive responses to each evaluation statement where a positive response is a slightly or strongly agree. N is the number of people who answered that statement. Positive responses indicate favourable views to Prison Voicemail (i.e. slightly/strongly agree, with the exception of statement 3 where statements slightly/strongly disagree is indicative of a positive response). A higher mean score (from a range of scores 0-3) also indicates a favourable response except for statement 3 where a lower mean score is more favourable.

Table 2: Family evaluation

Statement	N	Strongly disagree %	Slightly disagree %	Slightly agree %	Strongly agree %	% positive response	Mean (standard deviation)
1.Prison Voicemail is easy for me to use	75	2.7	0.0	2.7	94.7	97.4	2.89 (0.509)
2.Prison Voicemail is easy for my family member/friend to use	75	2.7	0.0	8.0	89.3	97.3	2.85 (0.546)
3.I have had difficulties using Prison Voicemail	65	70.8	6.2	12.3	10.8	77.0	0.63 (1.069)
4.Prison Voicemail is helpful to me	75	4.0	0.0	9.3	86.7	96.0	2.79 (0.643)
5.Prison Voicemail is helpful to my family member/friend	75	2.7	0.0	10.7	86.7	97.4	2.81 (0.562)
6.Leaving Voicemails makes me feel better	75	1.3	1.3	10.7	86.7	97.4	2.83 (0.503)
7.Voicemails make my family member/friend feel better	75	1.3	1.3	12.0	85.3	97.3	2.81 (0.512)
8.Voicemails help me find out what is happening with my family member/friend	75	2.7	2.7	17.3	77.3	94.6	2.69 (0.657)
9.Voicemails help my family member/friend find out what is happening with me and how our family is	75	2.7	1.3	9.3	86.7	96.0	2.80 (0.593)
10.Voicemails help me get practical issues sorted faster	72	1.4	2.8	18.1	77.8	95.9	2.72 (0.587)
11.Voicemails help my family member/friend get practical issues sorted faster	72	1.4	4.2	19.4	75.0	94.4	2.68 (0.624)
12.Voicemails are making the time my family member/friend spends in prison easier for them	74	1.4	0.0	16.2	82.4	98.6	2.80 (0.496)
13.Voicemails are making it easier for me while my family member/friend is in prison.	74	1.4	1.4	13.5	83.8	97.3	2.80 (0.523)
14.Voicemails allow me to have better contact with my family member/friend	74	2.7	1.4	10.8	85.1	95.9	2.78 (0.702)
15.I think my relationship with my family member/friend in prison is better because of Prison Voicemail	74	2.7	4.1	25.7	67.6	93.3	2.58 (.702)
16.Prison Voicemail is good value for money	76	2.6	6.6	14..5	76.3	90.8	2.64 (0.725)

In summary, similar to the prisoner surveys, the responses of family and friends to using Prison Voicemail was overwhelmingly positive. They generally found it easy to use, indicated relatively few difficulties and reported that they thought it was good value for money.

Family and friends reported that for both parties they felt that Prison Voicemail:

- Was helpful
- Made prison easier
- Made them feel better
- Helped them find out what was happening with each other
- Allowed them to have better contact
- Helped them get practical issues sorted faster

3. Qualitative data

Of the 18 interviews, 16 participants were female and 2 were male. The female participants were using Prison Voicemail to communicate with their current partner/spouse (8), with their ex-partner/spouse (1), their sons (5), their friend (1) and their brother (1). The 2 male participants were using Prison Voicemail to communicate with their son and wife. The interview transcripts were combined with the qualitative information from both the prisoner and family/friends surveys to identify themes. Five key themes were identified: 1) health and wellbeing, 2) relationships and social ties to the community, 3) accessibility, 4) improvements and 5) cost. Throughout these themes there was a 'golden thread' of feelings of positivity and gratitude, and the sense that the use of Prison Voicemail assists those in prison and the family and friends left outside.

At the end of this section, personal stories gained from the interviews are included. Names have been changed and any personal details removed to protect the identify of participants.

Health and wellbeing

There was a clear sense that Prison Voicemail was used to improve health and wellbeing within prisoners and their families;

“It helps me get things off my chest . . .the person that’s having problems i.e. myself, it makes you feel relaxed because you know they’re gonna listen to the message.

“If I’m feeling like crap and just want a hug. All the messages are saved on my phone so when I’m feeling like crap and want to hear him talk, I can just go through my messages and play the one I want.” (Interview 17).

Prison Voicemail seemed to help relieve some of the pains and challenges of imprisonment on families and prisoners;

“It helped loads, the fact he was brutally taken away from us, we never ever been separated before the three of us so it was a shock, it provide us with emotional support to know we can leave him messages at any time . . . it helped us tremendously, it was like a little straw we could grab”. (Interview 2).

“It’s definitely helped take some of the stress out of the situation.” (Interview 3).

“Some days he’s felt down in there so but in prison he can’t show emotion so he’ll listen to voicemail and he says that listening to me at the time, he says it puts a smile on his face and lifts his spirits.” (Interview 5)

“When I’m feeling a bit down, I do get upset coz I can’t talk to him but then when I’ve left him a message, I feel a bit closer to him.” (Interview 8)

“I just think it made life easier for the likes of me and my kids, a lot easier. We’re not waiting about for a phone call, its tonnes easier way of communicating. We all use it, the children too.” (Interview 10).

“If I miss a call, it’s upsetting because you can’t get back to them so it’s ideal because it’s on a message then.” (Interview 11).

“The conversations helped. I felt like sometimes I was doing it more for me.” (Interview 15).

“My sons due out but he’s done 16 months. I want to say thank you very much, they’ve made life a lot more bearable for us in a very difficult situation.” (Interview 16).

‘Since we found out about the service, we have used it constantly. It has been absolutely brilliant for myself and wife to keep in contact everyday between our main phone calls and visits. Thank you, it has made my sentence a lot easier to deal with’. (Prisoner survey).

‘Helped us a lot during the worse time in both our lives.’ (Family survey).

Prison Voicemail helps prisoners to be less worried about their families and vice versa;

“I live on my own and I have a lot of hospital appointments so it’s good if he knows . . . he can pick up a message to let him know where I am . . . it gives him peace of mind, that’s a definite . . . it’s a way of safeguarding ourselves.” (Interview 3).

“It gives him reassurance to know that I’m alright. He gets to hear what I’ve been up to . . . it just keeps him up to date on how I’m doing during the week. He likes it.” (Interview 8).

“It’s good to know he’s OK every day. He hasn’t been well. He can leave me a message saying there’s been an incident in the prison, I’ll be locked down and so you don’t worry then when you don’t hear from him.” (Interview 14).

“Its particularly useful if I’m gonna be out because if he can’t get hold of me then he panics. I leave a message and he knows I’m fine, I’m just not at home. . .He’s not going to panic if he can’t get through to me.” (Interview 17).

‘It gives peace of mind for both parties’. (Prisoner survey).

‘I can let my family know I’m OK and give them a rough time of when I can ring them back and chat to them’. (Prisoner survey).

And provides a sense of normality through a challenging situation. It has taken away some uncertainty and given back some control;

“Its lovely because it sort of feels like normality and I haven’t had that before.” (Interview 3).

“People don’t realise you’re just relying on them to call and if you don’t get that call, your mind goes all over the place . . . so by leaving a message it feels sort of like normal life in a surreal situation.” (Interview 3).

“It keeps me in sort of you know, control of leaving him messages because I’ve got bad OCD and when I’m having a bad day, I can just ring up and say I’m missing him and everything is really good. I’m glad I set it up.” (Interview 8).

For some, it became a way of helping to manage their mental health. This was evident in prisoners and families;

“It’s really useful, especially when my anxiety is kicking off because I can ring up and say my anxiety is kicking off and then when he gets it he’ll ring me, he rings me up to calm me down so its really useful for when I’m having a bad day.” (Interview 8).

“I think it really does help him because he is a self-harming person and if he leaves me a message he can express himself a bit more to me.” (Interview 13).

Prison Voicemail also increases feelings of positivity;

“I feel happy and I suppose it’s exciting because you don’t know what’s gonna be on it.” (Interview 10).

“I feel very happy and excited because I’m managing to leave him a message and I haven’t got to wait.” (Interview 13).

‘The voicemail system introduces a little novelty and excitement into our day as it means both parties can receive the surprise of someone reaching out to them.’ (Prisoner survey).

Resolving Practicalities

There were several clear examples of Prison Voicemail assisting prisoners and their families to resolve practical issues and to gather information. Often these were related to solicitors or probation;

“He leaves me a voicemail if he needs me to do anything, especially as his case hasn’t finished yet, so he needs messages passed on to his solicitor.” (Interview 6).

“He gave me permission to talk to his probation officer. . . so I was able to put a heart to save that message and then probation could listen to the message to say I’ve got permission. I said how can we do this quickly coz a letter is gonna take a few days. I was able to scroll through and find the heart cos I’d marked it and she was able to listen to it there and then.” (Interview 7).

“If I need to let him have some sort of information . . . to let him know that he’s getting a professional visit so I can let him know when it’s happening otherwise he wouldn’t know until the day and so he couldn’t prepare so I could say so and so’s coming on this day or you’ll be getting this mail so he knew when to expect it. We had some legal documentation that was time sensitive so I emailed him when I posted it and what I’d written on the envelope.” (Interview 9).

“He can leave me important messages and I can do things for him, I can help him more than anything to get things sorted like solicitors and things . . . if he hasn’t got any money or anything.” (Interview 13).

“More often than not, he’d leave a request, for example to send cash or confirm a visit or look something up on the internet”. (Interview 15).

Relationships and social ties to the community

It was clear that Prison Voicemail increases contact and ties with people in prison and their families, particularly given challenges such as families being at work during the day, often when prisoners had the best chance of being able to use a phone;

“It’s a good way to communicate when they’re not able to ring you, you’re not able to answer the call if you’re at work or whatever, it’s much easier to leave you a voicemail and you reply as well and you’re still kind of speaking to them . . . When we first went onto Prison Voicemail, he loved it and I think he still does because it’s still communication with me. . . if he was not able to ring me for whatever reason, he’d quickly run to the phone and leave voicemail just so he can hear my voice. (Interview 1).

“I’m at the mercy of when he can get to the telephone before we started using and if I was going to hospital and if there was other important information I needed to get to him, I just couldn’t do that before . . . it’s another way of keeping on contact with him and letting him know what’s going on because we’re away from each other.” (Interview 3).

“He only gets between half past six by the time I get home and seven o’clock to phone me if he can get chance to get on a phone but then he’s got all day to listen to his messages. If there’s anything important I need to tell him. . . I can leave messages on voicemail and he can pick them up so it’s really good.” (Interview 5).

“If I forgot to say anything when I’ve gone up to visit him, it’s just really useful, I can leave him the message and let him know what I was meant to say. When I go for the next visit, it might be a month or two before I go up again so it’s really useful.” (Interview 8).

“It’s an added way to keep in touch. More than anything we use Prison Voicemail 2-3 times/day.” (Interview 9).

“He can leave a message while I’m at work, just a sweet little message. Sometimes my hours are just as long as he’s out and we can’t always catch each other.” (Interview 14).

‘Any improved contact with family and friends is a wonderful bonus to strengthen family ties.’ (Prisoner survey)

'A helpful and meaningful way to enable users to stay in contact and develop bonds with those they care about.' (Prisoner survey).

Prison Voicemail helped maintain feelings of connection between people in prison and families in the outside world;

"It was bringing him into the reality, the outside world . . . keeping us very connected with him . . . and I needed that and that's what Prison Voicemail offered me (Interview 2).

"Just keeping in contact with him, making sure he knows he's loved and missed . . . if he can't phone me at least I can tell him every day that I love him. . . it's like you can sit and have a conversation . . . he listens to it and I know you're talking to a machine but it feels like you're talking to that person . . . it does make you feel happy. Even though they're in prison they still need to know that they're loved and wanted." (Interview 5).

"All of us use it, I've got it, my sister, all of our friends have got it. He's doing quite a long sentence so it's quite difficult to stay in touch with everyone but it's nice, he can leave everyone voicemails and they can leave him voicemails and he knows what everyone's doing". (Interview 6).

"He gets to know stuff that I've forgotten to mention he's involved in everyday issues you know like finances, our family, my work . . . it keeps him in the picture as well, especially little things that you don't realise like the new £5 notes that came out. . . it's just the little things to keep him involved in everyday things." (Interview 7)

"We use it for social issues, we talk politics a lot, sports but we obviously talk about the legal side and what's going on in the prison, what he's doing, is the gym open today, is education open today, also letting him know what we're doing." (Interview 12).

"I felt like I wanted to say stuff even if it was just mundane, if something came into my head and I wanted to share it . . . I hoped that even if it was mundane, that he would still feel connected to the family . . . As a Mum, I wanted to keep that emotional connection. I told him on most occasions that I loved him and that I'd still be there for him.

More specifically, it has demonstrated the ability to support the involvement in family rituals;

“ I have the app and on a weekend we would have movie night. Her dad would have rum and coke, she would have coke and ice and I’d have a glass of wine and we’d do cheers down the phone so he was still part of it. He felt part of what was our ritual as a family.” (Interview 9).

Prison Voicemail was used to share family events and good news;

“Important events in our family, when we had a certain celebration in our family, I would say ‘happy birthday’ or ‘happy anniversary’ (Interview 2).

“Special messages like birthday, anniversary, you can save them and just listen to them whenever you like, you can go right back.” (Interview 7).

To give him the good news our friend found out she was expecting, I could let him know sooner.” (Interview 9).

Prison Voicemail was particularly important when children were present in the family unit. It was used to share positive updates by both parents and children;

“We have a little child so the fact we could leave these messages when we felt like when something significant happened, for example, she passed a ballet exam, it helped loads. . . every little change in our lives. I know he wants to know the little one has been chosen for VIP of the week, our whole world revolves around her . . . she had SAT exams, she started school, it was important.” (Interview 2).

“I think he likes listening to voicemails from the kids, so they’re his nieces. He enjoys that because if he calls they don’t really talk openly on the phone but on voicemail they leave him loads of silly messages like what they’ve been up to at school, what they’ve watched for dinner, silly things but it makes him feel like he’s watching them grow”. (Interview 6).

“Our little one, she got a mention in the school assembly because she got a merit or something like that. I could let him know what she’d done and what award she’d got so when we phone up on an evening, he can speak to her straight away . . . he would say this little blackbird told me that you had a really good day at school today.”

“My kids more than me use it to talk and let him know what they’re up to.” (Interview 10).

“Our daughter is quite young so she is learning something new every week so it’s nice to be able to tell him she’s just stood up for the first time or taken her first steps.” (Interview 17).

‘Just like to say thank you, my wife really enjoys the service and she often captures my youngest (5-month old girl) first words which is simply amazing’. (Prisoner survey).

It could also be used to involve the person in prison in parenting;

“My daughter, she’s not long turned 9. If she’s having one of those days where she’s been naughty and sort of kicking off, I’ll say, ‘right I’m ringing your Dad’. Obviously I’m not talking to him but he can still hear the gist of the conversation that we’re having and he still feels part of the family and that he’s still very much important when it comes to discipline and ground rules . . . keeps him part of the family circle.” (Interview 9).

One family also demonstrated using it to show to their son that life is better outside of prison by way of encouraging him to stay out of trouble;

“We wanted to show by communications that life is still going on outside . . . trying to show him that outside is good and its worth not getting into trouble for. In the world outside we are still cracking on with life, there are some highlights and these are the bits you could be enjoying when you come out.” (Interview 15).

Accessibility

The fact that messages could be left at any time, seemed particularly valued by participants;

“We can share the information at the very moment it happens rather than waiting for him to call. We use it every day. I’m lucky enough to have a husband who tells me every day ‘you’re beautiful’ and I could say that back to him whenever I felt. My heart is bursting and he’s away from me . . . and I can just pick up the phone and tell him, no waiting for his call”. (Interview 2).

“Sometimes I’ve had bad news and I’ve felt really down and just actually leaving a message at two o’clock in the morning.” (Interview 5).

“It’s really handy to be able to leave messages at any time of the day for him to be able to pick up. . . it’s very good if you think of something at six o’clock at lock up time, you can leave a message and then he’ll listen to it in the morning.” (Interview 7).

“I think I’ve used it pretty late in the evening, 10 or 11 o’clock, all times of day really. . .it helps him a lot because although he’s not speaking directly to us, he can communicate more or less anytime. If we have query or he has one, its quick, we can respond quickly.” (Interview 12).

Families also valued being able to replay their messages at any time;

“With the app, you can listen to them as many times as you like so if you’re missing them you can hear their voice.” (Interview 1).

“I can save them so if I don’t hear anything from him I can hear his voice, I just listen to his messages over again.” (Interview 5).

This also tied into health and wellbeing;

“If I’m on a downer or whatever, I’ll just listen to them but you can select favourites now.” (Interview 1).

Prison Voicemail can be used anywhere and the actual practical use is discrete;

“It’s taken a lot of stress off me . . . I feel more at ease knowing I can leave a message and not have to worry if I’m out in company and they don’t know my situation, it helps with that because it’s quite discrete . . . I can’t always answer my phone”. (Interview 3).

“I can leave him a voicemail even if I’m at work and he can leave me one back, it makes it quite private and confidential.” (Interview 6).

“If I’m away for the weekend, we can still kind of communicate using voicemail.” (Interview 17).

More specifically, the fact that Prison Voicemail could be used abroad was also incredibly valuable to families;

“I couldn’t go on holiday, now for the first time in 6 years, I’ve decided to go away because I know that I can use the service to let him know that I’ve arrived safely and he won’t worry then because before I couldn’t be able to let him know. I’ll still be worried about going but it takes some of the pressure off knowing that I can leave him a message and he can pick it up at any time to say I’ve got there even if its late.” (Interview 3).

“It’s good for when I’m on holiday because I can leave him a voicemail. However, when I travelled to Asia it didn’t work but in the Middle East it did.

“It’s nice, when I’ve been on holiday still being able to use it. It costs a lot of money to ring a mobile from prison but we can use that and do messages back and forward.” (Interview 16).

People generally found Prison Voicemail fine to set up although they sometimes felt a little unsure initially;

“I wasn’t quite sure how does it work but I found all the information there and the more you use it, the more confident you become.” (Interview 2).

“I didn’t know whether it would be a good thing or a bad thing to be honest and I thought how’s this gonna work. I didn’t know how it would work, I didn’t know if it was just us leaving them a message of if they had certain time limits . . . so I just thought oh I’ll just give it a go.” (Interview 5).

“I was a bit dubious especially after setting up a direct debit . . . but the customer support has been very helpful.” (Interview 7).

“I wasn’t 100% sure on it but now I’ve got it up and running, it’s really really useful.” (Interview 8).

“I was unsure of how it would work, a bit dubious, but once you get to know how it works, it completely changed my opinion, it was dead straightforward.” (Interview 10).

“The first time you use it, you dial into the number and then the phone stops and then you get a noise and think what’s happening, then I sort of looked at the phone and then it rang so now I understood how the system works. . . It would be useful to be told just how the system works when you dial in but it’s very easy.” (Interview 12).

Cost

There appeared to be a dichotomy between what families thought of the cost and what prisoners thought. Families generally seemed to think the cost was good value for money; “It’s not expensive, I think its affordable.” (Interview 2).

“I think it’s worth the money.” (Interview 3).

“It’s a fair cost. . . it’s decent, I don’t think its overpriced at all. If people want to keep in contact they’ll pay it. The amount that they charge it’s not that much to be honest to stay on contact with your loved one, well I don’t think it is because they’re not here you’re not spending money going out for a meal or drink or whatever so its pennies really.” (Interview 5).

“I find it quite economical. I pay £5 a month . . . I usually phone 3-4 times a day and that lasts fine with me.” (Interview 7).

“It’s a bargain compared to my normal telephone bill. Although don’t put the price up!” (Interview 12).

“I think that the people who designed the service deserve to be rewarded and if that’s how they make their money then fair enough.” (Interview 15).

“You want to pay as little as possible, him being the main income earner not being around is a bit of a tight thing but its affordable.” (Interview 16).

Although families had noticed that if they topped up, the minutes didn’t carry over and they felt that one improvement would be that they should;

“If you’ve got 22 minutes left, then you pay again, them 22 minutes aren’t carried over. . . let them carry over so you’re not losing them.” (Interview 7).

Also, if they did not hang up fast enough after listening to a message, it would record a message that the prisoner then had to use credit to listen to;

“Sometimes I haven’t hung up fast enough and it takes some credit. He goes and it says its got one message and then it beeps and then there’s no message. He’s waiting to see what that message is and you didn’t even leave it and you have to be very fast. He’ll say ‘you’ve cost me 10p and I’ve listened to 3 bleeps’. . . there needs to be a delay.” (Interview 14).

However, a majority of prisoners seemed to have a different view regarding the cost, stating that they should not be charged for it because their families had already paid and that there should be multi user options;

‘Make picking up and leaving messages a free phone number for me so cost is met by my family and I can ring with no credit’. (Prisoner survey).

'If my girlfriend pays for it, then why does it cost me?'

'Find a way so that multiple family members can use the service without only one bearing the cost.' (Prisoner survey).

Improvements

A majority of Prison Voicemail Users were very happy with the way it worked as demonstrated in the discussion below. Many had no improvements to make;

"For me it worked like a clock. I was happy with the way it worked". (Interview 2)

"No improvements, what I use it for, I'm pleased with." (Interview 13).

'I really don't think Prison Voicemail needs improvement. (Family survey)

However, in addition to the issues relating to cost highlighted by prisoners above, some further suggestions were made (please see Appendix 1 for responses to these suggestions from the Prison Voicemail team):

Prisoners commonly said they would like to be able to listen to messages again. Families can do this via the app as discussed above but prisoners currently can't;

"He'd like to listen to the messages again and he can't. One of the messages I left brought a tear to his eye it were so nice and once he'd listened to it, it was gone and it'd be nice if on odd time that there were a message they wanted to save so they could listen to it again" (Interview 5).

'Would be good if prisoners have more control/options e.g. repeat message in case numbers or valuable information is contained in the message that needs to be written down.' (Prisoner survey).

'It would be good if we can choose to delete or keep a message.' (Prisoner survey).

'Should have the option to pause a message and hang up then start again if asked to put the phone down by prison staff'. (Prisoner survey).

'Having the choice to save and delete a select few would be nice. I hear my daughter trying to talk and it makes me happy but then it's gone. We could get one that if we was able to save, we could listen to everyday for a bit of a boost, something to make us feel better'. (Prisoner survey).

'If interrupted while listening to voicemail and have to hang up half way through, the message is lost. Is it possible to retain the message for future listening?' (Prisoner survey).

There was also the suggestion that it might be useful for families to delete their own messages;

"Sometimes I wish I could delete my messages because what it is sometimes I may leave him a message thinking he's gonna go on voicemail and then he doesn't listen to them and then we have a conversation on my mobile." (Interview 14).

Similarly, prisoners suggested being able to edit their messages;

'sometimes it'd be nice to listen back and change your message if you're not happy with how it sounds'. (Prisoner survey).

Families and prisoners requested time stamps on the messages;

"Last time me and my partner spoke, there wasn't a time stamp so I'd say I'm going out, I'll be about an hour and he doesn't know if its relevant or not." (Interview 17).

'The voicemail should tell you the time it was sent, with a date' (Prisoner survey).

'Sometimes after a few days or week of not using, I'll have 5-6 voicemails but I don't know the date they were. Knowing the date could help to understand them better'. (Prisoner survey).

There was also the suggestion from families and prisoners of having the option to leave longer messages;

“The three-minute limit thing on the app . . . it would be nice if you could have slightly longer. Five minutes is a good time, enough to say everything I need to and not gonna go over his time.” (Interview 17).

‘Maybe consider extending the time limit given to family/friends leaving a message to maybe five minutes.’ (Prisoner survey).

“Sometimes it’d be nice if the time was a bit longer because it seems like a long time but when you’re talking that’s not always enough.” (Interview 7).

Prisoners expressed frustration at the ‘line is busy’ message which actually meant they had no messages;

‘Message the line is busy might be better expressed as ‘you have no new messages’’. (Prisoner survey).

‘The line is busy message is extremely unhelpful when it actually means the mailbox is empty.’ (Prisoner survey).

‘It tells me the line is busy when it’s not but by the time I’ve noticed, it’s taken 20p off my PIN credit. This is not good for me when I don’t know what’s going off. This needs to be addressed and put right’. (Prisoner survey).

A very common theme was that prisoners wanted to be able to leave voicemails without their family having had to leave one first;

‘We should be able to ring and leave a message before receiving one. We can only respond to messages at the moment.’ (Prisoner survey).

'Why does it have to be a reply? Why can't we leave messages to our family and they reply?' (Prisoner survey).

They also wanted to be able to reply to individual voicemails, rather than listening to them all first;

'I should be able to reply to each message rather than listen to all'. (prisoner survey).

Similarly, they'd like to be able to set it up themselves and be able to put money on it themselves;

'could it not be set up from prison through apps?' (Prisoner Survey).

'Let prisoners put money on it'. (Prisoner Survey).

Families and prisoners both suggested there needed to be more advertising;

"Needs more advertisement because I've been in you know in the waiting room and the leaflets are not there anymore, there's no leaflets. . . I think where you book in there should be a slot. Its stuck on a notice board but people stand in front of it, I don't think its in a prominent place. It need to be on the desk so people can see it." (Interview 5).

"It's not displayed in any of the prisons he's been to. I've not really seen it. He's at [name of prison], I've never seen it there. When he was at [name of prison], it was a tiny poster behind the reception . . . someone he made friends with, his wife told us about it." (Interview 6).

'Advertise it more. I wasn't and neither was my partner aware of the service until my partner came across a poster on a visit. It doesn't seem very well advertised for prisoners.' (Prisoner survey).

'It's a great service but a lot of lads on the wing don't know about it. In prison, posters on the wall don't last too long . . . the posters here are ripped.' (Prisoner survey).

There was also the suggestion that a leaflet to take away would be useful;

“they do have a poster up, saying ‘don’t miss the dreaded missed call’ or something like that . . . but if there was a proper leaflet, explaining how it works . . . information that people can take away and sit and read. The bit of information in the pack I got was that you can do this but there wasn’t actually a lot of information about it, a little leaflet explaining how it works and the potential benefits would be more beneficial.” (Interview 9).

However, it was noted that at some prisons staff tell people about the service;

“Prison where my son is now, they have a team that promote it.” (Interview 15).

“I didn’t know about it until I found out from POPS” (Interview 18).

Although there was an acknowledgement this may be challenging, a small number of families and prisoners suggested it would be good if there was a way to notify prisoners when a voicemail had been left, particularly when prisoners had more than one active number;

“The prisoners don’t know they’ve got a message until they pick up the phone, whether they could be alerted in some way that they’ve got a message, maybe an e-mail or slip of paper just to say there is a message on the phone if you want to check it.” (Interview 15).

“He’s got to check the phone to alert him he’s got one. Maybe there could be a bleeper system or something. I don’t know how easy that would be.” (Interview 16).

‘Give warning of messages from people across all number so I don’t have to check all numbers every day.’ (Prisoner survey).

Families were generally pleased with the mobile app but a small number noticed that the app did not always seem to synch with the phone line and messages were not always deleted;

“The voicemail app doesn’t link with the voicemail telephone number so if you’ve listened to them on the app, I might ring the number and it will tell me that I’ve still got them to listen to so it might not sync. Since the apps come along it’s been really good. It’s also good to have the telephone number because if I don’t have Wi-Fi then I can ring but they’re just not linked at the moment.” (Interview 7).

“I think sometimes you ring and it tells you the message and you’ve already deleted it, it doesn’t always delete itself.” (Interview 14).

One participant discussed the potential for embarrassment regarding the lack of discreteness on her bank statements and on her mobile phone and suggested the statements and the mobile phone app could be made more discrete;

“Only thing that isn’t discrete is that it flags up on my bank statements so that could be quite embarrassing. I needed to show my bank statements for my mortgage and had to sort of blank it out. I’ve got the app as well and that’s quite good but that spells it out on the app and I’m quite a private person. . . maybe a redesign of the logo to just sort of abbreviate it rather than spell it out, it’s a bit off putting. Sometimes I’ve thought should I just get rid of the app.

Prisoners and families said they wanted Prison Voicemail in every prison;

‘I think that Prison Voicemail should be rolled out in every prison. I am currently in [name of prison] and I can’t access it from here’. (Prisoner survey).

‘Wish all prisons can have Prison Voicemail.’ (Prisoner survey).

Some of the improvements have already been acted upon:

For example, prisoners being able to leave more than one message;

“I did say before so that prisoners can leave more than one voicemail at a time . . . but Kieran [Prison Voicemail] did something so that he can leave me as many voicemails as he wants.” (interview 1).

Families receive feedback when a message has been listened to;

“It lets you know which I think is great. You have feedback when that message has been listened . . . it closes the circle.” (Interview 2).

Furthermore, at the time of writing this report, Prison Voicemail had considered all improvements suggested and are continuing to suggest a number of them where possible. Further details are provided in the Suggestions and Improvements table in Appendix 1.

Gratitude and Customer Service

Despite some isolated difficulties and several suggestions for improvement, the participants valued the high level of customer service they received from the Prison Voicemail team and generally didn't seem to mind that things had gone wrong because they were quickly put right again;

“The founders of Prison Voicemail are really helpful as well. . . they are really good and they do try and help as much as possible. . . it's a good service, they get back to you straight away.” (Interview 1).

“There's been a couple of glitches but I've spoken to them directly and they've put the issues straight.” (Interview 3).

“The people who do the voicemail are really helpful when I'm struggling to do stuff, they really help me through what I need to do and get it all sorted.” (Interview 8).

“The help side when things have gone wrong has been really really good.” (Interview 9).

“Even when I had problems the customer service was absolutely brilliant. . . When I've e-mailed them its been dealt with straight away.” (Interview 10).

“The guys when I did speak to them, they were very nice to me so I didn’t have any complaints.” (Interview 15)

‘The team at prison voicemail will do anything for you. They go out of their way to make sure the service is running perfectly for you and to help in any way they can.’ (Family survey).

Families and prisoners expressed their gratitude throughout and would (and do) recommend it to others;

“I’m so grateful for it.. . I’m happy to recommend it to any families for future reference. . . I appreciate the tremendous work and I said if there’s anything I can do I would do it by promoting or talking to other families. I would definitely encourage them to do it, its helped us tremendously. I would highly recommend it, it’s a useful tool for both parties, those inside and outside. “ (Interview 2).

“Everybody I talk to I’m like ‘oh do you use Prison Voicemail?’ and they’re like ‘what’s that?’ and I’m like oh you need to use it. I’ll tell them about it if they’ve not heard it. I tell them you can leave messages and you can leave them anytime you want”. (Interview 5).

‘It should be accessed by all prisoners and family’. (Prisoner survey)

They have come to value it and do not want it to stop;

“Just don’t delete it, don’t stop it. Keep it going.” (Interview 5).

“It’s just a fantastic service that you’re doing.” (Interview 9)

“I’ve got used to it, I use it a lot, its pretty good, it’s one of the better ideas.” (Interview 11).

“It’s an extremely useful innovation . . . well done. . . please carry on.” (Interview 12).

“I thought it was a jolly good idea . . . very well thought out.” (Interview 18).

‘I find this service helpful, I hope it sticks around.’ (Prisoner survey).

‘Just make sure Prison Voicemail never retires (Prisoner survey)

‘You offer a valued service to both the family/friends of prisoners – my hope is that this will be here to stay as I know most users of your service will appreciate the service provided.’
(Prisoner survey).

Personal Stories

Personal story: Julie

- Uses Prison Voicemail to communicate with her partner when she is in hospital
- Feels able to go on holiday for the first time in 6 years due to Prison Voicemail

Julie communicates with her partner in prison. She described how Prison Voicemail helped “take some of the stress out of the situation”. She described how she has regular hospital appointments but prior to Prison Voicemail, she was at the “mercy of when he could get to the telephone” and therefore could not always tell her partner what was happening when she was away from home.

She went onto describe how she has not had a holiday in 6 years but because of Prison Voicemail she now feels she can because she will be able to use Prison Voicemail to let her partner know she has arrived safely, even if its late, and he can pick up the message at any time.

Julie said Prison Voicemail has given her peace of mind and helps she and her partner to, “safeguard ourselves against any problems”. She said it has provided them with some feelings of normality that she hasn’t had before.

(Interview 2)

Personal Story: Sue

- Sue has used Prison Voicemail to have more contact with her partner and overcome some of the challenges of the prison regime which limited their contact
- She and her partner use Prison Voicemail to help them deal with difficult emotions

Sue and her partner often struggle to speak to each other because she works during the day and therefore her phone would be switched off. By the time she gets home from work, her partner only has between 6.30pm and 7pm on some nights to ring her and the phones are usually busy. She is also only able to visit twice each month.

Sue described how if she’s had bad news and felt really down, she could leave a message even in the early hours of the morning which helped her get it off her chest and then her partner would ring the next day and they’d have a chat about it. She said leaving messages made her feel relaxed because she knew he would listen to them. She said she could “talk, talk, talk” and even though she was talking to a machine, it felt like she was talking to her partner. Sue said her partner also uses Prison Voicemail to “lift the spirits”. She described how he told her that sometimes he feels down in prison but feels like he can’t show emotion in there and so he’ll listen to her voicemails and it “puts a smile on his face”.

Sue also appeared to feel comforted by the fact she could tell her partner every day that she loves him and that he’s missed.

Sue said she tells everyone she talks to at the prison about Prison Voicemail.

(Interview 3)

Personal story: Helen

- Uses Prison with her husband in prison and their 9-year-old daughter to keep up family rituals
- Uses Prison Voicemail to involve her husband in parenting
- Uses Prison Voicemail to manage practical and legal issues

Helen saves the Prison Voicemail messages from her husband so that their daughter can listen to her Dad's voice whenever she wants to. Prior to him going to prison, every weekend the family had 'Movie Night' together. Helen vividly described how they all had a drink, her husband a rum and coke, their daughter a coke and Helen a glass of wine, and watched a movie. Helen and her daughter have continued this tradition but they still involve her husband in it. During movie night, she leaves him a voicemail saying "Cheers Daddy, we miss you, we love you". Helen said he still felt part of what is their ritual as a family.

Helen also uses Prison Voicemail to involve her husband in parenting. For example, if their daughter got a merit at school, she would call and let him know so that when he phoned, he could speak to their daughter about it straight away. He would say to her, "little blackbird told me you had a really good day at school today". If her daughter was having a bad day and showing some negative behaviour, she would explain to her that she was ringing her Dad and would ring him during the discussion so he could hear what had happened which allowed them to have a consistent and united approach.

Helen also uses Prison Voicemail to help resolve practical and legal issues. For example, if he needed to prepare for legal visits. She would let him know who was due to visit, what he needed and when. She would also tell him using Prison Voicemail when she posted or e-mailed any important documents to him so he could look out for them.

(Interview 9)

Personal Story: Gemma

- Uses Prison Voicemail to help manage her mental health

When she is having a bad day and her anxiety is "kicking off", Gemma contacts her fiancé to let him know and he rings her when he receives the message and this helps to calm her down. She said leaving him a message helps her feel a bit closer to him. She said sometimes she forgets to tell him things on a visit and it might be a month or two before she visits again so she leaves him a message to tell him. Gemma also said she struggles with OCD and being able to leave a message any time helps her feel in control. Gemma also leaves her fiancé messages when she is having a good day too.

(Interview 8)

Personal Story: Catherine

- Uses Prison Voicemail to keep her husband involved in things happening outside the prison
- Used Prison Voicemail to get consent to speak to her husband's probation officer.

Catherine described a whole list of things she used Prison Voicemail for which included telling her husband about a new job, something that happened at work, if the dog had been to the vets, information about their finances and if they'd had a letter for a bill. She said she uses it to keep him in the picture about things that people don't realise such as when the new £5 note came out which he won't see until he is released from prison.

Catherine also used Prison Voicemail as a way of efficiently getting consent for her husband's probation officer to speak to her. His probation officer explained that they needed consent before they could share information with her but a letter would take several days. Helen asked her husband to leave a voicemail providing the consent. Helen saved the message as a favourite using the mobile app and was quickly able to retrieve the message when she met with his probation officer.

(Interview 7)

Personal story: Kirsty

- Partner uses Prison Voicemail to help manage his mental health
- Partner uses Prison Voicemail to ask her to help him with things

Kirsty said Prison Voicemail has been fantastic for both her and her partner. She explained that he sometimes struggles with self-harm and finds it hard to express himself. However, when he leaves a message, he is able to express himself. She said this has definitely helped to reduce his self-harm. She said sometimes it can be hard to listen to his messages if he is having a difficult time but there are happy ones and good ones too.

Kirsty said they also find it useful because he can let Kirsty know if there is anything that he needs such as sorting things with solicitors.

(Interview 13)

Personal story: Alison

- Used Prison Voicemail to keep the connection with her son
- Used Prison Voicemail to explain to her son that the outside is good and is worth not getting into trouble for.

Alison said she used Prison Voicemail whenever something came into her head, even if was mundane. She explained that she just wanted to connect as a Mum and keep that emotional connection. She used Prison Voicemail to reiterate to her son that she loved him and would still be there for him. She said sometimes she felt like she was doing it more for herself than for him. However, he also used it if he wanted to ask his family look something up on the internet, to ask for some money to be sent in if he was running out or to confirm a visit.

Alongside this, Alison described how she also used Prison Voicemail to talk about family occasions and wanting to let her son know that life was still going on outside the prison and that outside the prison is good and worth not getting into trouble for.

Alison's son has now been released from prison but she said the service was invaluable.

(Interview 15)

Discussion

This research aimed to evaluate the Prison Voicemail service, mainly in terms of perceptions of its use and utility. The findings suggest that Prison Voicemail is perceived as an innovative and highly effective service which has a profound effect on several areas of prisoner and family life.

According to those surveyed, Prison Voicemail is accessed by people of all ages, across all areas of the prison estate, in all areas of the country. It is accessible at any time and offers immediacy of communication that families so often lose due to the constraints of prison and the distance prisoners are detained from their support networks. It is used across a range of relationships; partners, family, children and friends. It is more frequently used by those on longer sentences but is also accessed by those on shorter sentences and remand. Similarly, both vulnerable and main population prisoners use the service and it is used by foreign national prisoners; although at a relatively low level. Further research is required to ascertain why this lower level of use is the case.

Respondents indicated that the use of Prison Voicemail acted to support families in maintaining and possibly strengthening family ties which had an impact on improved wellbeing and health for its users both in the prison, and those left outside. Using the system was seen to help resolve practical issues faster and to ease the stresses of prison on all parties. The system is perceived as reasonably valued and cost appears to have minimal impact on the increased financial burden that families often have as a result of imprisonment. A visual summary of the perceived benefits is detailed in Appendix 2.

Increasing awareness of the system is seen as important although problematic. Advertising through posters seems to be somewhat effective, although this is inconsistent across prisons and largely outside of the control of Prison Voicemail. Respondents can remember seeing the posters, however, overall uptake is still relatively low. To increase knowledge of the system, it is likely that an initiative from HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) will be needed. Such an initiative would aim to; ensure that prisons consistently advertise the services in prominent areas, ensure all staff are aware of and promoting the service, ensure

that all prisoners and their families receive information about Prison Voicemail, how it works, and the potential benefits during their induction.

Users of the service indicated that Prison Voicemail provided them with high levels of customer service and a willingness to be responsive to feedback. As a result of the perceived benefits and standards of service, Prison Voicemail users have actively recommended the service to others.

This research is not without its limitations. It is essentially a user satisfaction survey, however, given the positive nature of the findings, there are clear areas which need to be followed up with further more rigorous research. Firstly, data was only collected from active users and it could be argued that active users are more likely to provide positive feedback. Inactive users may not be using it because they don't understand it, because they don't need it, because they don't see the value, or because they have a more negative view of the service. Further evaluation should include inactive users and non-users.

Secondly, the research relied upon self-report data collection which has inherent limitations such as demand characteristics and participants' ability to effectively discern aspects of their experience and then coherently communicate this (Polkinghorne, 2005). Further research should investigate the areas covered within this research in more detail and allow triangulation with actuarial data. For example, psychometrics could be used to compare wellbeing and relationship outcomes in users versus non users and it may also be possible to look at the impact of the better maintenance of family ties (through Prison Voicemail) and ongoing prison behaviour. Collaboration with the HM Prisons and Probation Service may allow for comparisons in rates of suicide/self-harm, misconduct in custody and reoffending between Prison Voicemail users and non-users. To better understand the processes being undertaken, discourse analysis could be utilised to research the content of the voicemails, although it is acknowledged that this may be fraught with ethical challenges.

The availability of Prison Voicemail has spread very quickly across HMPPS but there are still some prisons without access and a wide range of prisoners without knowledge of the service. Given the potential ranging benefits of Prison Voicemail appears to have, and the

fact that many prisoners move establishments, it would seem sensible for it to be offered across all establishments. Currently Prison Voicemail is only available in England and Wales and it may be appropriate to expand this. Given that literature about the interaction between imprisonment and families has been evidenced in numerous countries around the world (e.g. USA (Arditti et al, 2003), Scotland (Loucks, 2004), Spain (Cid and Marti, 2012)), it seems feasible to suggest that prisoners and their families within other countries may also benefit from a system such as Prison Voicemail.

To summarise, the findings from this report are as follows:

- Prison Voicemail offers a service that is highly valued by its existing clients.
- Prison Voicemail offers support around health and wellbeing, practicalities and family ties. It also has a perceived influence on the likelihood of reoffending.
- Prison Voicemail is available in most prisons across England and Wales but could be made available in all prisons across England and Wales
- Prison Voicemail is viewed as being responsive to feedback and should continue to work consistently towards implementing the suggestions for improvement given by its existing clients, and providing feedback when suggestions cannot be implemented.
- There is a need to ensure consistent promotion of Prison Voicemail and to ensure that all prisoners and their families are reliably informed about Prison Voicemail, how it works, specific features, and the potential benefits of using it.
- Non-UK nationals are underrepresented as using Prison Voicemail and advertising in alternative languages may increase this.
- Research into Prison Voicemail should be extended with the aim of gathering further insight into the benefits and function of Prison Voicemail for prisoners and their families particularly with regard to; family ties, wellbeing, safety, prison behaviour and reoffending.
- Given the potential need and demand for such a service in other prison systems around the world, Prison Voicemail might consider making their system more widely available

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Appendix 1: Feedback regarding suggestions and improvements

Suggestion	Feedback
<p>Prisoners to be able to leave a voicemail without the need for their family/friend to leave one first</p>	<p>The Prison Voicemail team have implemented this as it has been the most requested feature. If a prisoner does not have a message, they will at first get the busy tone to prevent any phone credit being used. However, if they redial the number within one minute, they will be connected and able to leave a message. This has been communicated to prisoners using a one-time automated message which explains the feature</p>
<p>Date and time stamps</p>	<p>So far, this has not been widely requested and the Prison Voicemail team are cautious about adding a feature which would put additional time onto calls which would use their credit. However, they are continuing to discuss how this could be implemented in the most efficient way. Their aim is to make this optional to allow for voicemail users who do not want this feature.</p>
<p>The ability to delete, re-record and save messages</p>	<p>Families can now have complete control over their messages using the mobile app which is available on Android and iOS. This allows them to save, favourite, re-record and delete messages. Unfortunately Prison Voicemail have been unable to do this for prisoners at the present time. This is because prison phones do not allow 'touch tones' to be used once the line is connected and therefore this cannot be used as a way to provide prisoners with control over their messages. Voice control was trialled but most prisoners were reluctant to use this. The team are however, exploring the option to enable family members to re-send favourite messages using the app. This will allow prisoners to re-listen.</p>
<p>To change the 'line is busy' message when the mailbox is empty.</p>	<p>The reason this happens is because the Prison Voicemail system is set to reject calls from a prisoner if they have no messages waiting. If the line was to connect, even for just a second, the prisoner would lose 1 minute of credit from their phone account. Unfortunately, the message given when calls are rejected is set by the phone company.</p>
<p>Prisoners to not have to pay in addition to the payments</p>	<p>The Ministry of Justice do not currently allow Freephone numbers except in a small set of circumstances such as for the Samaritans</p>

made by family/friends	helpline. Prison Voicemail have been unable to get approval for Freephone numbers for Prison Voicemail accounts but this is something they would like to continue to pursue.
Increased awareness/advertising	The Prison Voicemail team have been constantly looking for new ways to increase awareness of the service and will continue to invest in this. Currently, Prison Voicemail is advertised using a diverse number of routes including the leaflets and posters around prisons, the Inside Time (national prison newspaper), HMPPS switchboard and intranet, the HMPPS internal training team, the HMPPS Senior Leaders Bulletin, the Ministry of Justice online prison directory, the National Prison Chaplaincy Association, the Samaritans Listeners network, National Prison Radio and prison family services such as Lincolnshire Action Trust, NEPACS, Pact, Ormiston and Barnardo's).
Prisoners to be able to set Prison Voicemail up themselves	The Prison Voicemail Team have already bene exploring this but there are some challenges relating to how the person in prison would be able to pay for their account. Prison Voicemail are liaising with the department that manages prison canteen accounts.
Syncing the app with the phone line	These should always sync unless the app user does not have internet connectivity. Prison Voicemail will continue to fix any issues they are alerted to.
Discreteness on bank statements and the app logo	The Prison Voicemail team trialled changing their name to 'P Voicemail' on bank statements but experienced a substantial increase in the number of chargebacks where people did not recognise the item and asked their bank to reverse the charge. Each chargeback yielded significant administration fees and therefore they had no choice but to return to using the full name.
Optional longer messages	The messages are limited to 3 minutes each to prevent prisoners using up all of their credit listening to messages or the call cutting off part way through a message. However, the Prison Voicemail team are investigating gaining access to information about how much credit someone has and if there is sufficient credit, the system would allow longer messages.

Appendix 2: Summary

95% of prisoners – voicemails help me have better contact
83% of prisoners – relationships are better because of Prison Voicemail
96% of families – voicemails allow me to have better contact with my family in prison
93% of families – my relationship with my family in prison is better because of voicemail

Practicalities

90% of prisoners – voicemails help me get practical issues sorted faster
96% of families – voicemails help me get practical issues sorted faster.
“He can leave me important messages and I can do things for him, I can help him more than anything to get things sorted like solicitors and things“
-Helps prepare for official visits and liaise with probation and solicitors

96% of prisoners – voicemails make them feel better
92% of prisoners – voicemails are making prison easier
97% of families – leaving voicemails makes me feel better
97% of families – Prison Voicemail is making it easier for me while my family member is in prison

Relationships and Family Ties

“When I’ve left him a message, I feel a bit closer”
“At least I can tell him every day that I love him”
“My wife uses it... she often catches my youngest first words . . . simply amazing”

- Flexibility to leave messages any time
- Helps maintain feelings of connection between families and the outside world
- Facilitates involvement of people in prison with family events and parenting

PRISONVOICEMAIL

Behaviour & Reoffending

55% of prisoners – Prison Voicemail is likely to help me stop reoffending
63% of prisoners – Voicemails help me behave better in prison.
“We wanted to show that life is still going on outside . . . trying to show him that outside is good and its worth not getting into trouble for”

Health and Wellbeing

“It was like a little straw we could grab”
“It felt like normality and I haven’t had that before”
“Its made my sentence a lot easier to deal with”
“Made life a lot more bearable for us in a very difficult situation”

- Relieves some of the stresses and strains of imprisonment
- Helped people feel less worried
- Gave back some control
- Increased positive feelings
- Used as a tool to help manage mental health