Supporting prison transformation

PROCESS DIGITISATION AND ENABLING OFFICERS WITH MOBILE DEVICES

Northern Ireland Prison Service

Overview

Working closely with the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), Sopra Steria has developed a suite of mobile device apps enabling prison officers to work from a variety of mobile devices. These apps are transforming and digitising core prison processes, enabling more effective delivery of custodial care.

NIPS has three operational prisons: one for Young Offenders and females, one for sentenced inmates and a third establishment that holds remands, sentenced, inmates serving life sentences, and high security inmates. The ultimate aim of the service is to improve public safety by reducing the risk of reoffending through the management and rehabilitation of people in their care.

Challenge

A significant amount of detailed information on a wide array of issues must be accurately collected, updated and promptly acted upon to support safety and rehabilitation within prisons. This is made more difficult as most officers have limited time during a shift, due to their busy role with inmates, to access a computer terminal.

Therefore, officers had limited time to complete management information during core work hours and either needed to come off wing activities to complete critical processes on a terminal, or, wait to undertake them after the close of a shift based on paper notes or their memory of the relevant details. This exasperated the process for both the prisoner and the prison regime, expended valuable officer time, and may have led to delay in process completion.

Prisons are a highly complex environment to manage. Examples include:

- Many inmates in prison have complex health requirements, including mental health issues;

- There is a proportion of inmates that do not have English as their first language;

- Post-pandemic, a trend has been that a sizeable percentage of those in prisons across the UK are remand prisoners (those held in prison custody until their trial can take place) whose differing rights must be managed alongside the regimes of sentenced prisoners.

To manage this environment effectively and to the required high level of care, safety, and decency, NIPS must ensure officers have access to the right information to support their decisions and actions. The administrative burden on officers to add, update, and manage the information for inmates is significant and increasing, which has reduced the time available for the rehabilitation activity that enables prisoners to integrate safely back into society when released.

As an added pressure, prisons are subject to much external scrutiny, and this added pressure adds to the officer administrative burden and organisational need to hold very accurate and detailed information to support decision making and actions.

The challenges for prisons are threefold:

Ensuring officers have access to the most current information possible in a Wi-Fi-free environment with limited access to computer terminals.

Freeing up prison officer time to focus on engagement and rehabilitative activity, rather than on administrative activities.

While still ensuring that the necessary processes are completed speedily, accurately and in a timely manner.

Solution

Sopra Steria worked closely with NIPS management, ICT and frontline prison service staff and has developed a suite of tablet apps to significantly reduce the administrative burden on frontline officers. The team selected several of the most complex and time-consuming prison processes for digitisation, streamlining and developing each into a specific app which is quickly available from an intuitive, user-friendly interface.

For security reasons Wi-Fi isn't currently available in prisons, therefore to ensure physical and data security NIPS took an innovative approach – both transforming and digitising core processes and enabling prison officers to access the new apps from secure mobile devices. Sopra Steria has worked continuously with NIPS throughout their digital transformation and provided secure app functionality that met NIPS requirements.

Each app is connected into the Northern Ireland Prison Records and Information System allowing auto-population of fields with existing data, and this applies across repeated fields within the form. The use of decision trees within the app intelligently ensures that officer time is focused on the fields relevant to the specific case at hand, rather than superfluous fields not relevant to this functionality (Targeting the information required for the officer).

The processes that have been digitised cover an array of core processes including Health and Safety Incident Management, digitising inmates' diaries, interview processes, and digitising a Directory of Core Services such as the educational programmes that are available to prisoners.

One such process, the committal interview – the initial collection of information from prisoners when they first come into prison – was a time consuming and detailed process which took up to two hours to complete as there are over 100 questions and it was usually completed using pen and paper and typed into the system later. It's vital that this interview is performed thoroughly as it informs and supports future decisions about managing that individual safely. Digitising this high-volume process has made it significantly more efficient – not only saving many hundreds of hours in officer time but also enabling new prisoners' needs to be understood, and managed better, enabling NIPS to better care for these inmates relatively new to prison life.

The incorporation of a digital translation capability means that the committal interview is now available to be presented back to the prisoner in the top 20 most commonly spoken foreign languages within the Northern Ireland Prison Estate, enhancing the accuracy of information needed to manage these prisoners.

The processes that have been digitised cover an array of core processes including:

Digital Management of Prisoner Regimes

Health and Safety Incident Management

Digitising inmates' diaries

Two device types

Working with NIPS, two device types were selected to support officers. For longer, detailed business processes officers use the larger tablet screen to navigate easily through the app, for example, to move with a prisoner into a more discreet section of the prison to undertake discussions that may require privacy e.g. healthcare related discussions. For wing-based roles, a smaller body-worn device incorporating a camera and QR scanner was preferred by officers as it can be worn on the forearm leaving officers' hands free when not in active use.

In Practice

As an example, when a prison officer is managing a prisoner who may represent a specific risk of harm to themselves or others, the prisoner must be continuously monitored for their own wellbeing. Recorded safety checks take place every 15 minutes, while still ensuring that the prisoner has access to purposeful activities. An officer can now quickly use the QR scanner to scan the cell location and add a time stamped automated entry for each check, and alerts remind officers these checks are continuously required.

This enables a far quicker record of the check to be logged, so more time is spent on the actual welfare need of the prisoner, rather than on administration, while having the added benefit of providing a more detailed and clearly verifiable pathway of care and contact for inspectorates.

"Prompt access to the right information is crucial to achieving the high levels of care, safety, and decency, that the Northern Ireland Prison Service expects. The development of this suite of digital apps, available to frontline officers on mobile devices, has led to significant operational benefits in terms of freeing up officer time to be spent on working directly with inmates, rather than administration. Most importantly though this digital transformation is enhancing prisoner outcomes and empowering more informed and targeted rehabilitation.

"This has been a truly transformational digital programme, achieved through close partnership working between NIPS Management, ICT teams and Sopra Steria."

Head of NIPS ICT Services

Key Outcomes & Benefits

Enhanced prisoner care and improved outcomes

The digitised processes smoothe the experience for vulnerable prisoners - for example reducing repetition of questions to people who may be in distress, and by enhancing communication with hard to reach groups (such as those who cannot speak English). This enables NIPS officers to spend more time working with and for the inmate, to gather more detailed information about the inmates needs and improve the management of their targeted interventions for their rehabilitation.

Better use of officer time and skill

By digitising processes NIPS is enabling a greater proportion of officer time to be spent on core activity rather than administration.

Increased data quality and timeliness

Because core processes can be completed and uploaded into the core information management system more swiftly, the prison regime as a whole is better informed and has access to more up to date data to support decision-making.

Transparency

The increased detail of the core prison processes captured e.g. of prisoners' appointments or of officer completion of safety checks, provides a much clearer overview to inspectorates of the day to day conditions and workload within a prison.

Further Information

At Sopra Steria we provide a bespoke range of Consulting, IT and Business Process Outsourcing services to Public and Private Sector organisations across the UK.

For more information on the services we provide to organisations in the Justice sector please see www.soprasteria.co.uk

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