

Press release: Facial recognition technology to help in fight against prison drug trafficking

- allows staff to identify suspicious visitors and work with police to investigate
- trials have taken place at three jails and are part of wider efforts to combat drugs, boost rehabilitation and make the public safer

Biometric technology which can identify visitors who may be trafficking drugs into prisons has been successfully trialled, Justice Secretary David Gauke revealed today (6 March 2019).

The technology, which includes iris scanning and facial recognition software, has been tested at 3 jails and is part of a wider crackdown on drugs entering prisons.

This trial comes against a backdrop of wide-ranging measures to tackle drugs and violence in prisons, including security scanners, drug search teams, digital technology to identify criminal kingpins and a Financial Crime Unit with the power to freeze suspect bank accounts linked to prisoners. All of this has been underpinned by a significant boost in prison officer numbers following a major recruitment campaign.

Intelligence work has identified a trend of prison visitors supplying illicit items to multiple prisoners and jails across the estate. These individuals have been difficult to track, however, as organised criminals may also falsify their identity documentation.

While some prisons have fingerprint recognition, most sites use paper-based verification, using documents like driving licences. In addition to being open to abuse by contraband traffickers, this system is slow and resource intensive.

The state-of-the-art biometric technology allows prison staff to identify visitors using applications based around document validation, iris scanning and facial recognition software.

It has been successfully trialled at HMP Hull, Humber and Lindholme. The Prison Service is now looking at how this, and other similar technology, could be used most effectively across the estate.

The machines highlight suspicious individuals, allowing staff to refuse entry and providing evidence that could be used in any subsequent Prison Service or police investigation. This will mean police and prison staff can better target the activity of those that seek to bring drugs into prison – disrupting their criminal networks.

It can also act as a deterrent, with one trial prison seeing a higher than usual 'no shows' rate at visits after attendees found out the software would be in operation.

Justice Secretary David Gauke said:

New technology is vital in our fight against the gangs that seek to cause chaos in prisons, and this biometric equipment has the potential to significantly aid our efforts.

It forms part of this government's multi-million-pound investment to improve the safety and security of our prisons. Alongside our successful officer recruitment drive, measures like this will help make prisons places of rehabilitation where offenders can turn their lives around. This will cut reoffending and make the public safer.

Last year more than 23,000 drugs and mobile phones seizures were made by prison staff, an increase of almost 4,000 from the previous year, showing the scale of the problem. Better intelligence and improved security measures are allowing us to catch more illicit items than ever before, but there is still more to be done.

The new technology will help in efforts to reduce drug use in prison, which drives up violence and self-harm. It is the latest development in a multi-million-pound drive to improve security and safety in the prison estate.

This includes £16 million to improve conditions for prisoners and staff and £7 million on new security measures, such as security scanners, improved searching techniques, phone-blocking technology and a financial crime unit to target the criminal kingpins operating in prisons.

Meanwhile, the '10 Prisons Project' has seen £10 million investment in some of the most challenging prisons to curb the flow of drugs and phones, while also improving conditions and leadership at those jails. This will tackle drug supply by enhancing physical security at the jails, with investment in drug-detection dogs, body scanners, and improved perimeter defences.

This has come against a backdrop of rising prison officer numbers, with more than 4,300 now recruited since October 2016 and staffing levels at their highest since 2012.

Notes to editors

- Three trials ran in December and January at HMP Lindholme, Hull and Humber
- Three types of technology were trialled: ID scan, Facewatch and Tascent