



Standing Committee for Youth Justice

Dear Sir/Madam,

Recently a 17-year-old boy was sentenced to prison for ten years. He pleaded guilty but his case overran. The judge decided to sentence the boy by video link early on a Monday morning. His Youth Offending Team officer was not consulted about the use of the video link. The boy will have been alone (save for a prison officer) in a small room at the prison when he heard his sentence, isolated from his lawyer and his family. The evidence shows that children (under 18-year-olds) in court, many of whom have communication problems, struggle to understand what is going on and to participate effectively in proceedings. How much more difficult to do so if you are sat hundreds of miles from the court and separated from everybody there by a video screen? The SCYJ research report, published today, shows that children are not only less likely to understand, but they can neither properly consult with their lawyer, parent or guardian, nor communicate adequately with the judge in court. We are concerned that video link risks making it much harder for children to comprehend the seriousness of their crimes and the harm they have caused. Justice by “skype” has been used with adult defendants since 2000, but has only recently begun to be used with child defendants. It is being deployed for first appearances, remand and sentencing hearings, despite strong indications that it impedes children’s participation in the process, prejudices outcomes and undermines the seriousness of proceedings. The government are pressing ahead with proposals to increase the use of video links for child defendants as part of the digital court reform programme and have even suggested that they should plead guilty to serious crimes on their mobile phones. There is no research on the effect on child defendants of being disconnected from the physical court. We call on the government to halt the expansion of justice by skype or mobile for child defendants until we know its effects. Until then, we argue for a firm presumption against the use of video links for child defendants, save for the most exceptional circumstances.

Yours sincerely,

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