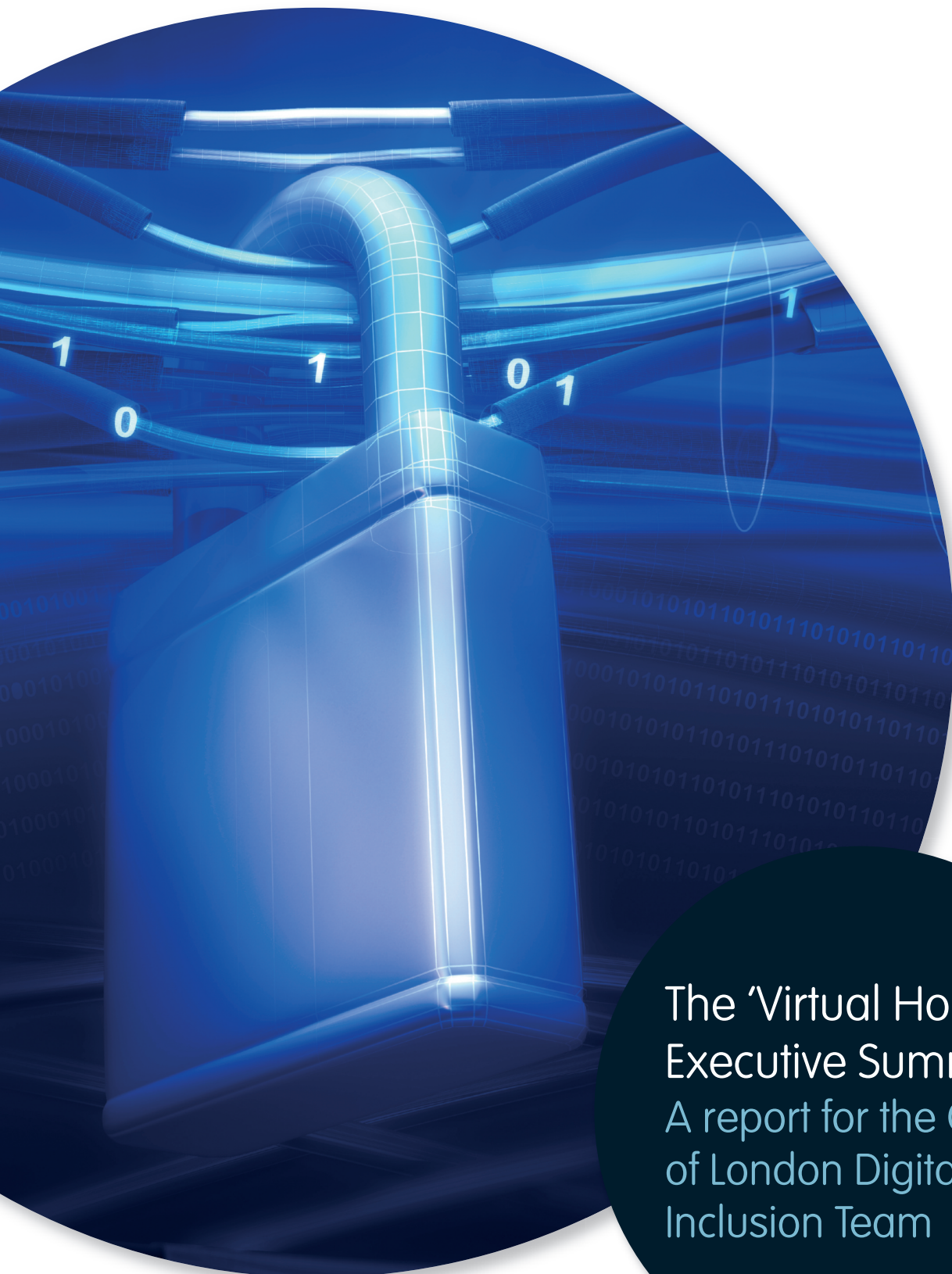




Perpetuity Research and Consultancy International (PRCI) Ltd
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The 'Virtual Home':
Executive Summary
A report for the City
of London Digital
Inclusion Team

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September 2010

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Acknowledgements

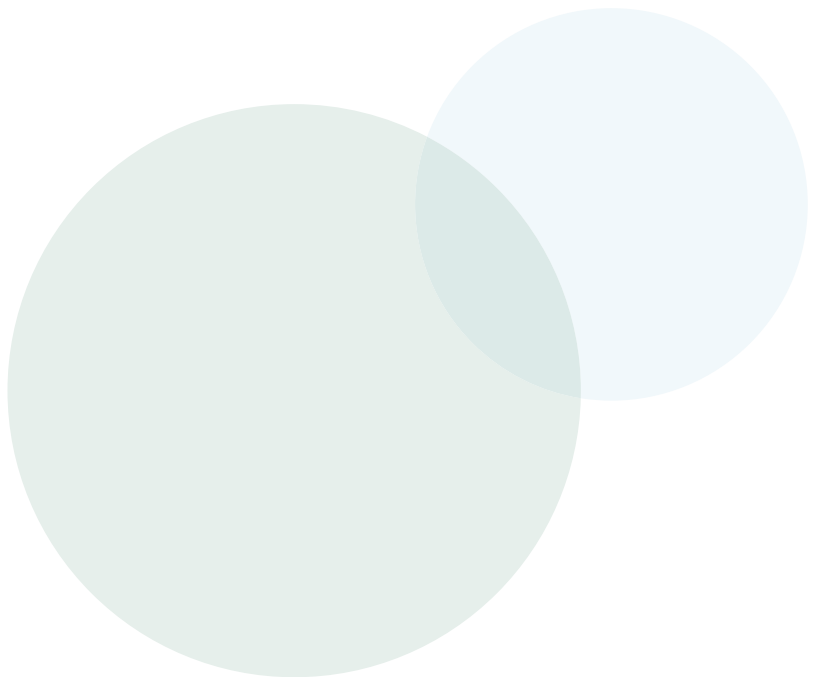
We would like to offer our sincere thanks to the staff at the Multi Agency Prolific & other Priority Offender (MAPPOM) team and the City Resettlement Team within Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland Probation Service who gave up their time to be interviewed. Particular thanks to Nicola Wright, Offender Manager who assisted with the organisation of a timetable of interviews.

We would also like to thank the offender who gave up their time to provide feedback on the Virtual Home.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Digital Inclusion London for commissioning the evaluation and for their ongoing support throughout the duration of the work.

Table of Contents

Section 1. Executive Summary	3
Introduction	3
What is Virtual Home?	3
Why choose Virtual Home?	3
How does Virtual Home work in practice?	4
Lessons learnt & recommendations for implementation	4



Section 1.

Executive Summary

Introduction

1.1 This document provides a summary of the Virtual Home and guidance on implementation. The information contained within this paper uses evidence from an evaluation conducted by Perpetuity (a research and consultancy company¹) of the Virtual Home implemented by the Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland Multi Agency Prolific & other Priority Offender Management (MAPPOM) team and City Resettlement Team. The initiative has been operational since January 2010.

What is Virtual Home?

1.2 Virtual Home is a new initiative - an electronic storage solution to store personal documentation including (but not limited to) birth certificates, driving licences and passports. The objectives of the Virtual Home are to:

- Provide Prolific and Priority Offenders (PPOs) with safe and secure storage of key documentation essential for day to day life thus helping to reduce re-offending.
- Overcome barriers to accessing services through the increased availability of proof of identity.
- Improve employability of PPOs by ready access to certificates, curriculum vitae (CV), employment history and references.
- Increase contact between PPOs and the MAPPOM team outside of structured meetings creating signposting opportunities.
- Develop an evidence base and record of the project to support transferability.

Why choose Virtual Home?

- 1.3 Vulnerable groups including offenders are prone to social disadvantage, with many experiencing disadvantage in relation to educational attainment, basic skills and employment, accommodation, financial support, and debt². This group are also highly likely to be digitally excluded (not able to access digital technology). It is therefore necessary to consider digital exclusion when developing initiatives for offenders.
- 1.4 Specific examples of how Virtual Home can support pathways out of offending – either by increasing access to services or by other means - include:
- Accommodation – storing proof of payment of rent arrears to help an offender onto a local authority housing list; storing proof of address for housing applications, storing references from previous landlords.
 - Education, Training & Employment (ETE) – storing certificates of achievement and attainment so offenders can prove their qualifications to potential employers; storing National Insurance (NI) numbers as these are needed for paid employment.
 - Health – storing drug test results, NHS medical numbers, and details of medical ailments and/or prescription lists.
 - Drugs and alcohol – storing proof of negative drug test results, storing useful support information.
 - Finance, benefits, and debt – storing proof of ID (e.g. passport or driving licence) to access benefits or to set up a bank account.
 - Children and families – storing family photographs and contact information to encourage ongoing relationships with families.

¹ www.perpetuitygroup.com

² HM Government. (2008). Digital exclusion profiling of vulnerable groups: ex offenders. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

- Attitudes, behaviour, and thinking – storing attendance records for courses (e.g. anger management) to demonstrate a commitment to changing lifestyles.

How does Virtual Home work in practice?

- 1.5 The ideal model is that the Virtual Home is offered to service users as part of their induction to the service, in the case of the MAPPOM and City Resettlement Teams the target audience was PPOs and offenders serving sentences of less than 12 months. If a service user agrees to the Virtual Home, they are required to complete a consent form to document their agreement and to concur with the terms and conditions of the scheme. Following this meeting service users are requested to bring the documents into the service at their next appointment when their documents can be scanned. Scanned documents are then stored electronically in the service users personal folder³ and can be retrieved at their request. With permission from service users documents can also be emailed to other agencies that require hard copies. When a service user is no longer classified as a PPO, they are offered a print out of all documents held and the option to have the Virtual Home account deleted at that time or after a period of six years with no contact with the service.
- 1.6 In order to implement the Virtual Home, the required technology includes: a secure IT infrastructure and access to a reliable scanner. There is very little burden on staff time as the initiative can be offered as part of an induction to the service. Undoubtedly the mechanism of the Virtual Home itself is straightforward and easy to follow.

Lessons learnt & recommendations for implementation

- 1.7 Should the project be replicated elsewhere it is beneficial to consider the key lessons learnt/recommendations from the implementation of the Virtual Home by the MAPPOM team and City Resettlement team within Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland Probation Service:
- 1. Target group: Consider the target group to ensure that the Virtual Home is directed towards the appropriate group of recipients who will benefit most from the Virtual Home.**
 - 1.8** One of the questions raised during the evaluation was whether PPOs were the correct target audience for the Virtual Home. There was some debate as to whether mainstream probation teams would have been more appropriate as these teams were often working with less experienced criminals who nonetheless had similar needs relating to social and digital exclusion.
 - 2. Lead and host agency: Offenders often lack trust in statutory services that may have let them down in the past and as such may be reluctant to share their personal documentation and data with these agencies voluntarily. Consider who is the best host agency for the Virtual Home exploring options outside probation and the police.**
 - 1.9** One of the issues for offenders managed by the MAPPOM team in particular was their suspicions over how probation staff and police staff may use the information they store in Virtual Home against them. This mistrust partly explained why some offenders would not use the facility.

3. Consultation with stakeholders & service users: Before Virtual Home is implemented consult stakeholders and service users to explore:

- a. Whether there would be buy-in for Virtual Home.
- b. Which agency Virtual Home sits best with?
- c. Which agencies would accept scanned documents as proof of identification?

1.10 Without doubt it is important to consult prospective service users to assess if the proposed initiative meets their needs. This would also provide the opportunity to put in place a number of measures to overcome any possible resistance to the scheme e.g. suspicion and trust issues particularly within statutory services.

4. Virtual Home Champion: Appoint/assign an operational champion to steer the Virtual Home from the outset to ensure that the scheme is effectively implemented. The champion will need to ensure there is a universal approach to offering the service to all potential service users at induction.

1.11 The cause of implementation failure or poor implementation of new initiatives can often result from the lack of a leader/driver to monitor its execution, it is therefore important that there is a champion for the Virtual Home supported by an implementation plan with set goals and milestones. This will assist teams to regularly review progress against milestones and to put in place solutions which may impact positively on implementation.

5. Briefings and refresher training: Ensure all staff are briefed on the scheme and consider specific training for staff on the Virtual Home; in particular on the benefits of the scheme for both staff and service users and the safeguards relating to data protection that are in place. There will need to be regular refresher briefings or courses to keep the scheme alive within the minds of those assigned to encourage use of it.

1.12 In order to ensure that there is commitment from staff for the Virtual Home and to ensure the initiative is mainstreamed it is important that staff are routinely updated on the scheme and encouraged to use this resource to benefit service users.

6. Launching Virtual Home: The launch of the Virtual Home is important and if supported by a successful marketing and promotional campaign will ensure staff and offenders are aware of the service. Reinforced marketing will be required to ensure the Virtual Home thrives.

1.13 When launching the Virtual Home, it is essential that literature is available on the scheme such as leaflets, posters, news bulletins etc to ensure that the initiative is promoted positively and in such a way that conveys the benefits of the facility for its service users. It is essential that the facility is branded as a service for service users rather than another mechanism by which statutory agencies can hold information on offenders. For offenders in particular using the benefits in relation to the pathways out of offending may be a useful starting point.

7. **Offering Virtual Home as a beneficial service:** The timing of the offer of Virtual Home is essential – induction appears to be the most suitable time to offer the Virtual Home to offenders when they are released from prison and are most likely to have personal identity documents and certificates in their possession. Even better pre release may be the ideal time to offer the Virtual Home to offenders where they will have a number of documents in their possession before returning to the community where they face the increased likelihood of losing identity documents and certificates particularly if their lifestyle is chaotic. In this way offenders are hooked into using the service pre release which may encourage further use and take up on release.
 - 1.14 Careful consideration needs to be given to the most appropriate time to offer the Virtual Home to service users. Some of the difficulties experienced by the MAPPOM team related to the difficulty service users had in remembering to bring their documents into the service for scanning. Some services use text services to send reminders to service users about appointments. It may be beneficial to use a similar system to remind offenders to bring in their documents on the day of their appointment. Home visits may be another alternative.
8. **An induction checklist made available to probation staff should be in place:** to act as a prompt to offer the Virtual Home which will help to ensure all offenders are routinely offered the service as part of core business.
 - 1.15 Learning from the experience within the MAPPOM team, there may be benefit in designing an induction checklist to ensure a universal approach to offering Virtual Home so that this is seen as core business rather than a bolt on to existing services. This will help to ensure that all service users are offered the scheme, one of the difficulties experienced by the MAPPOM team was the inconsistency amongst staff in offering the scheme to all service users.
9. **Performance monitoring:** a data recording system is required to monitor the number of offenders offered the Virtual Home, uptake and reasons for refusal. Without such a system, evidencing impact is impossible.
 - 1.16 If the Virtual Home is to be monitored and evaluated, it is strongly recommended that a performance management process is put in place to record that the facility is offered as well as take up and reasons for refusal.
10. **Integrated Offender Management (IOM):** ensure that agencies promote and refer offenders to Virtual Home as part of IOM as this will help to build trust and confidence in the scheme.
 - 1.17 IOM approaches aim to make a real difference to reducing offending by enhancing and extending the reach of offender management frameworks. Linking in with IOM processes would expand the service to cover a much broader group of offenders and would tie in with the pathways out of offending.

The full document is available on www.esd-toolkit.org.uk



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