

Video conferencing in Norwegian courts

Norway recently conducted a pilot project on video conferencing in courts and is now implementing the use of video conferencing technology in all courts. The following presentation will give a short description of the project and its findings, as well as its implications on Norwegian policy on video conferencing in courts. Cross border video conferencing in Norwegian courts will also be described in brief.

The aim of the project was to analyse the pros and cons of video conferencing, and to prepare the implementation of video conferencing in courts. The project included 6 courts, 6 police districts and 4 prisons that were provided with video conferencing equipment, and authorised to extended use of video conferencing by a special regulation. The project was applied to civil and criminal law cases, including the use of video conferencing equipment for the appearance of prisoners in remand extension hearings, and appearance of the accused in summary trials on a plea of guilty.

The main conclusions drawn from the project's assessment are that the implementation of video conferencing in courts not only has a large cost saving potential for the courts and its users, but also has the potential to improve the quality of court hearings.

The assessment especially points to the advantages of:

- the possibility for witnesses and the aggrieved party in criminal cases to give testimony by video link.
- its superiority to witness statements by telephone, with regard to reliable identification of the witness, and the court's basis for analysing and considering the importance of the statement.
- improved accessibility to the court for participants with weak health or long travel distances.
- improved flexibility for the courts when setting dates for court hearings.

The overall conclusion is that individuals participating in court proceedings through video conferences were comfortable with the arrangement. Furthermore, all pilot courts recommend further implementation of video conferencing in Norwegian courts, although some courts emphasised the need to use the technology with care, and not as a general substitute for physical attendance.

The conclusions from the project have contributed to Norway's commitment to the implementation of video conferencing in courts. Equipment is continuously being made available to more of Norway's courts, and new legislation on video conferencing in civil procedures have been in force since the beginning of 2008. In criminal cases we are assessing whether to remove the consent of the person in custody as an absolute condition for video conferencing in remand extension hearings. However, there are still plenty of challenges, including convincing the professional participants of the advantages of video conferencing, and providing all potential users with access to conferencing equipment.