

Assisted Prison Visits Scheme

Customer Service Guide

2009/10

We aim to promote family ties by contributing to the cost of prison visits by close relatives and partners who are in receipt of a low income.



**Ministry of
JUSTICE**

National Offender
Management Service



SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

About us

The Assisted Prison Visits Unit (APVU) is part of the National Offender Management Service, Ministry of Justice.

Our contact details are:

Address: APVU, PO Box 2152, Birmingham B15 1SD.
Telephone: 0845 300 1423 between 1015-1145 and 1415-1545 (Mon to Fri)
Textphone: 0845 304 0800 (for people with hearing problems)
Fax: 0121 626 3474 (24 hours)
E Mail: assisted.prison.visits@hmps.gsi.gov.uk
Websites: www.justice.gov.uk, www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk

Help and information

If you require any help in completing the application form or information, including notes about the scheme in Welsh or a foreign language or Braille or on audiocassette or CD, contact our Customer Services or ask at the prison you are visiting.

Independent advice is also available. See Section 7.1.

Rates payable

See inside of back cover (rates may change without notice).

Standards of service

If you are unhappy about the way we have dealt with you please tell us and we will do everything we can to resolve the problem. See Section 8.2.

Improving our service

We welcome any suggestions or ideas on how we can improve our service. Write to the Head of APVU or telephone and ask for Customer Services.

Data protection

Information provided on the application form plus any accompanying receipts or other documentation will be treated in confidence and used only to assess your eligibility for assistance or to ensure any payment is correct.

Equal opportunities statement

The Assisted Prison Visits Unit is committed to treating staff and customers in an open, courteous and respectful manner and anyone who contacts us will be dealt with without prejudice.

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Section 1. INTRODUCTION

This booklet is only a guide to the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme; it does not cover all the rules for every situation nor does it provide a full interpretation of the rules. It should not therefore be treated as a complete and authoritative document.

Every effort has been made to ensure that the information given is correct at the time of publication. However, changes in operational procedures, rates payable, departmental regulations and the law may make this booklet become out of date and less accurate.

The Assisted Prison Visits Unit (APVU), National Offender Management Service, administers the scheme which provides help with travel expenses when visiting a close relative or partner and in appropriate cases a friend in prison (includes Young Offender Institution).

Visitors must be a resident of England or Wales or Scotland to be eligible to apply for an assisted prison visit and qualifying rules of the scheme must also be met. See Sections 2 and 3.

The same scheme is administered on behalf of the Scottish Prison Service and the APVU will deal with applications to visit a prison in Northern Ireland, Guernsey and Jersey.

April 2009

Section 2. WHO CAN APPLY?

2.1 Close relatives

Close relative means: wife, husband, civil partner, mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, grandparent or adoptive step/half brother/sister, step child or step parent or someone who was in loco parentis for a significant period during the prisoner's childhood.

The minimum age for applying for an assisted prison visit is 18 years (16 years when visiting a prison in Scotland) but this restriction may be waived where the governor or director gives permission for a qualifying close relative, partner or sole visitor aged 16 or 17 years to visit unaccompanied.

2.2 Partner

A partner means a person with whom the prisoner was living, as a couple, in an established relationship, immediately before the period of removal or imprisonment was imposed. An age restriction applies. See Section 2.1.

Any children living within the family unit are also eligible to receive assistance.

2.3 Sole visitor

A sole visitor is defined as someone who is not a close relative or partner but is the prisoner's only visitor during a four week period immediately before the date of the first assisted visit. An age restriction applies. See Section 2.1.

2.4 Escort to a qualifying child or young person

There are three types of escort to a prisoner's child/children:

Prisoner's spouse or partner

Carer

A person authorised by either of the above to escort the child/children or young person to the prison on their behalf.

Prisoner's spouse or partner

Qualifying children should be included on your application form but you can arrange for someone else to take the child/children to the prison on your behalf. They apply for assistance as an escort. However, you must write to us to authorise the escort by providing information, as shown below, and evidence to confirm the prisoner is the mother/father of the child/children being escorted to the prison. See below*

- your name, address and National Insurance Number
- name and date of birth of your child/children being escorted to the prison and their relationship to the prisoner. See below*
- details of your income. See Section 3. If you are in receipt of Income Support or Employment & Support Allowance (Income Related) or Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance we may need to contact the local office that issued the award. To give your permission, state the name and address of the local office
- name, prison number and location of mother/father in prison
- name and address of escort.

Unless you withdraw permission by writing to us, we will assume the named escort is authorised to take your child/children on all claimed assisted prison visits.

***One** of the following is acceptable proof of parentage by confirming the surname of the child/children is the same as the prisoner's:

- original short birth certificate; or
- original long birth certificate; or
- original medical card; or
- Child Benefit award notice; or
- official letter e.g. from a school, health centre

If you are unable to send proof to confirm that the prisoner is the father you should contact your local Register Office for advice on adding the father's details to the birth record. Original documentation from the Register Office to confirm the birth record has been amended must be sent to us.

Carer

If you do not qualify as a spouse or partner but are looking after the prisoner's child/children you may be able to claim assistance as an "escort". You must meet the qualifying rules on income. See Section 3.

Proof of parentage to confirm the prisoner is the mother or father of the escorted child/children must be sent with the application form. See page 6.

If you decide to ask someone else to act as an escort you must comply with all the requirements of "Prisoner's spouse or partner". See page 6. Unless you withdraw permission by writing to us, we will assume the named escort is authorised to take your child/children on all claimed assisted prison visits.

The escort is required to complete an application form.

Authorised person

Before any application can be assessed we require a letter of authority and certain information as outlined above from the parent or partner or carer. You do **not** need to meet the income qualifying rules

2.5 Escort to a qualifying adult

Adult visitors may qualify for an escort. See Section 6.1d.

The escort must complete an application form and wherever possible it should be sent to us at the same time as the visitors' form.

The return journey between the home of the escort and qualifying visitor is payable. A maximum rate applies.

Where a car journey is being claimed, the total mileage allowance will normally be paid to the qualifying visitor unless advised otherwise. Published payment rates apply.

Section 3. INCOME

3.1 Qualifying income

To qualify for assistance you must meet the criteria in Section 2 and be in receipt of **one** of the following **or** hold a Health Certificate 2 or 3 (see Section 3.2 – 3.5 below):

- Income Support; or
- Employment & Support Allowance (Income Related); or
- Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance; or
- Tax Credit; or
- Pension Credit.

If someone else claims any of the above on your behalf you must enter their personal details in Part 2 of the application form.

Any changes in your income must be notified to us immediately

3.2 Income Support / Employment & Support Allowance (Income Related) / Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance

We confirm with the Department for Work and Pensions which benefit you receive and carry out regular checks.

3.3 Working and Child Tax Credit

To qualify you must be in receipt of one of the following:

- Child Tax Credit; or
- the disability element in Working Tax Credit; or
- Working Tax Credit with Child Tax Credit.

In each case the gross household income as shown on the tax credit award notice must not exceed a published limit.

The **original** award notice must be sent to us when first applying and thereafter when a new or amended award notice is issued.

3.4 Pension Credit

Recipients of Pension Credit are entitled to assisted prison visits subject to meeting the criteria in Section 2.

The **original** award notice must be sent to us when first applying and thereafter when a new or amended award notice is issued.

3.5 Health Certificate 2 or 3

The **original** certificate must be sent to us when first applying and thereafter when a new or amended certificate is issued.

Assisted prison visits may be backdated up to 3 months prior to the commencement of the health certificate, subject to meeting all other conditions.

Important - the contribution shown on the HC3 certificate for travel to receive NHS treatment under the care of a consultant, is deducted from any assisted prison visit payment.

A Health Certificate application form (HC1) is available from us.

Section 4 PRISON ESTABLISHMENTS

4.1 Prisons in England, Wales and Scotland

All prison establishments (includes Young Offender Institution) in England, Wales and Scotland are covered by the scheme.

4.2 Prisons in Northern Ireland

Qualifying visitors living in England, Wales or Scotland can apply for assistance to visit a prisoner held in a Northern Ireland prison.

4.3 Guernsey prison

Qualifying visitors living in England, Wales or Scotland can apply for assistance to visit a prisoner held in Guernsey prison.

Two conditions apply:

- assistance is given for one visit every 6 months by a maximum of 3 qualifying adults and qualifying children per visit
- one visit only will be assisted where the prisoner is serving a sentence of 6 months or less.

On sentence a UK citizen can request a transfer back to a UK prison. Guernsey Prison operates a policy of repatriation for all those sentenced to 5 years and above.

Help and advice can be obtained from the Probation Officer who works in Guernsey Prison (telephone number 01481 248376).

4.4 Jersey prison

Qualifying visitors living in England, Wales or Scotland can apply for assistance to visit a prisoner held in Jersey Prison.

The same two conditions for visiting Guernsey prison apply. Help and advice can be obtained direct from us.

Section 5 ASSISTED PRISON VISITS

5.1 Entitlement

Assistance is normally given towards a visit every two weeks and up to 26 assisted visits per 12 month period. This commences on the date of the first assisted visit.

Assisted visits can be saved up to allow two or more consecutive visits to take place during one return journey. A contribution towards an overnight stay will be considered. Each visiting day will count towards the annual allowance.

Assistance may be granted towards accumulated visits, contact us for advice.

An assisted prison visit can be used to meet, at the establishment, a prisoner who is released on temporary licence. The Confirmation of a Visit form must be date stamped at the prison. See Section 6.1e. Each return journey will count towards the annual allowance and payment of expenses will be restricted to the cost of a normal visit.

A maximum of 13 unused assisted prison visits can be carried forward at the end of the 12 month period. Contact us for more information.

5.2 Additional visits

The prison governor may authorise additional visits if it is considered necessary for resettlement purposes or the welfare of the prisoner or you. Payment will not count towards the annual allowance. See Section 5.1.

5.3 Late arrival at the prison

Some prisons may refuse to allow a visit to take place if you arrive late. In these cases you will not normally qualify for an assisted prison visit.

5.4 Cancelled visits

Assistance will normally be authorised if you travel to the prison and the visit is cancelled for operational reasons or the prisoner has been transferred to another prison. The Confirmation of a Visit form must be stamped and if possible a reason stated for the cancellation. Payment will not count towards the annual allowance. See Section 5.1.

Section 6 WHAT FINANCIAL HELP CAN I GET?

6.1 General information

a. When to apply for assisted prison visits

Each qualifying visitor and where applicable an escort (see section 2.4 and 2.5), should complete an individual application form which must be sent to us within 28 days of the earliest visit claimed. If you require any help in completing the application form please contact our Customer Services. See Section 7.1.

b. Proof of expenditure

Public transport, car hire, car park, bridge/tunnel tolls, overnight accommodation and childcare costs will only be reimbursed where receipts and/or used tickets are attached to the application form.

c. Advance payment

An advance payment can be claimed towards one or two visits. If travelling by rail we normally issue a warrant, this should be exchanged for tickets before travelling. Always ask for a receipt.

If you decide to apply for two advance payments at the same time and intend visiting every 14 days you may find it helpful to apply for a further advance payment immediately after the first of the two visits. You must include a completed Confirmation of a Visit form and where applicable any travel/accommodation tickets/receipts for the visit you have just made. You can continue applying every 14 days and the requested future visit date will normally be in around 4 weeks.

We will not allow you to hold more than 2 advance payments at any one time.

All tickets/receipts must be retained and sent to us with a completed Confirmation of a Visit form (see Section 6.1e) within 28 days of the visit date/s or they can be attached to the next claim if sooner.

If you cancel or do not visit within 7 days of the visit date/s shown on the application form, all monies and, if applicable, the rail warrant, must be returned to us or send a cheque/postal order payable to "APVU".

Contact our Customer Services if you need any advice or help in applying for an advance payment.

d. Special needs

If you are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance or are 75 years or over you can apply for:

- an escort (relative, friend or organisation) to help you during the journey. A higher mileage rate is payable when travelling by car. See Section 2.5.
- a hire car and the restricting of costs to the same journey by public transport will not apply. See Section 6.2e.
- use of a taxi for short journeys e.g. to/from bus stops, railway station. See Section 6.2f.
- taking your car on a ferry to the Isle of Wight when visiting a prisoner in HMP Albany, Camp Hill or Parkhurst. See Section 6.2d.

If you are not in receipt of Disability Living Allowance but have special needs due to a medical condition, ask your doctor to write to us. Unless the condition is stated as permanent a further letter will be required every four months.

e. Confirmation of visits

A completed Confirmation of a Visit form must be included with an application form for each visitor and where appropriate escort, applying for assistance. If you are requesting an advance payment see Section 6.1c.

Two Confirmation of a Visit forms are enclosed with the application pack. Complete Part A and take one form with you to the establishment, as it must be date stamped to prove the visit took place.

When you arrive at the establishment or Visitors' Centre (not every prison has one) find out who is responsible for completing Part B.

The date stamped form will be handed back to you.

Please read the following notes carefully as certain restrictions may apply to Section 6.1 a-e above

6.2 Travel

The scheme covers the cost of: rail (standard class or equivalent), bus including community bus, private motor vehicle/motor cycle, ferry, car hire, taxi and air travel.

Ensure you obtain receipts and also enclose all used tickets when applying.

a. Rail/Underground

Regular rail users can apply for the reimbursement of a discount travel card. However, we must be satisfied that the cost of the card will be recovered through lower fares when visiting a prison establishment. Ask at the rail station for details of any local schemes.

b. Bus

Regular bus users can apply for the reimbursement of a discount travel card. However, we must be satisfied that the cost of the card will be recovered through lower fares when visiting a prison establishment. Ask the bus operator for details of any local schemes.

c. Car/motor cycle

A fixed rate per mile is paid. The distance of the return journey (normally the shortest route) is calculated using a computerised journey planner.

When sharing a car with someone who is also claiming assistance, both forms should be sent to us together. One of the forms must be endorsed "driver".

Receipted car parking charges will be reimbursed for visits to those establishments where car parking is not provided or is restricted.

Bridge and tunnel tolls are reimbursable.

The cost of a "park and ride" bus service will be met where used tickets or a receipt is enclosed. An adjustment to the journey mileage may be necessary.

Where an escort or volunteer driver is required due to a medical condition, an enhanced published mileage rate is payable. See Section 2.5.

Drivers of a car provided under a Motability Finance contract may be entitled to financial help towards any excess mileage charge. Contact us for further information.

d. Visits to a prison on the Isle of Wight

Car parking charges at the mainland port are refundable.

The cost of taking a car on the ferry will only be met if you are unable to use a bus on the Isle of Wight due to a medical condition.

Foot passengers are restricted to the cheapest ferry to allow the visit.

The cost of the return journey by bus from the port to the prison is refundable.

e. Car hire

You can arrange car hire from a private company. Maximum rates apply but a fixed mileage rate is also payable.

Reimbursement of a hire car plus the petrol allowance must not exceed the cost of the same journey by public transport. However, we do take into account the number of assisted visitors travelling with you and any savings in fares, subsistence etc.

f. Taxi

The reimbursement of taxi fares for journeys to/from bus stops/railway stations will only be considered where the walking distance exceeds 20 minutes in one direction or you are aged 75 years or over.

Taxi journeys should wherever possible be booked through a taxi office.

Checks are regularly carried out with the taxi operator to validate claimed taxi fares.

Taxi receipts should, wherever possible, include the following details:

- date of journey
- name, address and telephone number of taxi company
- name/signature of driver
- details of journey
- fare paid.

g. Community bus or similar

Payment will be restricted to the actual fare charged or if cheaper, the cost of the same journey by public transport.

h. Air travel

The cost of air travel will only be paid if the overall cost of the visit is less than other methods of public transport.

It is recommended that you contact us before incurring any expenditure.

6.3 Light refreshment allowance

Absences from home of 5 hours and over will entitle you to a light refreshment allowance which we call “subsistence”. The rate is doubled for absences of 10 hours or longer. Receipts are not required.

A payment is also made for eligible children aged 1 year and over who accompany you on the visit.

6.4 Overnight accommodation

If you apply for payment of overnight accommodation costs we will take the following factors into account before approving payment:

- length of time absent from home
- difficulty of journey
- number and ages of any eligible children
- your age
- availability of public transport
- medical needs. See Section 6.1d.

The cost of travel between the accommodation address and establishment is payable but subject to a maximum published rate.

A light refreshment allowance towards the cost of lunch or an evening meal or both may be payable.

Regular checks are carried out to validate claimed overnight accommodation costs.

6.5 Child care

The cost of a registered childminder or breakfast/after school club or similar will be considered if you decide not to take a qualifying visitor who is under 16 to the prison.

The following details should be sent with your application form:

- name and address of school/childminder
- registration number of childminder and name and address of local authority (if applicable)
- cost per hour.

A receipt must be obtained and attached to the application form.

We do not normally contact the childminder or school direct.

Section 7 APPLYING FOR ASSISTED PRISON VISITS

7.1 Information and help

Information about the scheme and prison establishments including details of visiting times is available on the Prison Service website: www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk

Contact us direct if you:

- require help in completing the form
- would like information in Welsh, a foreign language, Braille or on audio cassette or CD
- have a general query about the scheme or applying for an advance payment
- are concerned about a current application or a recent payment
- wish to report the loss or theft of a giro cheque.

Our address is: APVU, PO Box 2152, Birmingham B15 1SD.
 Telephone: 0845 300 1423 between 1015-1145 and 1415-1545 (Mon to Fri)
 Textphone: 0845 304 0800 (for people with hearing problems)
 Fax: 0121 626 3474 (24 hours)
 E Mail: assisted.prison.visits@hmprisonservice.gov.uk

Independent advice, information and support to anyone with a relative or friend in prison (with the exception of assisted prison visit casework enquiries) can be obtained from:

Prisoners' Families Helpline (for prisons in England & Wales)

Tel no: 0808 8082003 (calls are free)
 Website: www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk

Scottish Prisoners' Families Helpline (for prisons in Scotland)

Tel no: 0500 839383 (calls are free)
 Website: www.familiesoutside.org.uk
 Email: admin@familiesoutside.org.uk

Information and support may be available locally from: National Probation Service, Youth Offending Team, Social Services and Citizens Advice Bureau.

7.2 Completion of application form

Before posting check to ensure:

- all sections are complete
- the declaration is signed
- tickets/receipts and a completed Confirmation of a Visit form are enclosed for visits already made
- supporting documentation (where applicable) is included.

7.3 Payment of an assisted prison visit

Once your application is assessed and approved you will receive the following:

- giro cheque and/or rail warrant
- letter to explain how the payment was calculated
- Repeat Claim Form
- two Confirmation of a Visit forms.

The giro cheque must be cashed at the nominated post office within 3 months of issue. Proof of identity may be required.

7.4 Lost or stolen giro cheques

Report any loss or theft of a giro cheque or rail warrant to the police, then write to us to confirm the following details: circumstances of the loss or theft, date reported to the police, crime reference number, name of police officer who dealt with you and address of police station.

A replacement giro cheque will normally be issued within 8 working days of being notified of the loss or theft.

Section 8 STANDARDS OF SERVICE

8.1 Our standards

We aim to provide the best possible service by meeting the standards set out below:

- staff will be polite and helpful
- you will be treated with respect, understanding and without prejudice
- your application will normally be assessed within 8 working days of receipt
- your letters and emails will be answered in full within 8 working days of receipt or an acknowledgement will be issued if we require further information
- a telephone service normally operates between 1015-1145 and 1415-1545 Monday to Friday. Calls will be answered within 10 seconds. A message machine will advise the caller to telephone at a later time if the line is busy or if the service is not available for operational reasons
- staff will give their name when answering the telephone or writing to you
- we will carry out a customer survey at least once a year and publish the results in a Newsletter
- we will tell you if our standards are being met via a Newsletter and if appropriate the action we are taking to improve our service
- we will tell you about any changes to the scheme via a Newsletter
- the Head of Unit will welcome your suggestions for improvement and comments on our service
- we will publish an appeals and complaints procedure.

8.2 Complaint procedure

If you are not satisfied with our service or you wish to make a complaint please write to: **Customer Services, PO Box 2152, Birmingham, B15 1SD**; or telephone **0845 3001423** between 1015-1145 and 1415-1545 (Monday to Friday) and ask for the Team Leader who deals with the prison you are visiting.

We will carry out a full investigation and you will receive a telephone or written reply within 5 working days of receipt or a progress report if the investigation takes longer.

We will do our best to put the matter right, give an explanation and, where appropriate, an apology.

Should you feel our response is unsatisfactory you can write to: **Head of Assisted Prison Visits Unit, PO Box 2152, Birmingham, B15 1SD. (for prisons in England and Wales)**

Directorate of Partnerships and Commissioning, Scottish Prison Service, Calton House, 5 Redheughs Rigg, Edinburgh, EH12 9HW. (for prisons in Scotland)

If you still feel your complaint has not been dealt with satisfactorily, contact your local Member of Parliament and ask that they raise the matter with the Minister of State responsible for the National Offender Management Service (for prisons in England and Wales) or with the Minister of State responsible for the Prison Service in Scotland (for prisons in Scotland).

You can also complain to the Parliamentary Ombudsman who will investigate complaints from members of the public about the way they have been treated by government departments and/or their executive agencies. Further information can be obtained from:

Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration
Millbank Tower
Millbank
London, SW1P 4QP

Helpline: 0845 015 4033, Fax: 020 7217 4160,
Website: www.ombudsman.org.uk

RATES PAYABLE / TAX CREDIT INCOME LIMIT

Note – rates are liable to change without prior notice

Motor Car / Motor Cycle

13p per mile

Light Refreshment Allowance (Subsistence)

Over 5 hour absence from home - £2.55 } Note: The qualifying age for payment
Over 10 hour absence from home - £5.10 } to eligible children is 1 year and above

Overnight Allowances

London and the South East:

Adult £34 per night (maximum) } Adult includes eligible children
Child £17 per night (maximum) } aged over 13 years.

Elsewhere:

Adult £28 per night (maximum) } Child means eligible children
Child £14 per night (maximum) } aged over 3 years.

Travel cost between accommodation address and establishment - £16 (maximum single journey)

Car Hire

£40 per day (maximum all inclusive) plus 13 pence per mile

Childminder

Rate paid should not normally exceed £3.75 per hour

Cars Provided Under the Motability Scheme

Excess miles charged by Motability Finance Ltd

12,001 - 14,999 miles	-	5 pence per mile
15,000 - 19,999 miles	-	8 pence per mile
20,000 miles and over	-	10 pence per mile

Volunteer Drivers

32p per mile plus subsistence – probation/social services volunteer or similar

27p per mile plus subsistence - other (medical cases only)

Escort

Payment for a return journey between the home of an escort and visitor will not normally exceed £27

Working and Child Tax Credit – 2009/10 Income Limit

The annual household income, as stated on the award notice, must not exceed £17,474

