

Prisoners - visits

If you're in prison, it's very important to keep in touch with family and friends. This fact sheet is for prisoners and the people visiting them. It explains the rules about visits.

Who can visit

Up to three adults at the same time can visit someone in prison. It's a good idea to check with the prison whether there are special rules about visits by children.

If you're a prisoner, your legal adviser can visit you as often as necessary but will usually have to book a visit. 'Legal adviser' means your solicitor, barrister or someone who is directly supervised by them. Other professionals can also visit you, like a social worker or probation officer. These professional visits don't affect the number of visits by friends or family.

There are special rules if you want to visit someone who's a Category A prisoner. The police will get in touch with you and your criminal record will be checked. This can take several weeks and you can't visit until the checks have been done. But if there are special reasons to visit whilst you're waiting for checks to be done, write to the governor of the prison asking for them to make an exception.

If the governor thinks that a visitor is unsuitable, they can refuse the visit. If you think that a prison visit has been refused unfairly, you can make a complaint.

Visits to unconvicted and civil prisoners

An unconvicted prisoner is someone who has been charged with a criminal offence and who is waiting for trial or is in the middle of their trial. They are in prison 'on remand' waiting for the trial to come up. The term 'unconvicted prisoner' doesn't cover people who have already pleaded guilty or have been found guilty and who are on remand waiting to be sentenced. A civil prisoner is someone who is in prison because of a non-criminal matter, for example, they haven't paid their council tax.

You can visit an unconvicted prisoner or a civil prisoner without making a formal request. Contact the prison to find out about visiting arrangements as most prisons have a booking system for these visits.

Some prisons allow visits to unconvicted prisoners every day. These visits should total a minimum of one and a half hours per week. Most prisons allow visits three times a week and each visit can last for at least one hour. The governor may allow more than this minimum in exceptional circumstances. Civil prisoners can have as many visits as they want, depending on what the

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prison says is practical. If you're a relative or close friend and can't visit often, ask if you can have a longer visit.

Visits to convicted prisoners

If you're in prison because you've been found guilty of a criminal offence, you're called a 'convicted prisoner'. You're also counted as a convicted prisoner if you pleaded guilty to an offence or been found guilty even if you haven't been sentenced yet.

If you're a convicted prisoner, you have to fill in a Visiting Order (VO) to get a visit. You must name everyone who's planning to visit. Then send the VO to one of the visitors. You'll get a VO when you first go into prison. After that, you get at least one VO every two weeks. Visits to convicted prisoners should normally last for a minimum of one hour. Many prisons may allow longer visits or more frequent visits.

If you're the visitor, it's very important to take the VO with you to the prison you visit. You'll also need identification. When you book the visit, ask the prison what sort of identification they'll accept. If you don't have the VO and identification, the prison might not let you in. If you've been sent a VO but you can't make the visit, return the VO to the prisoner so it can be used for someone else.

Financial help to visit a prisoner

If you are the partner or a close relative of a prisoner, you might get help with the costs of visiting. There are rules about what counts as a close relative. You are counted as a partner if you have lived with the prisoner as a couple before they were sent to prison.

If you are the prisoner's only visitor, you may get help with the costs of your visit, whatever your relationship.

To get financial help, you must be getting one of the following:

- Income Support,
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income Related Employment and Support Allowance
- Pension Credit
- Tax Credit (but this depends on your income)

If you're on a low income, but you're not getting these benefits, you may still be able to get financial help. To find out more about financial help for visits, contact:

The Assisted Prison Visits Unit (APVU)
PO Box 2152
Birmingham
B15 1SDTel: 0845 300 1423
Textphone: 0845 304 0800

www.adviceguide.org.uk

Email: assisted.prison.visits@hmps.gsi.gov.uk

You can get more information about financial help for visits from the APVU in a range of languages, in Braille and on audio-cassette. You can also get information on the Prison Service website at www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk.

Taking things into prison when you visit

If you want to take things into prison when you visit, check with the prison what you are allowed to bring. If the prisoner's on remand, you'll usually be allowed to take in clothing and toiletries, but not food, drink or money.

In most prisons, you have to leave your personal possessions in lockers before you go to the visiting room. This includes things like baby-changing essentials. Mobile phones must be left, at your own risk, at the main prison gate.

Arriving at prison

When you get to the prison, you'll need to hand in any VO at the gate if you're visiting a convicted prisoner. You'll be asked for identification when you visit. You could be photographed and fingerprinted.

Every visitor, including children, may be searched both before and after the visit. You could be asked to open your mouth and to remove items of clothing, for example, shoes, hats and religious head-coverings. Whatever the level of searching, prison staff should treat you in a polite and respectful way. If you're unhappy about the way you've been treated, raise your concern with a senior prison officer.

If a prison officer suspects that you're committing a crime, for example, taking illegal drugs into the prison, the prison can call the police. You can be arrested and kept until the police arrive.

During the visit

During the actual visit, the following rules apply:

- visits will take place in the sight and hearing of a prison officer
- you normally have to stay sitting down if the visit takes place in a visiting room
- you can normally speak in any language you choose, whether or not the prison officer understands it
- hugging and kissing is normally allowed. If you're not sure about what level of physical contact is allowed, ask the prison officer
- smoking during visits is not usually allowed in prisons and never in youth offender institutions.

The visit can be cut short if a member of the prison staff in charge of visits suspects that:

- any of these rules have been broken
- the visitor is a threat to prison security
- the visit is upsetting other people.

Sometimes instead of cutting short a visit, the governor can order a closed visit. This is where no direct contact is allowed between visitor and prisoner. A closed visit could also be ordered if the prison is worried that there might be a risk to prison security or if illegal or unacceptable behaviour might take place, such as the passing of drugs.

Complaints about visits

The Prison Service says that all prisoners and visitors should be treated with respect, whatever their sex, age, disability, nationality, race, family status, sexuality or religion. You can complain about unacceptable behaviour to the prison. If you're a prisoner who wants to complain about treatment of one of your visitors, use the normal complaints procedure. Visitors can complain by writing to the prison governor.

It is against the law to treat visitors unfairly because of their race, ethnic origin or sex or because they're disabled. This is called discrimination. If discrimination is involved, make sure this is mentioned in the complaint.

Further help

Citizens Advice Bureau

Citizens Advice Bureaux give free, confidential, impartial and independent advice to help you solve any sort of problem.

Some Citizens Advice Bureaux run advice sessions in prison. If you're in prison, check if they run these sessions in your prison. If they don't run advice sessions, you could write to them explaining your problem. Ask a member of the prison staff for the address of your local CAB.

If you are not in prison, and you want to find your nearest CAB, including those that give advice by e-mail, click on [nearest CAB](#), or look under C in your phone book.

Other fact sheets on Adviceguide which might help

- Prisoners – letters
- Prisoners – getting further help
- Prisoners – making a complaint

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