

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Visiting and Family Contact

Q How many visits is a prisoner allowed?

A Generally, unconvicted prisoners on remand are allowed up to three visits a week, but no more than one on the same day. However, some prisons may allow more (Holloway, for example, allows visits every day except Sunday for remand prisoners). Prisoners who have been convicted are allowed one visit every two weeks, although young offenders may be allowed three visits a month.

Q How does someone go about visiting someone in prison?

A If the prisoner is convicted, or on Judge's Remand (i.e. convicted of a crime, but the length of the sentence has not yet been decided) a person wishing to visit them needs a visiting order (VO) before they can do so. VOs are issued to prisoners soon after they arrive in prison and at two weekly intervals after that. It is up to the prisoner to decide who they want to visit and send out the VO. When someone is sent a VO they need to phone the prison and book a time for the visit. All prisons have dedicated lines for booking visits. It may not be easy to get through on this line, so it may be necessary to keep on trying. Callers should have their visiting order handy, as the prison will ask for the reference number. If the prisoner is on remand, a VO is not necessary, but a visit may still need to be booked.

Q Is a prisoner allowed a visit soon after being sent to prison?

A Some prisons allow reception visits at the start of a sentence. In this case the visiting order for the first visit can be left at the gate for the visitor to pick up on arrival, rather than waiting for it to be sent. This may only be possible on certain days of the week, and people wishing to visit may still need to book a time. It is advisable to contact the prison or visitors' centre to find out what the procedure is for that prison.

Q What is a visitors' centre?

A Not every prison has one. They are usually run by charities and may be partially staffed by volunteers. They are not run by prison officers. Visitors' centres usually provide a place to wait before a visit, somewhere to buy drinks and snacks, a children's play area and toilet facilities. The staff will know about the rules and systems for visiting that prison and can help with any problems visitors may have before, during or after their visit.

Q How does a visitor get directions to a prison?

A The prison or visitors' centre can provide directions. Alternatively, detailed directions are available on the Prison Service website at www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk

Q How many people can visit at once?

A Three adults and any number of children can be included on a visiting order for one visit. Every visitor has to be listed on the order to be allowed in, and those listed cannot visit separately. Some prisons may limit the number of older children on a visit due to lack of space.

Q Are there any other restrictions?

A The minimum age for visiting a prison is usually 18, even if the prisoner is one's partner or parent. Sometimes, if the prisoner has committed a sexual or violent offence, people under 18 will not be able to visit at all, or only after clearance has been granted. This can take several months. Prison governors have discretion to allow anyone 16 and over to visit.

Q What if someone is on a low income and can't afford to visit?

A People on low incomes may qualify for help with fares from the Assisted Prison Visits Unit (APVU). See the information sheet on Assisted Prison Visits at www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk/php/bin/readarticle.php?articlecode=9250 or call the APVU on 0845 3001423.

Q What does a visitor need to take when they go to visit?

A A visitor will need to take their visiting order and some form of identification, such as a passport, driving licence, benefits book, birth certificate, bus pass or union card. They should check with the prison how many forms of ID they will need and what the prison will accept.

Q Can things be taken in for the prisoner?

A Rules vary, so check with the prison or visitors' centre before taking anything on a visit. A prisoner may have to make a formal request for an item before it can be handed in. Visitors are not allowed to take in anything besides items that have been approved and perhaps money for refreshments. Food and drink themselves are generally not allowed (although it may be possible to buy refreshments in the visits hall). The prison will provide lockers for visitors to leave personal belongings in.

Q Will visitors be searched?

A Prisons take security very seriously and it is likely that some form of searching will take place, particularly in a high security prison. Procedures may include searching the contents of pockets, a pat down search, metal detectors, looking in the mouth, ears or hair or asking the visitor to remove their coats, cardigans or shoes. In lower security prisons, searches may be carried out at random. Female visitors will always be searched by a woman. Male visitors may be searched by an officer of either gender, but they can ask to be searched only by a male. Strip searches are only carried out when there are reasonable grounds to suspect a visitor is trying to bring in drugs or firearms. These searches may be carried out by the police.

Q Can a visitor refuse to be searched?

A Yes, but the prison can refuse them the right to visit. If there are reasonable grounds to suspect a visitor is smuggling in firearms or drugs, they may be searched without consent.

Q What is a closed visit?

A This means that the prisoner and visitor are separated by a glass partition and cannot make physical contact. If there is

reasonable suspicion that either the visitor or the prisoner have been trying to smuggle in unauthorized items, the prisoner may be restricted to closed visits for either a specified length of time or number of visits. The position is reviewed at the end of the period and a decision made by the prison staff as to whether closed visits will continue.

Q Can visitors complain about the way a visit was handled, including treatment by prison staff?

A Visitors can write to the Governor or the Board of Visitors and explain what happened. If they do not get a satisfactory reply to their complaint, they can write to the prison's area manager, their MP, or the MP of the constituency where the prison is.

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