

Home visits by the Probation Service

If a prisoner is being considered for parole, home leave, or home detention curfew, one of the reports routinely required is a report on the home they would be returning to on release. This will usually be written by a probation officer in the community based on a visit to the address. For Home Detention Curfew applications, it may be written by a Home Detention Curfew Officer. Similar questions are asked for all three, although for parole it is more detailed.

Will I know when a probation officer is coming to visit me?

The probation officer will not turn up on the doorstep unannounced, but will write or telephone first to suggest a time. If the time they suggest is not convenient, you can rearrange. If you work, an evening appointment may be arranged.

What will they want to know?

They will be assessing whether or not the home is a suitable address for the prisoner to come back to, and whether their being there will help to keep them from re-offending. The questions asked will include the following:

- Who lives at the address? How long have they known the prisoner and how well?
- Will the people at the address support the prisoner and help them not to re-offend? For example, will they be supporting them in staying drug or alcohol free, or will they be encouraging them to drink/use drugs? Does anyone at the address have a drink or drug problem?
- Are the family fully aware of the offence that was committed? It is not unknown for prisoners to mislead their families as to what it was they actually did, and for families to be less willing to have the person living with them when they become aware of the truth. So the probation officer will ask what you believe the person is in

prison for. It is also to make sure the family are aware of any implications of the offence, especially if it was a serious one, such as arson, and they may need to be mindful of certain behaviours when the person comes home.

- In the case of home leave, they may ask about the financial situation. This is because prisoners are given fares to get home but no money for food, and cannot claim benefit. They want to be sure the family is willing and able to feed the prisoner while s/he is on home leave.
- Is anyone else in the family in any trouble with the law? This is to assess whether the prisoner is likely to be tempted to commit offences with other family members.
- Is the family in touch with any other organizations such as Social Services, Psychiatric Nurses, etc.
- The family's attitude towards the prisoner. Have they visited? If not, why not? (Not having visited will not necessarily mean parole will be refused as there are many good reasons why families are unable to visit.) Have they been in contact by phone or letter?
- What are the prisoner's employment prospects? While this is largely up to the prisoner, the family may be aware of an opportunity, say in a family firm.
- How have the family coped with remaining in the community if the crime was serious or had an effect on the local area?
- Did the prisoner have home leave before? How did it go? Were there any problems?
- Are the family aware of what it will be like to have the prisoner back? Both the family and the prisoner will have changed. What effect will it have on any children? This is to

alert the family to the possibility that there may be problems.

What will they be looking for in terms of the physical conditions of the home?

Unless the home is totally derelict there are unlikely to be any problems here. The probation officer will **not** be snooping around! Nor will it matter if the washing up has not been done or there are toys all over the floor. It does not matter if the family are unable to give the prisoner his/her own room, or even if they would have to sleep on a sofa, as long as the prisoner is aware of this and is happy with the arrangement.

If the family have not thought through these issues what happens?

Often the probation interview itself is enough to get them thinking about the implications and this may well be enough. Just realising that the way the prisoner behaves or the way the family feel once he/she is home is not abnormal or unusual may help them be prepared for these things if they occur. The probation officer will be happy to make another appointment to discuss any difficult issues further. The family can also raise them with the prisoner in a letter or on a visit. Getting in touch with a prisoners' family support group and meeting other people who are experiencing the same things can help.

If the home is not deemed suitable, does this mean the prisoner won't get parole?

Not necessarily. Alternatives will be considered, such as any other family members s/he could stay with, and failing that, hostel accommodation.

If a member of the family expresses any doubt about having the prisoner home, will that jeopardise their chances of parole?

It is important to remember that the home visit report is only one of many that

will be considered and it is highly unlikely that a comment by a family member will be the only reason why someone is not granted parole. The decision will be based on the prisoners behaviour inside, whether they took anger management courses or refused them, their history of violence prior to imprisonment and so on. So a family member need not feel solely responsible if parole is refused. Having said that, anything that the family do say may be included in the report, as the probation officer has a responsibility to consider the safety of the people living at the address. The report can be worded in such a way as to protect the identity of individual family members if need be.

Can I read the report?

Families do not have an automatic right to see the report. The prisoner, however, does have a right to see his or her dossier, which will include all the reports being considered. If s/he wishes, the prisoner can apply in writing to the community probation officer and request that a member of their family be allowed to see the report, giving reasons why. If permission is granted, the family would be invited to the probation office to read the report, but would not be given a copy to take away.

Does the community probation officer see the prisoner as well?

Yes, usually. The officer will have been allocated six to nine months before the release date and will have built up contact with them during that time, including at least one visit. The prisoner will continue to see a probation officer after release.

The information provided in this factsheet is intended for information purposes only. It does not constitute legal advice. Prisoners' Families and Friends Service (PFFS) recommends that professional legal advice should always be sought. The information contained in this factsheet is subject to change and may not be up-to-date or accurate. PFFS gives no guarantee of the accuracy or completeness of this information. PFFS will not be held responsible for any loss or damage arising from the use of the information provided.