

Visiting someone in prison

How many visits is a prisoner allowed?

Generally, if unconvicted (on remand), they are allowed up to 3 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). When they have been convicted, they are allowed one visit every two weeks. Young Offenders may be allowed three visits a month.

How do I go about visiting someone in prison?

If the person is convicted, or if they are on Judge's Remand (ie. Convicted of a crime, but the length of the sentence has not yet been decided) you need a visiting order (VO) before you can visit them. VOs are issued to prisoners soon after they arrive in prison and then at two weekly intervals after that. It is up to the prisoner to decide who s/he wants to visit them and send out the VO. When you receive it you need to phone the prison and book a time for the visit. Many prisons have dedicated lines for booking visits. You will need the visiting order in front of you when you call as the prison will ask for the reference number. If the prisoner is on remand, you don't need a VO, but may still need to book.

Some prisons allow reception visits, for which the VO for the first visit can be left at the gate for you 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 you 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.

What is a visitors centre?

Not every prison has one, but at those that do, they are a very useful contact for families. Visitors' centres are not part of the prison, although they may be situated within the grounds. They are usually run by charities and may be partially staffed by volunteers. They are not run by prison officers. The centre provides a

place to wait before a visit, a small shop selling 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 you may have before, during or after your visit.

How do I get directions to a prison?

The prison or visitors' centre will be happy to give directions for your first visit. Alternatively, you can find detailed directions on the Prison Service website (<http://hmpriprisonservice.gov.uk>)

How many people can visit at once?

Three adults and any number of children can be included on a VO for one visit. No-one not listed on the VO will be allowed in, and those listed cannot visit separately. Some prisons may limit the number of older children on a visit due to constraints of space.

Are there any other restrictions?

You have to be 18 or over to visit a prisoner on your own, even if the prisoner is your 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.

I'm on a low income and can't afford to visit.

You may qualify for help with fares from the Assisted Prison Visits Unit (APVU). See our information sheet on Assisted Prison Visits or call the APVU on 0845 3001423.

I am unwell and find it impossible to travel to visits.

It may be possible for the prisoner to apply for a transfer to a prison nearer home. See our information sheet on Transfers.

I've been ringing the visits booking line for ages and can't get through.

It can be notoriously difficult to get through to book visits. The only advice

we have is to be patient and keep trying. The visitors centre or switchboard may be able to tell you if there is a particular problem such as phone lines being down or a staff shortage.

I haven't received a VO.

If the people a prisoner wants to visit live at different addresses, only one of them will receive a VO. The prison or the visitors centre will be able to tell you if there has been any problem with issuing VOs. If not, you will need to raise it with the prisoner when s/he telephones or in a letter. It's not unknown for a prisoner to send a VO to one of his/her friends instead of his/her parent or partner.

What do I need to take with me when I go to visit?

You will need to take your VO, and some form of identification, such as a passport, driving licence, benefits book, birth certificate, bus pass or union card. Check with the prison as to how many forms of ID you will need and what they will accept.

Can I take things in for the prisoner?

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

Will I have to be searched?

Prisons take security very seriously and so it is likely 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.

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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.

Can I refuse to be searched?

Yes, but the prison can refuse you the right to visit. If there are reasonable grounds to suspect you are smuggling in firearms or drugs, you may be searched without consent.

What is a closed visit?

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 you 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.

I was treated very badly by prison staff on my visit. What can I do?

You can write to the Governor or the Independent Monitoring Board (an independent group of people from the community, whose job it is to monitor procedures at the prison – they can be contacted care of the prison address), and explain what happened. They should reply and tell you what action is being taken to rectify the situation. If you do not get a satisfactory reply to your complaint, you can write to that prison's area manager, your MP, or the MP of the constituency where the prison is.

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