

Do's and Don'ts of Visiting Prison

A person you may care about has been remanded or sentenced to prison from court, and you may be unsure of what happens next. Families Outside produce a number of factsheets, and **Information Sheet No 3 - Visiting Someone in a Scottish Prison** explains the differences between remanded and convicted prisoners. The Information Sheets produced can only give you guidance, so you may need to check any specific details with the prison or the Family Contact Officer (FCO). FCO's are prison officers who have a special responsibility for ensuring that families have access to correct information.

Visiting a prison establishment may be very new to you, so it is perhaps helpful to have an idea of what you can expect to take place at a visit and some of the rules and regulations you should be aware of.

You can contact Families Outside Support & Information Helpline on 0500 839383 (freephone), available Monday–Friday, for further information, or alternatively contact the Helpline via the website www.familiesoutside.org.uk. As a registered charity, they offer an independent service and are not part of the Scottish Prison Service. They can help you with any issues raised here and listen to any other concerns that you may have.

What Should I Take With Me?

Most Scottish prisons now request photographic identification, such as a passport, photo driving licence, or government approved id. You can ask at the prison or contact the **Support & Information Helpline** for a identification application forms. You will also need proof of your address – this could be something like a utility bill, council tax bill or letter from an official source.

If you don't have valid id, you may be refused admission to the prison for a visit.

Most prisons request that visitors arrive at least 15 minutes, and sometimes more, before the start of the visit. It may be helpful to check this with the prison. If you have any special needs, please let the visits staff know when you apply for the visit so that arrangements can be made. The prison will make every effort to accommodate your request.

What About My Own Belongings?

The prison will provide lockers for you to leave your personal belongings in whilst you visit so that nothing is taken into the Visit Room.

Will I Have To Be Searched?

Everyone (including people like solicitors and doctors) has to co-operate with the prison's security procedures. Prisons must make sure

that illegal items like drugs or alcohol and items that could be used in a dangerous way, are not taken into the prison. Efforts are made to recognise individual needs and differences, so if you do have any special requirements, please contact the prison or the Information & Support Helpline who may be able to help.

Some procedures or security measures may include:

- **Metal detecting equipment** – similar to equipment used at airports or at court and will involve the visitor walking through archways or the use of hand held metal detecting equipment
- **Searches** – may involve visitors emptying their pockets and opening their mouths for examination. Visitors may also be asked to remove shoes and may be subject to searching of outer garments and personal possessions. For women and children this will always be carried out by a female officer.
- **Drug Detection Dogs** – Many prisons use dogs to help stop drugs coming into the prison.
- **Closed Circuit Television (CCT)** – cameras are used to supervise visits rooms and other areas within a prison, including car parks.

What if I am asked to take in a banned item?

You may be under pressure from your partner or family member to attempt to take drugs into the prison; they may be having some difficulty coping with their sentence and you will feel that this can only help. However, the consequences can be huge, such as involvement of the police, and you may be arrested, charged and sent to prison.

There is also a possibility that Social Work will be involved if there is concern about young children and drugs, and the children may be taken into care. If visitors are caught with a banned item, it may result in closed visits for the prisoner from all family members and friends for the foreseeable future. If you or a family member are being bullied, or need help with drugs or other addictions, you can talk to the **Information & Support Helpline** on the confidential, freephone number 0500 839383. They will support and signpost you to an agency who will be able to help.

PLEASE Do Not take any items into the visit area or attempt to pass anything into the prison.

If you are found to be in possession of drugs, the police will be called. You will also be held responsible if drugs are found on children you have with you. Attempting to take any items into a prison could have an affect on any future visits.

What if I refuse to be searched?

The prison has the right to refuse a visit if visitors decline to be searched, although the visitor may be offered the option of a closed visit (see below). If the prison has reasonable grounds to suspect that something will be attempted to be smuggled into the visits room, the visit will be refused.

What is a Closed Visit?

If there is reasonable suspicion that a prisoner or visitor has been involved in attempting to smuggle in unauthorized items, or for any other risk to security, the prisoner may be restricted to closed visits for either a specified length of time or number of visits. A closed visit means the visit taking place with the prisoner behind a screen.

The prison may inform you if the visit is to be a closed visit, but it may be that you will have to ask the person you are visiting why the visit is restricted. The position is reviewed at the end of the period and a decision made by prison staff as to whether closed visits will continue. Permission then has to be received from the prison for normal visits to start again.

What About Property and Clothing?

If you wish to take in property or clothing for the prisoner, in most prisons you must have a **proform**. This is a form which is completed by the prisoner and authorised by prison staff. It lists the items you can take, and **only** these items can be handed into the prison. The prisoner will then send the proform to you. Alternatively, the prisoner may telephone you with the items on the proform. The items will then be checked against the proform when received by the prison. Electrical equipment must be safety checked, and all items handed in will be searched. Most prisons will supply an authorised list of what electrical goods can be handed into the prison.

Who Can I Ask For Help?

Visiting can sometimes be a difficult and stressful time. If you are unhappy with the search procedures or in any way upset at a member of staff who may have carried out the search which made you uncomfortable, try to remain calm and polite. If you have a complaint or would simply like to comment about any aspect of your visit, ask to speak to the Visits Manager on the day. Alternatively, ask for a **Comments Form**, which allows you to write to the Prison Governor about any aspect of your visit.

Each prison has a **Family Contact Officer** (FCO) who should be available to talk through any concerns you may have about visiting and they can be contacted at the prison through the telephone switchboard, or they may be available when you visit. You can also call the Families Outside Support & Information Helpline on their freephone number 0500 839383.

If you would like a summary of this leaflet in large print format, audiotape or in your community language, please e-mail, phone or write to us.