

Families Outside - Support & Information Helpline

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2. What to expect when starting a prison sentence

This information sheet will tell you about what generally happens when a person first enters the prison system.

Arrival

After people are sentenced, they are taken from court and initially transported to the nearest reception prison for the first few nights. They may be relocated to another prison depending on the security category, nature of the crime, length of sentence and other factors that may need to be taken into consideration.

There is a standard procedure for all prisoners arriving at a prison. Prisoners will be required to be strip searched by officers of the same sex to ensure they are not concealing anything.

Property

The prisoner's belongings will be given to reception staff who will sort out what items are permitted in the prison. All other belongings will be stored until their release. The prisoner is issued with a list of clothing entitlements. At this point the prisoner will sort out which clothes they wish to/are allowed to wear.

Prisoners cannot keep cash with them while they are in prison. The prison keeps money on their behalf in a private cash account. Relatives or friends of the prisoner can send or hand money into these accounts. There is a set amount of money that a prisoner is allowed to spend on a weekly basis, this amount is set by the prison.

Identity

The prisoner will be issued with a prison number and given a release date (EDL) and the qualifying date of possible release on an electronic tag, if applicable – this is called Home Detention Curfew (HDC). [Information Sheet 14](#) has more information about a tag.

The prisoner may be required to have a photograph and fingerprints taken for prison records.

They will be given a pin number for making phone calls and information on how they can do this. They will also be asked to complete a list of whom they will be calling, and this list will be checked by the prison.

Health

Prisoners will have the opportunity to see a doctor or nurse. They will discuss with them any current medications they are prescribed and give them the opportunity to raise any physical or mental health issues such as addictions, known medical conditions or low mood/anxiety.

If prisoners feel upset or worried when they arrive at prison, it is important they talk to someone about it. They should ask to talk to prison staff or to see the prison chaplain, if they prefer. Prisons also have specially trained prisoners who are available to talk and listen. These people are called Listeners or 'buddies', who are trained by the Samaritans. This service is completely confidential.

First night in custody

After all procedures at reception are completed, the prisoner may be offered a bath or shower, and will then be taken to the cell in which they will spend their first night. Some prisons now have a dedicated first night block which houses all new prisoners. If the prison they have been taken to does not have this option, they will be taken to a regular prison block.

A prisoner may be given the opportunity to buy the following items: toiletries, tobacco, sweets and telephone credit. These are very basic packs and may be limited to a certain number per person.

Prisoners can purchase further items on the weekly prison canteen sheets but may have to wait a week to do so. They may also be allowed to make a brief telephone call to his family at this time.

After the first night

Prisoners will be shown to their cells and issued with bedding and compulsory prison clothing if required. They may have to share a cell with another prisoner. However, the staff will endeavour to make sure this is someone they feel is suitable for the prisoner to share with.

Prisoners are allowed to smoke in their own cells, but they aren't allowed to smoke anywhere else inside the prison building. If the prisoner is a non-smoker and their cell mate smokes, they can speak to staff and may be moved to another cell.

It is the responsibility of the prisoner to keep the cell clean and tidy. Adequate cleaning materials will be provided, as will towels and bedding which will be washed on a weekly basis.

Induction

All prisons offer convicted prisoners to take part in an induction programme. This allows the prisoner to see what will happen within the prison on a day to day basis, what programmes or activities are available, visiting entitlements and the roles of certain staff within the prison (including the Family Contact Officers).

The induction process will vary from prison to prison however and, at the moment, does not extend to prisoners on remand. There are other differences between remand and convicted prisoners (relating to visits, canteen facilities etc.), and it is important to know what these might be.

Family induction is also offered by some prisons and gives family members an opportunity to understand what the prisoner's daily routine might be.

Further information is available from the Family Contact Officers (FCO) at each prison establishment, or telephone the Families Outside Support & Information Helpline **0800 254 0088**.

Passing time in the cell

Most prisons now provide in-cell TV's which have a variety of channels available. There is a small weekly charge for a TV, and this is deducted from the prisoner's canteen sheet. They should also have a kettle to allow them to make tea and coffee which they have purchased.

What items are allowed in prison?

Each prison has its own rules about what prisoners can keep in their cells. They may be able to keep things such as newspapers, books or writing and drawing materials. A convicted prisoner may also be allowed to have a CD player or games console equipment in their room, depending on what the prison allows.

Other items which may be kept by the prisoner include: all letters or legal documents; greeting cards and photos (glass photo frames are not allowed); books or magazines either from the prison library or delivered according to prison procedures.

Alarm clocks and watches may be permitted; however mobile phones, chargers or SIM cards are not permitted in any prison.

Any medication that staff or doctors have agreed to may also be kept in the cell.

Prison staff will often do cell checks to make sure people in prison do not have any non-permitted items.

Can conditions improve as the sentence progresses?

Prisoners should be able to work their way through their sentences, leading towards prison incentives, for example, perhaps aiming towards a better cell or even a single cell, a specific job within the prison or additional visits. However, progression will depend on a prisoner's sentence, behaviour and the prison's available facilities. Those who follow the rules can earn privileges if they behave well. Privileges are different in each prison; prison staff can explain to the prisoner how the scheme works.

This is a very quick guide to what to expect when starting a prison sentence. If you have any questions about any of the information on this factsheet, please contact Families Outside Support & Information Helpline on **0800 254 0088**.

We would like to give a special thanks to Laura T for her suggestion for this leaflet, informative insight and guidance.