

Prison - What happens while I am in prison?

Prison can be a difficult place for anyone. This factsheet looks at what happens in prison and how you can get help and support.



- There are lots of different departments and staff in a prison.
- They can help you with any problems.
- There are things that you can do to make the most of your time in prison, such as doing education.
- Family and friends can visit you. They may be able to get help with the costs, such as travel expenses.

This factsheet covers:

1. [Who can help me in prison?](#)
2. [What can I do in prison?](#)
3. [How do I get prison visits?](#)
4. [Information for families and friends of prisoners](#)

1. Who can help me in prison?

Prisons have different departments. These will include a:

- gatehouse and reception for when you arrive and leave,
- visitors' centre for people visiting you,
- houseblocks or wings as accommodation,
- education and training workshops,
- gym and exercise area,
- healthcare wing,
- Chaplaincy (for emotional and spiritual care and support. It doesn't matter if you are religious or not),

- unit for the Offender management team for managing your sentence plan,
- segregation unit for safety or discipline.

There is more information about these areas in more detail below.

You will come into contact with different staff to help you while in prison. They can give you information and advice while you are in prison and for your release. External organisations or charities may visit prisons to help with issues such as housing, money or finding a job.

Where will I stay?

Where you stay may be called wing or houseblock. In this factsheet it will be called a wing. There may be different wings for different prisoners. For example, new prisoners, prisoners on remand, sentenced prisoners and lifers may all stay in different areas.

Some prisons have a healthcare wing to people who are very unwell. It is a bit like a hospital ward.

Some prisons have wings for young offenders aged between 18-21 years old.

On each wing, there will be rooms or cells for you to sleep in. Sometimes there are shared rooms known as dormitories or you may need to share a cell with someone else. There will be food halls where you get your meals, showers and toilets, TV and pool tables, telephones and staff offices.

Can I get education and training?

Prisons should have different education and training courses. Some are work related courses, such as bricklaying and mechanics workshops. There will be an education department, where you can learn skills including English and Maths. You may be able to get a qualification such as NVQs and GCSEs or do an Open University course.

The prison will have a library. Libraries should have different books, magazines and newspapers. It should have information that could help when you are in prison or when planning for your release. You can take some reading materials back to your cell with you.

Will there be a gym?

There will be a gym with weights and exercise machines. There may be a gym hall or outside space for football and other games. You will be allowed to use the gym for a certain amount of time. If you are on enhanced or gold level of privilege, you may be allowed to use the gym facilities more.

Can I get healthcare?

You should get the same kind of healthcare as if you were getting in the community. This includes help from doctors, dentists, opticians and any other healthcare professionals. Some prisons have a healthcare wing, like a hospital. You might stay there if you are very unwell.

The prison in-reach team can help you with your mental health. It is similar to a Community Mental Health Team.

If your mental illness gets very bad, the prison can arrange to assess you under the Mental Health Act 1983. If you need hospital treatment they can transfer you to a general hospital outside the prison. You can find a letter template in the [Sample Letters](#) section of this factsheet. You can use this to ask the prison to share information about your mental health. You can also use it to ask them to transfer you to hospital. You will find a letter that your friends and family can use for these same reasons.

What is Chaplaincy?

Chaplaincy is a place where you can go to get religious or spiritual support. You don't have to have a religion to go. It supports everyone no matter what their religion is. There are regular services and you can ask to speak to the chaplain.

How can the Offender Management Unit help?

Offender Supervisors help you to manage your sentence. For example, an Offender Supervisor should manage your risk and help you to get certain targets. These might be doing an education course or working with mental health services.

The Offender Supervisor also has links with outside agencies and organisations to help you settle back into the community on release. Part of their job is to stop you re-offending. They can help you do this by looking at your needs while in prison and on release. For example, they can help you with housing, relationships with family, mental and physical health and money issues.

Your Offender Supervisor in the prison will speak to your Offender Manager in the community. They will supervise you in the community on release from prison.

What is Segregation Unit or 'Seg'?

A segregation unit is separate from the normal wings. Prison Governor will say you should go to segregation to help with safety and discipline. The segregation unit is made up of basic prison cells.

You may go to segregation for different reasons. For example, if you are at risk from other prisoners you may go to a vulnerable person's unit or segregation. Your behaviour may be too difficult for the prison to manage in the other wings. The prison may put you here if you have broken prison rules.

The Governor should only use segregation for a short period of time. The prison should not use it inappropriately. Going into segregation is called removal from association. You should not be removed for more than 3 days. If they keep you in segregation for more than 3 days they need to get permission from the Secretary of the State or the Independent Monitoring Board.¹ You should not be kept in there for more than a month without the segregation being reviewed.

What staff are in the prison?

Staff can give you information, help and advice. Most departments are run by prison officers or staff employed by the prison service. Outside charities or organisations may also visit the prison.

Prison Staff

A prison officer does many things. They manage the security of the prison and keep an eye on how you and the other prisoners are behaving. They make sure vulnerable prisoners are ok. Prison officers should be able to explain how the prison works. They will be the personal officer for some prisoners.

A personal officer can help you with any problems you may have in prison.² You should tell your personal officer any problems or worries you have. They can help sort these out.

Other prison staff will work in the kitchens, training and education departments and Chaplaincy.

External Organisations

Some prisons will have staff from external organisations to help you with things like housing, finding a job or money issues. These organisations may include local housing associations, Jobcentre Plus and the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).

Some organisations visit prisons to help with childcare issues such as Barnados. Some help women prisoners such as the charity Women in Prison. Other charities have befriending services where someone will come and visit you in prison such as the New Bridge Foundation.

If you have problems in prison (for example, with healthcare) an advocacy service may be able to help. An advocate can help to get your voice heard, POHWER is one organisation that offers this.

Other charities may visit or offer help with settling back into the community when you are released. These are known as ex-offender or resettlement charities. These include St Giles Trust, Nacro, Unlock and Clinks.

You can find contact details of useful organisations in the Useful Contacts at the end of this factsheet.

[Top](#)

2. What can I do whilst in prison?

All prisoners can go to education and training. Sentenced prisoners are often expected to do work. You could help in the kitchen by cooking, cleaning areas of the prison, recycling and laundry. You can learn new skills by doing work. This could be very helpful when you are released.

There are programmes to help you with your offending behaviour and why you are in prison. Some of these are explained below.

Offender Behaviour Programmes (OBPs)

These help you to look at why you have offended and they try to reduce the risk of re-offending. There are different programmes depending on your needs and why you are in prison.

For example, Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) looks at the thinking and behaviour linked with offending and covers things like problem solving. There are other programmes that address managing anger (Controlling Anger and Learning to Manage it – CALM) and a specific programme for sex offenders (Sex Offender Treatment Programme – SOTP).

You might have to complete an offender behaviour programme for your sentence plan. If you do not complete the programme, this may affect your release date. Prison staff and probation may not feel you are ready for being released back into the community yet.

Drug and Alcohol Programmes

These look at drug and alcohol problems. You may hear this called 'substance misuse'.

Your sentence plan might include doing this programme if you have drug or alcohol issues.

External organisations run some substance misuse programmes in prisons, such as the Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust (RAPt)³. RAPt also deliver some community-based programmes.

You can find more information on www.rethink.org about:

- Drugs, Alcohol and Mental Health
- Healthcare in Prison

Call 0121 522 7007 or write to us at the address at the end of this factsheet and ask us to send you a copy. You can ask staff, friend or relative to get this information for you too.

ROTL – Release on Temporary Licence

ROTL lets some prisoners leave the prison for things such as work, training, job interviews or home leave. Quite a few prisons now do this, to help you settle back in the community.

The prison need to do detailed risk assessments before you are allowed to leave. You will need to be on the highest level of privileges to show they can trust you. In some cases a member of prison staff may escort you.

You will be on a temporary licence when you are in the community. You will need to meet conditions such as not meeting up with certain people and not going to certain areas.

You may not be allowed to do certain activities on ROTL if it could be related to your offence. For example, if you are serving a sentence for a driving offence, you will not be allowed to do any work involving driving.

ROTL can help you if you are due for release soon. You can meet local organisations and employers in the local area, and see family.

[Top](#)

3. How do I get prison visits?

What are the visiting times in prison?

Visiting times will vary in each prison. You can ask prison staff about visiting times.

How often can I get visits?

This depends on whether you have been convicted (found guilty and sentenced) or whether you are on remand

If you are on remand, you can have more visits than a convicted prisoner. You can get three 60-minute visits a week.

If you are a convicted prisoner, you are allowed at least two 60-minute visits every four weeks. Some prisons allow more visits as a reward for good behaviour.⁴

If you are far away from home, people can save up their visits to visit you less often but have more time at each visit. This is known as accumulated visits. You could speak to the prison to see how this could work.

How do I arrange a visit?

If you are convicted or sentenced, you will need to send visitors a visiting order. This includes the names and details of the visitors including children under 18.

If you are on remand, you do not need to send a visiting order. Your visitor can call the prison and book a visit.

It is a good idea for people to book visits in advance, as visits can get booked up quickly. They can book their future visits when they come to see you.

Can my visitor bring children with them?

Children can visit. You should ask staff how many children could come. Most prisons will have toys and possibly a crèche for younger children.

What to expect

Staff will understand that prison visits can be very difficult. Prison staff, the local council or a charity such as PACT (Prison Advice and Care Trust)

run visitors' centres. The staff can give information and advice to family and friends, such as prison life and family issues.

You may want to check with the prison what you and your visitors can and cannot do. For example, some prisons do not allow anything to be passed between you and visitors or don't allow you to touch each other.

[Top](#)

4. Information for families and friends of prisoners

It can be difficult if you have a friend or relative in prison. It will affect people differently. Some people may be angry, upset or feel ashamed and worried.

If you are worried about your friend or relative's mental health while they are in prison, you could use our sample letter below to write to the prison.

You can get information about organisations that can support you from our '**Prison**' guide for friends and family. You can download a copy for free from www.rethink.org/ciguides. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.



FURTHER
READING

You can find more information on www.rethink.org about:

- **Complaints about Prison**
- **Healthcare in Prison**
- **Prison – Planning for release**
- **Prison – Helping someone who is in prison**

[Top](#)



USEFUL
CONTACTS

POhWER

POhWER deliver advocacy in some prisons. If you have an NHS complaint, they might be able to help.

Telephone: 0300 456 4214

Address: PO Box 14043, Birmingham, B6 9BL

Email: pohwer@pohwer.net

Website: www.pohwer.net

Prison Reform Trust

Prison Reform Trust is a charity that has information and advice for prisoners.

Telephone (information and advice): 0808 802 0060 (Monday 3:30pm - 7:30pm, Tuesday and Thursday 3.30pm - 5.30pm) (you can get information and advice on other days during office hours by calling the office number but it won't be free)

Telephone: 020 7251 5070
Address: 15 Northburgh Street, London, EC1V 0JR
Email: adviceandinformation@prisonreformtrust.org.uk
Website: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

SEAP

SEAP deliver advocacy in some prisons.

Telephone: 0330 440 9000
Address: Upper Ground Floor, Aquila House, Breeds Place, Hastings, East Sussex, TN34 3UY
Email: info@seap.org.uk
Website: www.seap.org.uk

St Giles Trust

They provide a range of support, such as mentoring, help with benefits, housing, finding a job, keeping ties with family, accessing services and support in appointments. Mostly London based.

Telephone: 020 7708 8000
Address: 64-68 Camberwell Church Street, London, SE5 8JB
Email: info@stgilestrust.org.uk
Website: www.stgilestrust.org.uk

Unlock

Unlock is a charity led by reformed offenders. They provide information on many topics including how benefits and housing are affected by being in prison, banking, insurance and employment.

Telephone: 01634 247350 (Monday to Friday 10am – 4pm)
Address: Helpline, Unlock, Maidstone Community Support Centre, 39-48 Marsham Street, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 1HH
Email: advice@unlock.org.uk
Website: www.unlock.org.uk

New Bridge Foundation

New Bridge works with individual offenders responding to their own needs, talents and potential. They organise befriending for people serving sentences.

Telephone: 020 8671 3856
Address: New Bridge Foundation, 1a Elm Park, London, SW2 2TX
Emails: info@newbridgefoundation.org.uk
Website: www.newbridgefoundation.org.uk/



Sample letter if you want to give information to the prison and/or ask for a transfer to hospital

Name of Governor or Healthcare Manager

Date

Dear ***(Name of Governor / Healthcare Manager)***,

Re: Your Name (date of birth)
Prison Number (if you know it)

I am writing to give the prison more information about my mental health.

To give you more information about my circumstances:

[Give details of your mental health, what has been happening recently that worries you about your mental health, and any other relevant background information. List as much of the worrying behaviour as possible, but try not to make the letter too long. You might want to consider the following questions:

- *Have you got a mental health diagnosis? If not, what has been happening recently to make you concerned about your mental health?*
- *Has your mental health got worse since being in prison?*
- *Have you seen anyone from healthcare since being in prison? Would you like to see someone?*
- *Have you been taking any medication or getting therapy? Tell the prison if your treatment has stopped since being in prison.*
- *Before prison, did you see anyone about your mental health such as a GP or Community Mental Health Team? Give the prison any details.*
- *Is there anything else that the prison need to know? For example, do you take drugs or drink alcohol? Would you like to see someone about this?*

(If you feel that you are so unwell that you should be in hospital)

I feel that the prison is doing all they can for my mental health, but it can no longer manage my condition in the prison. I would like to be assessed for a transfer to hospital under **[keep the one relevant to you]** section 47 of the Mental Health Act 1983 *(if you are sentenced)*/section 48 of the Mental Health Act 1983 *(if you are on remand and have an ongoing court case)*.

The Government wants to make sure that the criminal justice system takes people's mental health into account. I feel the prison needs to understand my background, and would like you to take this into account while you are caring for me.

Yours faithfully,

Signature
Your name

Sample Letter for Friends/Relatives to Provide Information to the Prison and Ask for a Transfer to Hospital

Your name
Your address
Your telephone number (optional)
Your email address (optional)

Name of Governor or Healthcare Manager

Prison address [you can find this at www.justice.gov.uk]

Date

Dear **(Name of Governor or Healthcare Manager)**

Re: Person's Name (date of birth)

Prison number (if known)

I am writing as **[name of your friend/relative] [state relationship]**. I am worried about **[name of your friend/relative]** mental health. I would like to give you more information about them while they are under your care.

[Give details of your friend/relative's behaviour which is causing alarm and any relevant background information. List as much of the worrying behaviour as possible, but try not to make the letter too long. You might want to consider the following questions:

- *Has your friend/relative got a mental health diagnosis? If not, what has been happening recently to make you concerned?*
- *Has their mental health got worse since going into prison? For example, have they said anything on the phone or in letters that has worried you? Have you noticed a change in their behaviour or appearance when visiting them?*
- *Do they receive any treatment, such as medication and/or therapy?*
- *Have they ever accessed mental health services or are they accessing them now? You could give the prison details of any services if you know these. This could include details of their GP or Community Mental Health Team.*
- *Does the person understand their illness or do they think they are well (do they lack insight)?*
- *Are there any other circumstances you think the prison should know about? For example, drug or alcohol use?*

(If you feel that your friend/relative's mental health is so severe that you think they should be in hospital)

I feel that the prison are doing all they can for **[name of your friend/relative]**, but the prison can no longer effectively manage their condition. Because of this, I would like you to arrange an assessment to see if **[name of your friend/relative]** should be transferred to an appropriate hospital bed under section 47 of the Mental Health Act 1983 **(if your friend/relative is sentenced)**/section 48 of the Mental

Health Act 1983 (***if your friend/relative is on remand and has an ongoing court case***).

I understand that one of the Government's priorities is to make sure that the criminal justice system takes into account people's mental health conditions. I feel that the prison needs to know about ***[name of friend/relative's]*** background, and would like you to take this into account while you are caring for them.

Yours faithfully,

Signature
Your name



¹ Prison Rules 1999 45(2).

² UK House of Commons. Justice Committee publications: *The Creation of the National Offender Management Service – The role of the prison officer*.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmjust/361/36107.htm> (accessed 5th October 2015).

³ RAPt. *Our Services*. <http://www.rapt.org.uk/content/our-services> (accessed 5th October 2015).

⁴ Directgov. *Staying in touch with someone in prison*. http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/CrimeJusticeAndTheLaw/Sentencingprisonandprobation/Familyandfriendsofprisoners/DG_4002984 (accessed 5th October 2015).

© Rethink Mental Illness 2013

Last updated October 2015

Next update October 2017

Version 2

This factsheet is available
in large print.

Rethink Mental Illness

Phone 0300 5000 927

Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm

Email advice@rethink.org

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

Feedback
PO Box 68795
London SE1 4PN

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday.



Leading the way to a better
quality of life for everyone
affected by severe mental illness.

For further information
on Rethink Mental Illness
Phone 0300 5000 927
Email info@rethink.org

www.rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to www.rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights. Or talk to others about your problem at www.rethink.org/talk.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0300 5000 927. We are open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us between 10am and 2pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

Can you help us to keep going?

We can only help people because of donations from people like you. If you can donate please go to www.rethink.org/donate or call **0300 5000 927** to make a gift. We are very grateful for all our donors' generous support.



Rethink Mental Illness is a partner in:

