

Prisons – How are they run and what can I do there?

This factsheet looks at how prisons are run and some things you can do there. It also looks at how you can get help and support and visitors to prison. This information is for people in prison in England who are 18 or over and for their carers, relatives and friends too.

Key Points.

- There are lots of different departments and staff in a prison.
- Staff can support you and help you with problems you might have in prison.
- There are things that you can do to make the most of your time in prison, such as 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. [How are prisons run and what staff work there?](#)
2. [What are some of the things I can do in prison?](#)
3. [How do I get prison visits?](#)
4. [Where can families and friends of prisoners get information?](#)

1. How are prisons run and what staff work there?

What different departments are there in prison?

The different departments in prison usually include the following.

- A gatehouse and reception, for when you arrive and leave.
- A visitors' centre, for people visiting you.
- Houseblocks or wings for accommodation.
- Education and training workshops.
- A gym and exercise area.
- A healthcare wing.
- A chaplaincy for emotional and spiritual care and support, whether you're religious or not.

- A unit for the Offender Management Team, who manage your sentence plan.
- A segregation unit for safety or discipline.

There is more information about these areas below.

You will meet different staff to help you. They can give you information and advice on your stay 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 a houseblock. Houseblocks are usually divided into different wings. There may be different houseblocks for different prisoners. For example, new prisoners, prisoners on remand, sentenced prisoners and lifers may all stay in different areas.

On each wing, there will be rooms or cells for you to sleep in. You might have a room to yourself or have to share with someone else. There will be showers and toilets, TV and pool tables, telephones, staff offices and food halls where you get your meals.

How can Offender Supervisors and Offender Managers help? ^{1,2}

Offender Supervisors and Offender Managers help you to manage your sentence by creating a plan. The plan can include things like:

- managing any risk you might pose, such as reoffending, and
- setting targets, such as doing a course of education.

Offender Supervisors work in the prison. Offender Managers usually work in the community, but they also sometimes work with people in custody.

The Offender Supervisors have 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 will speak to your Offender Manager in the community. They will supervise you in the community after you're release from prison.

What is a segregation unit or 'seg'? ²

A segregation unit is separate from the normal wings. In segregation, you don't have contact with other prisoners. You may go to segregation to help

with safety and discipline. Like if you've broken prison rules or your behaviour is too difficult to manage on a normal wing.

You should only be in segregation for a short period of time. If the prisoner Governor wants you to be there for more than 42 days, they need permission from the Ministry of Justice.

What are vulnerable prisoners' unit?

A vulnerable prisoners' unit is separate from the normal wings. If you are at risk from other prisoners, you may go to a vulnerable prisoners' unit.³

What is the chaplaincy?

Prison chaplaincies usually have a multi-faith team that care for the spiritual and emotional well-being of prisoners. They sometimes help with prisoner rehabilitation.⁴

The Chaplaincy will support you if you're not religious.⁵

Can I get healthcare?

You should get the same kind of healthcare that you can get in the community.⁶ This includes help from doctors, dentists, opticians, and any other necessary healthcare professionals.

Some prisons have a healthcare wing, like a hospital. You might stay there if you are very unwell. If there isn't a healthcare wing you might be transferred to hospital.

Prison GPs can help you if you have mental health issues. The prison in-reach team can support you if you are experiencing more severe mental illness. They are like an NHS community mental health team.⁷

If your mental illness is severe and you need hospital treatment, you can be transferred to hospital under the Mental Health Act.⁸ the prison can arrange to assess you under the Mental Health Act 1983.

If you think your mental illness is severe and you need hospital treatment, you can tell hospital staff. You can use the suggested wording in the [Sample letters](#) section of this factsheet if you want to ask in writing.

The sample letters can also be used:

- To give information to prison staff about your mental health, and
- By friends and family for these purposes.

You can find out more information about '**Healthcare in prison**' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

What are incentives and earned privileges?

Every prison should have a system of incentives and earned privileges. There are 4 levels to the scheme:⁹

- basic,
- entry,
- standard, and
- enhanced.

You will start on the entry level when you first go into prison. You can move up levels if you:¹⁰

- commit to your rehabilitation,
- behave well, and
- help others.

But you can move down levels too if you don't do these things.

If you have the standard or enhanced level, you might:¹¹

- be allowed more visits,
- be able to earn higher rates of pay,
- get a television in your cell,
- be able to wear your own clothes,
- have your own money, and
- get time out of your cell for socialising.

What different kinds of staff are there in prison?

Staff can give you information, help and advice.

Most departments are run by staff employed by the prison service. Staff from outside charities or organisations may also work in the prison.

Prison staff

Most staff members are prison officers. 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 can explain how the prison works.

You may get a personal officer. This is a prison officer who can help you with any problems you may have in prison.¹² They can also be known as case supervisor, case worker, mentor, or offender supervisor.¹³ You should tell your personal officer any problems or worries you have. They can help sort these out.¹⁴

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

Staff from outside organisations

Some prisons will have staff from outside 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 Service.

Some organisations, such as Barnardo's, visit prisons to help with childcare issues.¹⁵ Some help women prisoners, such as the charity Women in Prison.¹⁶ Other charities have befriending services where someone will come and visit you in prison, such as the New Bridge Foundation.¹⁷ You can find details for these organisations in the [Useful contacts](#) section of this factsheet.

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 Nacro and Unlock. You can find contact details of useful organisations in the [Useful contacts](#) at the end of this factsheet.

If you have problems in prison an advocacy service may be able to help. For example, you might have problems with healthcare. An advocate can help to get your voice heard.

You can find out more information about '**Advocacy**' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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2. What are some of the things I can do in prison?

You can use the education and training facilities available.¹⁸

If you're a sentenced prisoner, you're usually expected to do work, such as cooking, cleaning, or helping with laundry.¹⁹ You can learn new skills through work that can be helpful when you're released.

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

Can I get education and training?

Prisons should have different education and training courses.²⁰ Some are work related courses, such as bricklaying or mechanics workshops.

There will be an education department, where you can learn skills including English and Maths. You may be able to get a vocational qualification and GCSEs or do an Open University course.

The prison will have a library.²¹ Libraries should have different books, magazines and newspapers. It should have information that could help when you're 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 usually be a gym with weights and exercise machines. There may be a gym hall or outside space for football and other games.

You should be allowed to use the gym for a certain amount of time. If you are on standard or enhanced level of privilege, you may be allowed to use the gym facilities more.²²

What is the offender behaviour programmes (OBPs)?

These programmes 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.²³

You might have to complete an offender behaviour programme for your sentence plan.²⁴ If you don't complete the programme, it may affect whether you get parole.²⁵ Parole means leaving prison before the end of your sentence.

What are drug and alcohol programmes?

These programmes help you to better deal with drug and alcohol problems.

Your sentence plan might include doing one of these programmes.

Outside organisations run some of these programmes in prisons.

You can find out more information about '**Drugs, alcohol and mental health**' at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries Team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

What is release on temporary licence (ROTL)?

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.²⁶

The prison needs to do detailed risk assessments before you can leave.²⁷ A member of prison staff may go with you when you leave the prison.²⁸

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.²⁹

ROTL can help you if you are due for release soon. You might be able to meet local organisations and employers and see family.

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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 them.

How often can I get visits?

This depends on whether you have been convicted or whether you are on remand. ‘Convicted’ means being found guilty and sentenced. ‘Remand’ means you are awaiting your trial or sentencing hearing.

If you are on remand, 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 4 weeks.³⁰

Some prisons allow more visits as a reward for good behaviour.³¹

If you are far away from home, people can save up their visits. They can visit you less often but have more time at each visit. This is known as accumulated visits.³² You can speak to the prison to see how this works.

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 18.³³

If you are on remand, you don’t need to send a visiting order. Your visitor can call the prison and book a visit.³⁴

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 can come. Prisons usually have toys and sometimes a crèche for younger children.^{35,36}

You may want to check with the prison what you and your visitors can and can’t do. For example, some prisons don’t allow anything to be passed between you and visitors.³⁷

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4. Where can families and friends of prisoners get information?

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

The Prisoners’ Families Helpline provides advice and information to families of prisoners. You can find their details in the [Useful contacts](#) section below.

If you are worried about your friend or relative’s mental health, you can use our sample letter below to write to the prison.

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

- Complaints about prison
- Healthcare in prison
- Prison – Going in
- Prison – Planning for release
- Prisoners – Self-harm
- Prisoners – Suicidal thoughts

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Prison Advice Service

PAS offers free legal advice and information to prisoners throughout England and Wales regarding their rights, conditions of imprisonment and the application of the Prison Rules.

Phone (Advice line): 020 7253 3323

Address: Prisoners' Advice Service PO Box 46199 London EC1M 4XA

Email: advice@prisonersadvice.org.uk

Website: www.prisonersadvice.org.uk

Prison Reform Trust

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

Telephone (information and advice): 0808 802 0060

Address: FREEPOST ND 6125, London, EC1B 1PN

Email: advice@prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Website: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Unlock

Unlock is a national independent advocacy charity. It supports, speaks up and campaigns for people facing stigma, prejudice and discrimination because of their criminal record.

Helpline: 01634 247350

Address: The Helpline, Unlock Maidstone Community Support Centre, 39-48 Marsham Street, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 1HH

Text or WhatsApp: 07824 113848

Email contact form: <https://unlock.org.uk/the-helpline/#flex-mod-5>

Website: www.unlock.org.uk

New Bridge Foundation

They provide befriending services by letter and face-to-face visits for prisoners.

Telephone: 020 8671 3856

Address: 1a Elm Park, London, SW2 2TX

Emails: info@newbridgefoundation.org.uk

Website: www.newbridgefoundation.org.uk/

Prisoners Families Helpline

Provide advice and information to people who have a family member involved in the criminal justice system.

Telephone: 0808 808 2003

Email: info@prisonersfamilies.org

Website: www.prisonersfamilies.org

Women in Prison

A national charity that supports women affected by the criminal justice system. It campaigns to end the harm caused to women, their families and our communities by imprisonment. Their website includes useful information and details of support services.

Phone: 020 7359 667

Address: Women in Prison, 2nd Floor, Elmfield House, 5 Stockwell Mews, SW9 9GX

Email: info@wipuk.org

Website: <https://womeninprison.org.uk>

Barnardos's

One of the few organisations to help children with a parent in prison. They run training services for professionals as well as services in the community and in prisons to help maintain contact and support family relationships.

Post: Freepost BARNARDO'S SUPPORTER RELATIONS.

Phone: 0800 008 7005

Email: supporterrelations@barnardos.org.uk

Webpage on support of children of prisoners:

www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-families/children-with-a-parent-in-prison

Nacro

This is a charity run by ex-offenders that also has a mental health department. Nacro provides a range of services across England and Wales. For example, resettlement services, youth projects, education, and employment. You can look for local services on their website. They also produce information resources and have a resettlement advice helpline.

Resettlement advice: 0300 123 1999

Address: Walkden House, 16-17 Devonshire Square, London, EC2M 4SQ

Email: helpline@nacro.org.uk

Website: www.nacro.org.uk/

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

[Name of Governor or Healthcare Manager]

Date:

Dear [Name of Governor/ Healthcare Manager],

Re: My mental health

My date of birth:

My prison number:

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

[Give details about your mental health issue. Include what has been happening recently that worries you and any other relevant background information. List as much information 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 are your symptoms and behaviours that are concerning you?*
- *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 staff at an NHS community mental health team? Give details.*
- *Is there anything else that the prison needs 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 add the following.....]

I feel that I am so unwell that I need treatment for my mental health issues in hospital.

I would like to be assessed for a transfer to hospital under the Mental Health Act 1983.

Please take the above into account in relation to care and support for my mental health.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

[Your name]

Sample letter for friends or 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.gov.uk/government/collections/prisons-in-england-and-wales)]

Date:

Dear [Name of Governor or Healthcare Manager],

Re: [Prisoner's name] Date of birth:

Prison number: [if known]

I know the prisoner well because I am their [say your relationship with prisoner. E.g. sister, friend].

I am writing to give you more information about the prisoner's mental health as I'm worried about them.

[Give details about the prisoner's mental health issues. Include what has been happening recently that worries you and any other relevant background information. List as much information as possible but try not to make the letter too long. You might want to consider the following questions:]

- *Have they got a mental health diagnosis? If not, what are their symptoms and behaviours that are concerning you?*
- *Has their mental health got worse since being in prison?*
- *Have they seen anyone from healthcare since being in prison? Would they like to see someone?*
- *Have they been taking any medication or getting therapy? Tell the prison if their treatment has stopped since being in prison.*
- *Before prison, did they see anyone about their mental health, such as a GP or staff at an NHS community mental health team? Give details.*
- *Is there anything else that the prison needs to know? For example, do they take drugs or drink alcohol? Would they like to see someone about this?]*

[If you feel that they're so unwell that they should be in hospital add the following.....]

I feel that the prisoner is so unwell that they need treatment for their mental health issues in hospital.

I would like you to assess them for a transfer to hospital under the Mental Health Act 1983.

Please take the above into account in relation to care and support for the prisoner's mental health.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]
[Your name]

References

¹ National Offender Management Service. *Prison Service Instruction 19/2104 - Sentence Planning*. www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/offenders/psipso/psi-2014/psi-19-2014-ai-14-2014-pi-13-2014-sentence-planning.pdf (accessed 30th November 2021) para 1.9

² Prison Rules 1999 45

³ Prison Reform Trust. *Accommodation and Living Conditions in Prison*. www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/ForPrisonersFamilies/PrisonerInformationPages/Accommodationandlivingconditionsinprison (accessed 30th November 2021).

⁴ The Prison Fellowship. *Chaplaincy support*. <https://prisonfellowship.org.uk/our-work/chaplaincy-support/> (accessed 10 February, 2022)

⁵ Ministry of Justice. *Faith and Pastoral Care for Prisoners*, PSI 05/2016. London: Ministry of Justice; 2016. Para 12.4.

⁶ Gov.co.uk, *Prison life*. www.gov.uk/life-in-prison/healthcare-in-prison (accessed 30th November 2021)

⁷ British Medical Journal. *Dealing with mental disorders in prisoners*. <https://www.bmjjournals.org/doi/10.1136/bmjjournals-2016-101282> See p27 under heading 'Treatment of mental disorders in prison' (accessed 30th November 2021)

⁸ S47-48 Mental Health Act 1983.

⁹ Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 30/2013 para 1.10.

¹⁰ Prison Service Instruction 30/2013 para 4.1.

¹¹ Prison Service Instruction 30/2013 para 9.5.

¹² Prison Reform Trust. *Early days in prison – Men's prisons*. <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/ForPrisonersFamilies/PrisonerInformationPages/Arrivalandfirstdaysinprison/Earlydaysinprisonmensprisons> (accessed 10 February, 2022)

¹³ UK House of Commons. Justice Committee publications: *The Creation of the National Offender Management Service – The role of the prison officer*. www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmjust/361/36107.htm (accessed 30th November 2021).

¹⁴ Prison Reform Trust. *Early days in prison – Men's prisons*. <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/ForPrisonersFamilies/PrisonerInformationPages/Arrivalandfirstdaysinprison/Earlydaysinprisonmensprisons> (accessed 10 February, 2022)

¹⁵ Barnardo's. *Children with a parent in prison*. www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-families/children-with-a-parent-in-prison (accessed 30th November 2021)

¹⁶ Women in Prison. *About us*. www.womeninprison.org.uk/about/what-we-do.php (accessed 2nd December 2021)

¹⁷ The New Bridge Foundation. *We bring light into the darkest places*. www.newbridgefoundation.org.uk/ (accessed 2nd December 2021)

¹⁸ Rule 32. Prison Rules 1999

¹⁹ Rule 31(1). Prison Rules 1999

²⁰ Rule 32(2) The Prison Rules 1999

²¹ Rule 33 The Prison Rules 1999

²² Prison Service Instruction 30/2013 para 9.18.

²³ Gov.uk. *Offending behaviour programmes and interventions - Offending behaviour programmes and interventions* www.gov.uk/guidance/offending-behaviour-programmes-and-interventions#offending-behaviour-programmes-and-interventions (accessed 15 February 2022)

²⁴ Prison Service Instruction 19/2014 para 2.8

²⁵ Prison Service Instruction 19/2014 para 2.11

²⁶ Prison Service Instruction 13/ 2015 Para 1.1

²⁷ Prison Service Instruction 13/2015 para 3

²⁸ Prison Service Instruction 13/2015 para 6.26

²⁹ Prison Service Instruction 13/2015 para 6.81

³⁰ Gov.uk. *Staying in touch with someone in prison*. www.gov.uk/staying-in-touch-with-someone-in-prison/visiting-someone-in-prison (accessed 2nd December 2021)

³¹ Prison Service Instruction 30/2013 para 9.5.

³² Prison Service Instruction 16/2011 paras 5.6 – 5.12

³³ Prison Service Instruction 16/2011 Annex G page 5

³⁴ Prison Service Instruction 16/2011 Annex G page 5

³⁵ Prison Service Instruction 16/2011 para 3.19

³⁶ Prison Service Instruction 16/2011 para 3.10

³⁷ Prison Service Instruction 15/2011 para 4.25

This factsheet is available in large print.

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0808 801 0525

Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm - excluding bank holidays

Webchat service available

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you or if you found any issues with it

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

Write to us for advice at:

Rethink Advice & Information Service,
28 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7GR

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0808 801 0525 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday, excluding bank holidays. Find out more about the service here: www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/about-our-advice-service/contacting-the-advice-service



Equality, rights, fair treatment, and the maximum quality of life for all those severely affected by mental illness.

For further information on Rethink Mental Illness Phone 0121 522 7007
Email info@rethink.org



rethink.org



Patient Information Forum

Need more help?

Go to www.rethink.org for information on Mental health conditions and symptoms, treatment and support, physical health and wellbeing, BAME mental health, LGBT+ mental health, mental health laws and rights, work, studying, and mental health, police, courts, and prison, and advice for carers.

Do not have access to the web?

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Do you have accessibility tools for this information?

You can find this information on our website at www.rethink.org. There is an accessibility function on this webpage called **Recite**. On the desktop site, click on the icon in the top right-hand corner next to 'Donate.' On the mobile site, scroll right and click on the 'Turn on accessibility' icon.

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