

# **The Partners' Guide to Prison**

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## **Introduction**

This guide is a collaborative effort by the partners of some of those convicted in June 2011 at Blackfriars Crown Court, London. Some of it is specific to certain courts and prisons but it should still give you an idea of what to expect. Hopefully you will never need it! But it's best to be prepared so read it now. It can't tell you everything, but our lives would have been a lot easier if we'd had a guide like this. Luckily there was a group of us and by sticking together and exchanging knowledge we managed to get through the tough initial stages. The thing about prisons, and the criminal justice system in general, is that they don't tell you ANYTHING and if they do it often turns out to be wrong. You will need to take the initiative and do some research if you want to get information. And don't always rely on what you hear from other people!

Being the partner of a prisoner is not easy. It can be emotionally and physically draining and dealing with the practicalities can seem daunting. We hope this guide helps you if the worst happens. Please remember that although you may feel isolated and powerless, you are not alone and there is always somewhere to go for help.

## **Preparation**

Or: 'things you'll wish they'd sorted out before'!

Of course nobody likes to think about the possibility of going to prison, but it doesn't help anyone if basic practical issues are not addressed beforehand. Sorting it out now will save A LOT of trouble later on. Much of this may seem obvious but your partner may well be in a kind of denial about the situation and unwilling to discuss things (not surprisingly)! Try to get them to think about the following if they have not already done so, and leave instructions for you:

- Home; how will the rent be paid (if applicable)? What about bills? Does someone need to keep an eye on the place? Where are the keys? What to do if it turns out they are unable to keep their home?
- Work (again, if applicable!); what should their employer be told? If they are on benefits a decision may need to be made on what to do about this (see page 9).
- Financial stuff e.g. bank account; do any standing orders, direct debits etc need to be cancelled? What about cash cards, credit cards, or loan repayments? Do they want to give you (or someone else e.g. a family member) access to their account so you can manage their affairs while they're away? If so you obviously need all their passwords, ID etc, and you may want to consider getting power of attorney or a 'third party mandate' – ask the bank about this.
- Make a list of people who will need to be contacted, with their phone numbers, addresses etc.

If possible, delegate! It may be difficult for you to deal with all these things at once. Can they assign different responsibilities to various family members, friends etc?

## **What to do immediately after sentencing**

At this point it can be difficult to know what to do, especially if you have never been in this situation before. Things can all happen very fast and you may feel shocked, confused and panicky. It helps to have people with you! Your first questions will probably be whether you can see your partner before they are taken to prison, which prison they are being sent to, how soon you can visit and whether they are OK.

First of all grab their solicitor. S/he may possibly be able to arrange a brief visit to the cells in the court so that you can see your partner before they are taken to prison to start the sentence – but this is very rare and most courts do not allow any 'social' visits at all. In most cases only their legal representatives will be allowed to visit the cells. Maybe you will have time to write a short note which the solicitor may be able to give to them. Ask the solicitor what is happening to any property that they have not been allowed to take with them.

The solicitor might also be able to find out which prison your partner is going to. If not, you can wait around or phone the court after 4.30pm or whenever court business has finished for the day and ask to speak to the cells; they might be able to tell you, but in reality it is often like beating your head against a brick wall trying to get any information. Every prisoner is supposed to be allowed one free phone call (lasting about a minute) within the first 24 hours after their arrival in prison, but in practice there is such high demand for the use of prison phones that they might not manage to get to the phone before they are locked up for the night, so you may not hear from them until the next day. They should also be allowed to send at least one letter (on prison issue paper) for free, so if all else fails you may find out this way. Remember, prisoners can never receive incoming calls.

**Every prisoner is legally entitled to a 'reception visit' in the first 72 hours (3 days)**, so once you have found out where they are you will probably want to take advantage of this. Like most things where the prison system is concerned, it is not as easy as it sounds! You may need to get there really early in the morning, i.e. by 8.30/ 9am (even if visiting times are in the afternoon!), and you may have to wait all day to get in due to the queuing procedure (see *Visiting*, page 5). Even then, you may not get in on the first day and may have to come back the next day. You may want to phone the prison's visitors' centre beforehand and ask them for advice, but the important thing is to get there. If you don't get in within the 72 hours, kick up a stink! The reception visit is a legal right!

Remember **YOU WILL NEED TO TAKE THE CORRECT I.D. WITH YOU!** They are really strict about this. At Wormwood Scrubs, for example, you need to have a passport (in date) or a driving licence (with your current address on it) and two forms of proof of address (valid in the last three months) e.g. bank statement or utility bill. Check with the visitors' centre if in doubt. You may also want to ask whether you can take clothes or other items in for your partner, but

this may not be allowed at this stage. It is more likely to be allowed if they are on remand.

For contact details of all UK prisons look at <http://www.insidetime.org/info-visitors.asp>

If you are very worried about how your partner might be feeling, to the extent that they may be so distressed they might hurt themselves, you can telephone the prison, explain that you think there is a risk of self harm or suicide and ask to speak to the Duty Governor. If you do not feel confident enough to do this, call the Prisoners' Families Helpline free on 0808 808 2003. Helpline staff will try to get through to the Duty Governor for you and call you back.

All prisons should have a multi-faith chaplaincy and chaplains can arrange to visit a prisoner. You can contact the prison chaplain by ringing the prison number and asking for the chaplain.

## **What happens when someone arrives in prison?**

There are a few procedures that take place when a prisoner first arrives in prison:

### **Property**

Any belongings the prisoner has brought with them are listed by an officer and put into safe-keeping. They might be allowed to keep some of the items with them while in prison; anything they are not allowed to keep will be returned to them when they are released.

### **Prison number**

The prisoner will be allocated a prison number which will be used on all correspondence from, to and about them while they are inside. You need to know this number as soon as possible so that you can communicate with them.

### **Health check**

Once they have had a shower they will be seen by a member of the prison's healthcare team. Every prisoner is assessed so that they can be given any particular medical care they may need while they serve their sentence. All the information is treated as confidential.

### **Reception and induction**

They will then go to the reception or induction wing and have an interview with a member of the probation staff, or a 'personal officer' (a prison officer who has been allocated to individual prisoners). This is supposed to be an opportunity to discuss any

worries and ask for advice and support. In some cases, other prisoners are also there to act as peer supporters.

Some prisons have special 'First Night' centres for newly arrived prisoners and your partner may be located there. Otherwise they are likely to be put on a wing with other recently- arrived prisoners. Most prisons have an induction programme lasting for the first few days, which is supposed to explain how the prison works, what prisoners' responsibilities are, and what might be available in the way of work, education and training. Non-uniformed staff, such as people working for voluntary sector organisations or the prison chaplaincy, may also be available on the induction wing to offer support.

If you want to know more about what prison life might be like you can read the documents written by AB and SC, available online here: <http://www.brightonabc.org.uk/prisonexp.html>

## Visiting

For all visits after the reception visit (see page 3), you have to wait for your partner to send you a VO (visiting order). A new prisoner will normally get two VOs a month plus a PVO which is an extra one they can apply for. Up to three people can go on each visit; in order to invite them the prisoner will need their full names, addresses and dates of birth. When you receive your VO in the post you ring up the booking line (shown on the VO) and book the visit. The booking lines get really busy and it can be really frustrating trying to get through; be patient.

Just over half the prisons in England and Wales have a visitors' centre, which offers information and support to families and friends of prisoners. Many are completely independent from the prison and you can talk to them in confidence about any worries or concerns that you may have. They should also be able to provide you with written information about visiting the prison and any special facilities that might be available, e.g. for children.

There is much more information on visiting in the Outsiders booklet 'Keeping in Touch' which should be available from prison visitors' centres or the Prisoners' Families Helpline (Freephone 0808 808 2003). You can also download useful information at the Prisoners' Families Helpline website [www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk](http://www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk)

## **What happens on a visit**

[NB some of the details below apply only to Wormwood Scrubs, but there will probably be similar procedures at other prisons.]

There is a limited number of visitors allowed each day. On a reception visit, you will have to wait until all those with booked visits have gone in, and then see whether there is any space left - so be aware you may not get in the first time. When you arrive you need to fill in a form and keep watching the order of other reception visits to make sure you don't miss your turn. Talk to other people in the visitors' centre and learn from them. Most people are friendly and remember you are all going through the same thing! The staff are usually quite helpful and will understand your worry and frustration (but remember they are probably volunteers who are nothing to do with the prison itself - so there is a limit to what they can do).

On a booked visit, you will need to arrive up to one or even two hours before the start time in order to get a queue number. Visitors go through in small groups in numerical order, so the earlier you get there, the sooner you will get through security and the longer your visit will be (normally one and a half to two hours). Once you've got your number you put your bag etc in the lockers; you will need a £1 coin for this (returnable). You can't take anything in with you except your VO, ID, the locker key and up to £10 in coins (£20 at some prisons - including the Scrubs) to buy food and drinks. (They do not give change in the centre so bring some with you. Also make sure you go to the toilet before you go in! If you go on the way through security, you will be given an extra search which takes AGES, and once you are in the visits room you may not be able to go at all as you may not be allowed back into the room afterwards; this applies to the prisoner as well.)

After putting your stuff in the locker you wait to be called through to the visiting area. There are normally several checkpoints to get through and it can take a while. Be prepared for some low-level humiliation, a lot of waiting around and being herded about like cattle! Follow the screws' directions; they can be really horrible and rude and it can be a bit shocking but just ignore it and keep going through. You may have to give your thumb print, have your photo taken and sign a declaration. You will also be searched and may have to remove items of jewellery, belt etc. Do not wear badges! They will be confiscated. This is apparently because the pin could be used as a weapon although you could probably do more damage with a raisin.

After going through security there is usually somewhere to buy food and drinks. At the Scrubs this is a hole in the wall before you go through to the visits room itself, in other prisons there may be a hatch in the visits room itself. There are chocolate bars, cakes, soft drinks, fruit and some distressed-looking sandwiches that are best avoided. It's a good idea to get fruit as they don't seem to get much fresh fruit in the daily prison diet. Anything you buy is put into a sealed bag which you're not allowed to open until you're in the visits room with the prisoner.

You then enter a small glass-walled room. Put your VO and declaration form in the letterbox at the other end of the room and then sit and wait. Your partner will be called out and you will get called to go in. They have to sit on the red chair, you sit on the blue and you are supposed to keep the table between you at all times. However, you can kiss and hug and hold hands. Oh, and then you can eat your food. You can also buy hot drinks from the machine in the corner but it only takes the correct change: 50p (if it's working!). When the time's up you will be asked to finish your visit by a prison officer and then you have to leave. Be prepared to feel a bit emotional afterwards!

**REMEMBER YOU NEED TO TAKE YOUR I.D. EVERY TIME YOU VISIT! AND DON'T FORGET THE V.O!**

### **Help with visiting costs**

Costs can add up when you are travelling regularly to a prison, particularly if the prison isn't close to your home. You may be able to get help from the Assisted Prison Visits scheme. To qualify, you need to be claiming certain benefits. More information can be found here:

[http://www.insidetime.org/info-help-results.asp?SID=7&c=assisted\\_prison\\_visits\\_unit](http://www.insidetime.org/info-help-results.asp?SID=7&c=assisted_prison_visits_unit)

and here:

[http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/uploadedFiles/Family\\_Zone/help%20with%20the%20cost%20of%20prison%20visits.pdf](http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/uploadedFiles/Family_Zone/help%20with%20the%20cost%20of%20prison%20visits.pdf)

The Prisoners' Families Helpline (0808 808 2003) can advise further.

### **Communication and sending stuff in**

Possibly the worst things about being in prison are the isolation from the outside world and the separation from friends, family and loved ones. It can feel pretty bizarre trying to sustain a relationship under such circumstances. The lack of communication can be horrible

(both for those in prison and those on the outside) so keep writing letters and keep as much contact as you can.

### **Letters**

Letters are an almost outmoded form of communication these days but you'll have to get back into the habit!

The prison is supposed to pay the postage on one letter a week from convicted prisoners and two a week from those not convicted. A prisoner can send out more letters but they must cover the cost themselves out of their weekly spends. Depending on the prison, letters can take between one day and two weeks to arrive. They will usually get there but some do get lost, especially if you enclose other things in the envelope, so if you write one that you consider to be a particularly brilliant literary masterpiece, make a photocopy just in case. Check with the prison what you may be allowed to enclose.

### **Phone calls**

After their one free phone call at reception, prisoners have to apply for phone numbers they can ring. They usually have to complete a form giving details of the people they will be calling, for example family and legal contacts. They will then be given a PIN number to operate the phone and can buy phone credit from the prison shop.

All phone calls must be made during their 'association' time (i.e. time outside the cell) which may be two hours, one hour or less each day (and sometimes they get none at all). Association could be at any time of day so be prepared and keep your phone on you. Remember there will be a time limit to the call and you can't ring him back! Also there will be a high demand for the phone so they may spend an hour standing in the queue only to be called back to their cell just as they get to the front.

### **Emails**

[www.emailprisoner.com](http://www.emailprisoner.com) is a website where you can set up a top-up account and send emails to inmates of prisons that have signed up to the scheme (i.e. most UK prisons). The email goes to the prison postroom, is printed out and taken to their cell on the next mail run. One email is cheaper than the cost of a second-class stamp and it will usually reach them within a day. They are not allowed internet access so won't be able to reply, but it's good if you need to tell them something quickly as you never know when they'll be able to call or when letters will arrive.

**ASSUME THAT ALL CORRESPONDENCE (INCLUDING PHONE CALLS) IS BEING MONITORED.**

Don't say or write anything that might get you, your partner or others into trouble, but on the other hand try not to become so paranoid that you end up never saying anything important or talking in some kind of strange code. The screws have hundreds of letters to trawl through every day and they are not that interested in your partner's personal life! For advice on what sort of things to write, see <http://www.brightonabc.org.uk/writing.html>

### **Sending stuff and bringing stuff in**

Each prison has different rules about what can be sent in (or brought in on a visit), and how, so you will need to ask. However, it does often seem to be quite random and sometimes it may just depend on who is working in the postroom or on reception that day and whether they feel like being nice or not. Sometimes things have got in that they said weren't allowed, other times things have been refused that should have got in – so it's trial and error really. After the reception period the prisoner normally has to apply to have specific things brought in; usually at least 48 hours (2 days) in advance. Remember you can't take anything into the visiting room for them when you visit; you will have to leave it with the screws at some point during the security process.

### **Money**

Prisoners have a prison account in which they can have as much money as they like, but they will only be able to draw out a certain amount of 'spends' per week. To begin with this will probably be £15. Money can be sent to their accounts by postal order (or sometimes by cheque), usually made payable to the Governor. Check with the prison. Also remember it could take up to two weeks for the money to appear in their account.

### **Clothes**

You may have to be quick off the mark about this as many prisons will only accept clothes brought in person, and only within the first few days or perhaps the first 28 days. Again, CHECK what is allowed: what type of items, how many, and what colours. For example some prisons will not accept black, dark blue or white clothing (in case it looks like a staff uniform!), camouflage patterns or anything football-related. Some will only accept newly-bought clothes, with the receipt and the tags still on! Also think ahead; for example it may be the middle of summer now but your partner may need a winter coat in a few months' time and this may be your only chance to bring them one. This isn't Gok Wan obviously, but having to wear prison-issue stuff will do nothing for their self-esteem.

### **Stationery and stamps**

It's normally OK to send as much writing paper, envelopes and stamps as you like. Careful with pens though.

### **Books**

These may well be their main source of entertainment so get their friends, family and supporters to send in lots of them. Most prisons will accept new, paperback books and sometimes you can send them directly through Amazon. Check! Hardback books are usually not allowed.

They may be able to get books from Haven (<http://www.havendistribution.org.uk/>); the prison library should have details of this.

### **Newspapers and magazines**

Most mainstream newspapers are allowed and there may be a system in the prison whereby prisoners can get these for themselves. If they are in Wormwood Scrubs, there is a newsagent's down the road which will send him any papers he wants and you can pay for however-many weeks in advance (Du Cane Stores, on Du Cane Road - turn right as you come out of the prison and go a little way down the road under the railway bridge. Do not use the online/phone subscription service recommended by the visitors' centre; it's more expensive and they are a private company in cahoots with the prison). You may be able to find similar shops near other prisons. Magazines are more dodgy and rules vary from prison to prison.

Let your partner know when you have sent something (especially money) so that they can look out for it. Then if it doesn't arrive they and/or you can chase it; this often has to be done within a time limit e.g. 14 days. Stuff that is not allowed through should be either returned or put into their property to be given back to him on their release, so keep a record of anything that gets 'lost'.

If you are sending different items at once and you're not sure whether all of them will be accepted, put the dodgy stuff in a separate envelope or package, because sometimes if there is just one dodgy item in a parcel full of stuff, the whole parcel will be rejected. You may hear that it's better to send stuff by recorded/signed-for delivery but in our experience this still doesn't guarantee they will get it and just makes it take longer to arrive.

## **Complaints**

Keep a list of complaints or other issues that come up. If any unacceptable incidents occur, make a note of the date and time and exactly what happened. You can complain to the Prison Governor and ask the visitors' centre, a solicitor, the CAB or one of the support groups on page 12 for help if you feel you or your partner are being treated badly. Anything's worth a try. Sometimes if you make a real nuisance of yourself you can get things changed.

## **Financial matters and benefits**

Try to get as much of this sorted out beforehand if possible, particularly if you and your partner live together and are both on benefits. If your partner has been claiming benefits for you both or for the family (if you have one) you will need to transfer this claim to yourself as soon as possible after your partner has been sent to prison, as you will now be treated as a 'one income' family. Also, as a partner or relative of a prisoner you may be entitled to benefits to cover various costs such as visiting your partner in prison or help with NHS charges. You may be able to claim Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance if you are sick or disabled or Pension Credit. You'll be counted as a single person or a lone parent if you do. For Working Tax Credit or Child Tax Credit, you'll still be counted as part of a couple if you claim, as long as you're only temporarily separated.

For Housing Benefit, you'll still be counted as a couple if you're planning to live together again when your partner is released from prison and if your partner is unlikely to be in prison for longer than 52 weeks.

For Council Tax Benefit, you'll still be counted as a couple as long as you're only temporarily separated.

If you're looking after your partner's child, you can get Child Benefit. If your partner has been ordered by the Child Support Agency to pay maintenance for your children, he won't have to pay whilst he's in prison.

If you do have kids you can also use the Lone Parent Helpline 0800 018 5026 (or 0800 0191 277 if the first number does not work) and Gingerbread 0800 018 4318. Some families are reluctant to use the helplines because they do not see themselves as single parents. However, these organisations will help you even though your separation is only temporary.

If in doubt about anything, you could seek advice from the Post Office, Jobcentre Plus, Social Security office or the local CAB (Citizens Advice Bureau).

Some bills, debts or fines may be written off e.g. parking tickets. You or your partner can ask his solicitor or the CAB for help with this.

Think about whether things like insurance, subscriptions or any direct debits or standing orders can be cancelled. Also check whether there are any ongoing policies or payments which will need to be renewed while they are inside and if so, what you will do about those. Consider getting Power of Attorney if they are happy for you to manage their bank account. You will need to get a form from the bank for this, which then needs to be signed by you both in the presence of the bank manager, a solicitor or CAB officer, so it's much easier to do beforehand!

### **If he or she moves to another prison**

Ideally the prisoner should be given advance notice of this but in reality they may get hardly any warning at all. They may not even get chance to notify you until after they have been moved.

When they are moved **THEY ARE ENTITLED TO ANOTHER RECEPTION VISIT** within the first three days. Check whether the new prison has different rules about things that can be brought in etc.

Any post that arrives for them at the previous prison is supposed to be forwarded. If things have not been forwarded within 14 days, chase it up. Also make sure that friends, family and supporters know the new address asap. Their prisoner number will stay the same.

### **Preparing for release**

Within a few weeks of going into prison your partner should be informed what their earliest possible release date will be. This does not necessarily mean that they *will* be released then; it is usually the date they might be let out on a tag (Home Detention Curfew). For more details see:

<http://www.prisonersadvice.org.uk/info/infohomedet.html>

To be released on a tag they will need to show that they have somewhere suitable to live and a landline phone, so bear this in mind when deciding what to do about their home while they are inside.

We'll get back to you with more on preparing for release when we know a bit more about it ourselves!

## **Look after yourself!**

Self-preservation first! You can't be a very effective support for your partner if you're in a complete mess (though you may be in a bit of one to begin with!).

Some things to remember:

- You are entitled to feel upset, worried and angry, especially in the immediate aftermath of the conviction. These sorts of feelings may continue for some time. But it's possible to feel this way and still get on with things.
- Make sure that *you've* got some support (both practical and emotional). Don't feel that you have to cope on your own.
- You have your own life. Of course you'll do everything you possibly can to help your partner but in the end there is a limit to what you can do from outside. They are serving the sentence, not you. So be sure to make time for yourself.
- You are not their only source of support. They also have friends, family and/or comrades to help give both practical and psychological support. You can't do everything so don't feel you have to.
- Make an effort to do normal things and try not to spend all your time thinking/talking about prison stuff. When you visit your partner or write to them they will most likely want to hear some news and gossip from the outside world and about stuff you've been doing. They may also be worrying about how *you* are coping. Of course they will want to know that you're missing them but probably not that you're spending all your time moping around being miserable (unless you are a pair of goths who enjoy that sort of thing); though of course you should be honest with them about how you are feeling!

You will also have to decide what to tell other people, if anything, about the situation. Friends will be understanding but you may have to deal with some ignorant and insensitive attitudes from other acquaintances who can't imagine what your circumstances are like and may make certain assumptions about you based on the fact that you have a partner in prison. Of course it is entirely up to you who you tell and how much you tell them, but there may be some people who need to know e.g. employers and colleagues, especially

if you have to start taking days off work to go on visits. You may also be pleasantly surprised by some people's reactions.

Finally, some suggestions that might help keep you sane and may even make the time pass a bit more quickly:

- Create some 'milestones' in time; this will help break up the sentence into chunks in your mind, which might make it easier to deal with. Try not to dwell on the full stretch of the sentence ahead but make it your aim simply to get to the halfway point. Then imagine getting to the halfway point of that, etc.
- Give yourself a project that will fill some time; maybe something you've been wanting to do for ages but haven't got round to (e.g. a magnificent new tattoo design for yourself!)
- Plan some things to do together when your partner gets out; this will give you both something to look forward to.
- It's a tall order but try to keep a sense of humour whenever possible. A lot of things about the prison system are farcical so why not treat it that way.

## Useful links and contacts

Inside Information:

<http://www.insidetime.org/>

A good first port of call for info about particular prisons.

The Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) can help with financial, legal and practical issues and their advice pages have lots of information about various things:

[http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/index/search.htm?pr=adviceguide\\_index&query=prison&Search.x=24&Search.y=508444111444](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/index/search.htm?pr=adviceguide_index&query=prison&Search.x=24&Search.y=508444111444)

Prisoners are supposed to be allowed access to the CAB if they ask for it, and many prisons (including Wormwood Scrubs) have a CAB officer on the premises. However, prisons are not obliged to tell prisoners about it and they may conveniently forget! So make sure your partner knows that they are entitled to ask for CAB help.

Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group:

<http://www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk/>

Prisoners' Families Helpline: Freephone 0808 808 2003.

They also run local support groups around the country.

Action for Prisoners' Families:

<http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/>

020 8812 3600

Brighton ABC

<http://www.brightonabc.org.uk/>

Leeds ABC

<http://leedsabc.org/>

and of course any other networks by which this document has been circulated!

This guide is an ongoing effort so if you want to add anything, update anything or wildly disagree with something, please feel free to do so. It is also written in the fervent hope that it will turn out to be completely redundant.