

Prisoners - letters

If you're in prison, it's very important to keep in touch with family and friends. This fact sheet is about keeping in touch by letter. It's for prisoners and their family and friends.

Sending letters

If you're in prison, you can usually write letters to anyone you want, as long as what you write follows prison guidelines. You will, however, need to get permission from the prison governor to write to some people. For example, you need the governor's permission before you can:

- advertise publicly for a pen-friend
- write to the person you committed the offence against or their family
- write to another prisoner at a different prison. But there are some exceptions to this rule.

There are rules which restrict what you can write in a letter. For example, the governor can stop letters if:

- they're considered to be a threat to security
- they would cause distress or anxiety to the person you're writing to
- they are not easily understood, for example, because they are in code.

Special rules also apply if you're writing to the media, for example, a radio or TV programme.

If a letter's stopped, you'll be told.

If you're not in an open prison, you mustn't seal up your letters before you give them to the post room. But even if you're not in an open prison, you can seal them up if they are confidential letters, or letters to your legal adviser or the courts (see below).

The letters of some prisoners are read before they go out, for example, if you're in a high security prison or if you're a Category A prisoner. The governor can also order that your outgoing letters are read if they think this will stop a crime happening or help them detect a crime. Some letters are read at random. You can complain if you think your letters are being read without a good reason.

How many letters can you send

If you're on remand, that is, you haven't been convicted yet, you can send two letters a week, paid for by the prison. If you're a convicted prisoner, you can send one letter a week paid for by the prison. You may be able to send more than these letters if you pay for the postage yourself but this is a privilege that can sometimes be taken away. The prison can pay for special letters if you

haven't got enough money to send a letter and there's an urgent reason to write.

Getting letters

Generally speaking, you can get letters from anyone. All letters arriving at the prison are opened to check that they don't contain anything they shouldn't. The only exception to this is a legal or confidential letter which can't be opened unless there are very special reasons. Some letters will be thoroughly read, like letters to Category A prisoners. Other letters will just be glanced at.

How many letters may a prisoner get

Usually you are allowed to get as many letters as you are allowed to send. But in some prisons, where letters are read regularly, the number of letters you can get is limited.

Confidential letters

Letters to and from legal advisers, courts and some other people and organisations are confidential. These include:

- the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman's office
- the Criminal Cases Review Commission
- your MP
- in some cases your GP or medical specialist
- the Samaritans
- the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Letters to Citizens Advice Bureaux **aren't** confidential unless you are writing to your legal adviser and they work in a CAB. You should write 'Prison Rule 39' or 'Legal Correspondence' on confidential letters to your legal adviser or the courts. You should write 'Confidential Access' on other confidential letters.

Confidential letters aren't normally opened and read. But they can be opened and read if the governor believes:

- they contain something which isn't allowed, or
- they contain something that could put prison security in danger.

You're allowed to be present if your confidential letters are opened.

Complaints about letters

If you've written to a prisoner and the letters aren't getting through, you can try and sort out the problem by contacting the prison. If you're a prisoner who wants to complain about letters, use the normal complaints procedure. It's against the law to treat you unfairly, for example, because of your race or ethnic origin or because you're disabled. This is called discrimination. If you've got a problem with letters that you think is because of discrimination, make sure you mention this in your complaint.

Further help

Citizens Advice Bureau

Citizens Advice Bureaux give free, confidential, impartial and independent advice to help you solve any sort of problem.

Some Citizens Advice Bureaux run advice sessions in prison. If you're in prison, check if they run these sessions in your prison. If they don't run advice sessions, you could write to them explaining your problem. Ask a member of the prison staff for the address of your local CAB.

If you are not in prison, and you want to find your nearest CAB, including those that give advice by e-mail, click on [nearest CAB](#), or look under C in your phone book.

Prisoners' Advice Service (PAS)

PO Box 46199
London
EC1M 4XA

Tel: 020 7253 3323 / 0845 430 8923, (Monday, Wednesday and Friday
9:30am - 1:00pm and 2:00pm - 5:30pm)

Fax: 020 7253 8067

E-mail: advice@prisonersadvice.org.uk

Website: www.prisonersadvice.org.uk

The Prisoners' Advice Service (PAS) provides advice and information to prisoners on their rights as prisoners. PAS does not deal with miscarriages of justice or appeals against conviction or sentence.

Other fact sheets on Adviceguide which might help

- Prisoners - phone calls
- Prisoners - getting further help
- Prisoners – making a complaint
- Discrimination in prison

This fact sheet is produced by [Citizens Advice](#), an operating name of The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux. It is intended to provide general information only and should not be taken as a full statement of the law. The information applies to England and Wales only.

This fact sheet was last updated on 13 July 2011 and is reviewed regularly. If it is some time since you obtained this fact sheet, please contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau to check if it is still correct. Or visit our website - www.adviceguide.org.uk - where you can download an up-to-date copy.