

Covid-19 Information Sheet – Courts and Prisons

This information sheet has been produced by students from BPP's Pro Bono Centre under the supervision of legally qualified staff members. The information contained in this document is accurate as of 16 April 2020.

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Planning prison visits

Can I still visit someone in prison?

In line with instructions for people to stay home introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, prison visits are temporarily cancelled until further notice. In order to keep staff, prisoners and their families safe, there will be no social visits, education or workshops taking place across the prison estate. In addition, all face-to-face prison education has been suspended by the University and College Union.

How can I stay in touch with someone in prison during this period?

As a temporary measure, risk-assessed prisoners will be given secure phone handsets to speak to a small number of pre-authorised contacts. Strict measures such as calls being time-limited and monitored will be in place to ensure these phones are not misused. It should be noted that handsets will include measures that prevent non-secure SIM cards being used and the phones provided to prisoners will not have internet access. Alongside the handsets, the Prison Service is also exploring the use of video calls at six pilot sites to allow prisoners to be called by their families in a secure environment with strict safeguards.

There are a number of other ways to contact someone in prison. Firstly, a prisoner can be contacted by leaving a voice message using the Prison Voicemail Service. To do this, you can sign up for a Prison Voicemail account at prisonvoicemail.com. You will immediately receive your own Prison Voicemail number which allows you to call a prisoner straight away and leave them a message. After listening to your message, the prisoner can simply dial their Prison Voicemail number from any phone in the prison and leave you a reply. Once you receive a notification, you can call your Prison Voicemail number to listen and respond.

The second way is by sending them an email using the email a prisoner service. In order to do this, you can sign up via www.emailaprisoner.com. Emails will be delivered each day to the

prison of your choice and they will be included in the next mail delivery inside the prison. Please note that there may be some instances where messages and replies are delayed during this period.

You can also contact a prisoner by sending letters through the post. Normally, there is no limit on the number of letters you can send. Most letters sent to and from prison are checked by prison staff.

What if someone develops symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the prison?

According to the guidance issued by the Ministry of Justice, any prisoner with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature will be isolated in single occupancy accommodation for 7 days. If such accommodation is not available, prisoners who may have COVID-19 should be alone in higher occupancy accommodation. Whilst being transferred to an isolated room, the prisoner should wear a surgical face mask. Prisoners who have a new, continuous cough or a high temperature do not need to be transferred to hospital if they are clinically well enough to remain in prison. Any staff members that become unwell on site will go home. The guidance also states that if a prison faces multiple cases of people displaying coronavirus symptoms, 'cohorting' or the gathering of potentially infected cases into a designated area may be necessary.

Where can prisoners get support and advice?

The Prisoners' Advice Service (PAS) is a charity which provides free legal advice and support to UK prisoners regarding their rights and conditions. Due to the on going coronavirus situation, PAS is prioritising the Telephone Advice Line service. The opening time for the Telephone Advice Line will be more frequent than usual but the hours will be confirmed in due course. It should be noted that the outreach programme is suspended. The letters clinic remain open where Caseworkers will work on current cases at home and continue to send letters and legal documents to prisoners and other recipients via the Royal Mail as usual. However, mail may take longer than usual to arrive in the present circumstances. For more information, kindly visit www.prisonersadvice.org.uk.

Courts during the coronavirus outbreak

Will courts remain open?

Many courts will remain in operation. However, these courts will operate at a reduced capacity, and in a way which minimises the risk of coronavirus spreading to court staff and users. The work of courts and tribunals will all be consolidated into fewer buildings. The courts remaining in operation during the coronavirus outbreak are named 'priority courts'.

In total, 160 courts are currently open to the public for essential face-to-face hearings. A further 116 courts are open for staff and judges to work on cases, however these will not be open to the public.

75 courts are temporarily closed as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

The numbers listed above are subject to change. The Government will continue to update its list of courts that are open to the public as the situation continues to develop.

How and when will hearings take place?

Urgent and vitally important hearings will be prioritised during the outbreak. These are referred to as 'priority hearings'. There is not an exhaustive list on what will be classed as a 'priority hearing'. Court managers, working closely with the local judiciary, will decide which hearings are to be prioritised during the outbreak.

Hearings may take place using audio or video technology or matters may be decided by a consideration of the papers in the case alone. How a hearing will proceed is a matter for the judge. The courts will be increasing their use of telephone, video or other technology so that as many hearings as possible will be able to continue remotely. Some hearings, such as jury trials, cannot be conducted remotely.

If you have an imminent hearing scheduled during the outbreak, you will be informed of any changes to this hearing in the usual way. This will usually be by email or by telephone.

If you are a victim awaiting a criminal trial, HMCTS, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service will be working closely together to ensure that you are kept up to date with any changes to trial hearings and when and how evidence will be provided in the trial.

All new cases to be tried by jury will be postponed for a short time in order to allow the courts to make arrangements and for it to free up space to manage existing trials. Trials which are already underway will continue until they reach a conclusion wherever this is possible.

Should I still attend court for a hearing?

You should be contacted by email or telephone if you are due to attend a court tribunal or hearing. You should not attend court unless you have heard from the court. All court and tribunal users should follow the Government's guidance regarding prevention, treatment, travel and staying at home. This includes those who are witnesses at a hearing, those attending for jury service, defendants, professional courts users and justice system partners.

There are many hearings where you will not be required to attend court, even if you are a defendant. If you do have an upcoming hearing, you should consider whether your presence at the hearing is required. If you are not required to attend a hearing you may be breaching the Government's guidance by attending court.

Victim support

I am a victim due to appear in court – what support will I receive?

The coronavirus outbreak is likely to cause some disruption to the services which are provided to support victims and witnesses in criminal trials.

If you are a victim who is already receiving support from your local services provider, you should contact your services provider in the first instance to obtain more information about how the support that you receive could be affected by the outbreak.

If the support that you are receiving involves face to face victim and support services, it may be that there is a shift towards your emotional and practical support being provided remotely during the coronavirus outbreak. This change is to ensure that those providing the service to you can comply with the government's social distancing guidelines.

Victims of a crime or witnesses who need support and/or further information can contact Victim Support on their 24/7 supportline for further help and guidance. The contact details for this helpline are contained at the end of this information sheet.

Jury Service

What if I am currently serving on a jury and have already been selected for a trial?

Wherever possible, trials which are already underway will continue until they reach a conclusion. This means that if you are currently serving on a jury and have already been selected for a trial, you will be expected to attend as normal unless the court where you are serving as a juror has asked you not to.

What if I have already started my jury service but have not yet been selected for a trial?

Following the Lord Chief Justice's announcement on 23 March 2020 on jury trials, all new trials will be postponed for a short time both to allow the HM Courts and Tribunals Service to make arrangements and to give them more space to manage existing trials. If you have already started your jury service but have not yet been selected for a trial, or if you are due to start jury service this week or any time after this, you will not be expected to attend court unless you have been contacted by the HM Courts and Tribunals Service.

What if I am due to start or complete jury service and I need to self-isolate?

You are not expected to start or complete your jury service if:

- you have symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19), or have been diagnosed with a coronavirus (COVID-19) infection
- official Government advice says you need to self-isolate
- you are over 70 years of age, have a weakened immune system, an underlying health condition, or are pregnant.
- there is another reason why you cannot attend.

If you meet one or more of these criteria and can no longer undertake your jury service, you should contact the court.

Further Information

BPP Pro Bono Centre has produced a series of Factsheets looking at how COVID-19 impacts on a range of different people. All of our factsheets can be viewed on the Pro Bono Centre Blog here: <http://probono.bppuniversity.ac.uk/blog/bpp-students-demystify-covid19/>

Information and Updates

The UK Government publishes a number of documents and updates as part of the ongoing response to Covid-19. These can be found on the UK Government website here: <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

Wellbeing

This is an extremely difficult time for everyone. There is much uncertainty and a lot of anxiety. Along with your physical health, it is important to look after your emotional wellbeing during this period. There are a number of organisations that can help you during this difficult time.

Mind - 0300 123 3393 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm) www.mind.org.uk

Prisoners' families helpline – 0808 808 2003 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm and Saturday and Sunday, 10am to 3pm) www.prisonersfamilies.org

Victim Support - 0808 1689 111 (operating 24/7) www.victimsupport.org.uk