



COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

July 2021

We recognise that this continues to be a challenging time for many families across Scotland, with necessary restrictions still in place during visiting. We have updated our FAQs to reflect recent changes in our guidance.

From now on all visitors on entry to the prison must complete a COVID triage questionnaire. If you answer 'yes' to any of the questions, you will not be permitted to attend the visit. The questionnaire asks:

- Do you or any member of your household/family have a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19?
- Are you or any member of your household/family waiting for a COVID-19 test result?
- Have you travelled internationally to any country which isn't exempt from self-isolation rules in the last 14 days?
- Have you had contact with someone with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19?
- Have you tested positive for COVID in the last 10 days?
- Do you have any of the following symptoms?
 - high temperature or fever
 - new, continuous cough
 - loss or alteration to taste or smell

More information on our visits guidance can be found on our website at [COVID-19 Information Hub \(sps.gov.uk\)](https://www.sps.gov.uk/covid-19-information-hub).

1. What is the SPS doing to protect people in prison from COVID-19?

Our number one priority is to ensure the safety of everyone who lives or works in our prisons. We continue to work with Scottish Government, Health Protection Scotland and a number of other partners to make sure everything we do is fully informed by the very latest public health advice and guidance. A dedicated team regularly review Scottish Government policy and announcements to assess how this impacts our prisons.

Physical distancing, alongside effective and regular handwashing are key in continuing to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Posters and information re-enforcing the importance of taking these measures are displayed throughout our prisons.

As you know, as part of our response to the pandemic, it has been necessary to introduce a number of measures to further reduce the spread of COVID-19. However, as is happening in communities across Scotland, we are working towards lifting some of these restrictions.

2. When will restrictions be lifted?

With recent SG announcements regarding national restrictions being eased across Scotland, SPS is now cautiously planning the next phase of our pandemic response. Some restrictions have already been lifted, others are gradually being eased in line with public health advice.

In planning this, our key consideration has been to ensure that any changes we make are appropriate and safe. Prisons are unique environments, which accommodate many vulnerable people. Therefore, it is important to note that the timing of changes that occur in the wider community may not be immediately realised in the prison setting.

Whilst we would prefer to ease restrictions in a consistent manner, regimes will ease at differing rates and may be slower than some people would wish. Whilst this may understandably cause some frustration, our approach will always be aligned with public health advice to best protect all those who visit, live and work within our prisons.

3. When will in person visits be back to normal?

In person visits are available in all establishments across Scotland. Over 7,500 in person visits have taken place since visits resumed in late April 2021.

In order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19, public health measures like physical distancing, face coverings and limited numbers at visits are likely to remain in place for some time.

Information on the current arrangements for each establishment is available on our website at [Information for Families and Friends \(sps.gov.uk\)](https://www.sps.gov.uk/information-for-families-and-friends)

At the moment, it is not possible to give definite dates as to when things such as children's visits and family days will happen again. We recognise how important these days are for your family and are keen to see them back in our establishments when it is safe to do so.

4. Can I hug my loved one at a visit?

Brief hugs are permitted at the beginning and end of the visit session and both parties must wear appropriate Personal Protective Equipment i.e. face masks. Rules around hand washing and use of hand sanitiser should also be observed. Anyone who is exempt from wearing a face mask/face covering must not make physical contact during the visit, unless they are wearing a facemask whilst doing so.

Visitors under the age of 5 may have physical contact throughout the visit.

5. Are mobile phones still in use?

Every person in prison has access to an authorised mobile phone or in cell landline and these continue to be in use. The existing PIN phone system (or landline) continues to be available in all establishments.

6. Who will pay for the costs of the mobile calls?

The SPS continues to pay for the cost of all calls from the mobile phones whilst current restrictions remain in place. Each individual will have a maximum of 310 minutes of calls per month. Individuals in HMP Kilmarnock are provided with a £5 phone credit per week.

7. Are Virtual Visits still available?

Yes, Virtual Visits are still available in every prison in Scotland. We have created an information Video which explains how they work. Please follow this link - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0SFZZoGbmM>

There is also a Q&A document available here -

<http://www.sps.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?IID=4628&slD=15813>

8. What other ways can I keep in touch with my family member in prison?

People in custody can continue to communicate through mail and the prison phone system. We have expanded and encouraged access to the Email-a-Prisoner scheme. The Prisoner Voicemail scheme also allows individuals in custody and their loved ones to exchange voicemails through the prison phone system. Families can subscribe to this at: <https://prisonvoicemail.com/>

9. How do I give money to someone in prison?

Prisons are not currently accepting money being handed in. However, money can be sent in the post. If you intend to send cash in the mail, please refer to Royal Mail for guidance. We can also accept money transferred via an online banking facility. Money

is transferred from your own personal banking app and not via a Government or SPS website. Further details on this can be found on the SPS website at: <http://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Information/covid-19.aspx>

International money cannot be transferred using this service and can only be sent in the mail.

10. Can I hand in property yet?

No. We are currently consulting on more permanent arrangements as SPS moves out of Covid specific restrictions. In the meantime, property can be sent to someone via Royal Mail.

11. What happens if someone in prison has COVID-19 symptoms?

If someone reports, or appears to have COVID-19 symptoms, they will be assessed by NHS healthcare staff, who are responsible for the delivery of all health services in Scottish prisons. If NHS healthcare staff suspect that an individual has COVID-19, then, as in the community, that individual will be required to self-isolate and confined to their own cell. If the individual is sharing a cell, then they can remain with that same person in a shared cell. All meals and prescribed medication will be provided in their cell. Many prisons have set aside specific areas to accommodate those who are symptomatic and require to be kept apart from others.

12. Does the SPS test for COVID-19?

Yes, all NHS Health Boards will test anyone in custody who is showing symptoms associated with COVID-19. Results of tests are being returned within 6 and 48 hours depending on the Health Board administering the test. A person who displays symptoms but tests negative for COVID-19 will therefore spend no longer than 48 hours in isolation.

13. Are prisoners being tested on admission?

SPS are working with the Scottish Government and NHS partners to extend the pilot in HMP Perth where those in custody are tested on admission.

14. Are staff being tested?

Asymptomatic testing of staff is offered on a voluntary basis and we strongly encourage all eligible staff to undertake the testing.

Testing provides an additional layer of protection, identifying staff members infected with the virus who do not have symptoms, and allow them to self-isolate, so reducing the risk of infecting colleagues and those in our care.

Testing is, however, just one layer of protection. While it is important, it is only one of the tools we have to reduce the spread of the virus. We must continue to adhere to national restrictions, maintain physical distance, follow appropriate PPE guidance and observe effective hand hygiene – these things work to greatest effect when they work together.

15. Are those in custody being offered the vaccine?

Yes. The vaccination programme is being delivered by local NHS boards, in the same way as in the community.

Every individual in custody has received a letter jointly signed from the Chief Medical and Nursing Officers and the National Clinical Advisor, encouraging them to get both doses of the vaccine when offered. You can read this letter here [\[insert link\]](#).

16. How will I know if my family member is isolating?

When anyone is isolating as a result of showing COVID-19 symptoms, they will be asked if they would like a family member or friend to be informed. If the answer is yes, a member of our staff will then make contact. Should anybody become seriously ill, or be admitted to hospital, then, where possible, the person will be asked who they want to be informed. If they wish someone to be notified, again we will contact that individual. If they are not able to communicate this information, SPS would routinely contact the next of kin identified on their records.

17. How can you physically distance in a prison?

Notices are displayed across all our prisons explaining how everyone, including staff, should keep the appropriate distance apart. All prison activity is being delivered with additional controls and with fewer people in communal areas to allow everyone to follow physical distancing guidelines.

18. Are prisons overcrowded? Does this mean COVID-19 spreads quickly?

No. Scotland's prison population has been high in recent years. In March 2020, there were approximately 8,000 individuals in custody; now there are closer to 7,400.

Our number one priority continues to be on ensuring the safety of everyone living and working in our prisons. The necessary restrictions that have been in place, alongside

our adherence to public health measures such as physical distancing, face coverings and regular handwashing have been key to reducing the spread of COVID-19.

19. How will the SPS look after my family member's mental health in prison?

We are aware that social isolation in a prison environment can have a detrimental effect on mental wellbeing. Our staff have been provided with information on how to identify those who may be struggling whilst in isolation. Staff are used to dealing with people who may have poor mental health and are trained to support them.

Self-help support leaflets and audio files, designed by SPS Psychologists, have been issued to everyone in custody providing information and tools which can be used to maintain a sense of wellbeing. Prison Chaplains continue to provide pastoral, spiritual and faith-specific care within establishments.

The SPS and NHS Health Boards are providing additional in-cell activities and Fife College have provided learning packs and other educational activities. Relaxation and mindfulness exercises are also available on in-cell televisions and radio. Prisons are also encouraging greater outdoor exercise activities in line with public health advice.

20. How is the SPS making sure prison exercise and recreation is safe?

People in custody continue to be offered exercise in the open air and recreation time. However, restrictions have been introduced to maintain physical distancing. Exercise and recreation are being delivered in significantly smaller groups than previously was the case. The number participating at any time is assessed by each individual prison and this activity is supervised so as to maintain physical distancing.

21. How will COVID-19 affect my family member's progression?

In order to limit the risk of COVID-19 being transmitted from the community, or from new arrivals, to other prisons or residential areas, it was necessary to suspend progression to less secure conditions as well temporary absence, including home leave.

As part of our gradual easing of restrictions, transfers to less secure conditions have resumed. Access to work placements, home leave and Special Escorted Leaves have also resumed. Please note that for the purposes of keeping those in our care safe, a maximum of 35 individuals are allowed on home leave at any one time.

SPS has a single national waiting list for progression to our National Top End facilities and HMP Castle Huntly; this ensures a clear and fair decision making process with those who are approaching critical dates being prioritised for consideration.

22. Where can I find out what is happening and when?

SPS has a Routemap which is published on our website at [COVID-19 Information Hub \(sps.gov.uk\)](https://sps.gov.uk). This routemap was designed to describe our way out of earlier stages of the pandemic. It is currently under review given recent Government announcements on movement toward Level 0 restrictions and beyond.

SPS Communications

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