



Information about Court

What happens after arrest

If someone is charged at a police station to appear at court, the case will always be heard at a magistrate's court first. There, the magistrates will decide whether they can deal with the offence or if it needs to go to crown court.

Magistrate's Court

All criminal cases begin at the magistrate's court, but Magistrates deal with less serious offences. They can send people to prison for up to 12 months, but mostly hand out fines and non-custodial sentences. The cases are decided by a panel of 2-3 magistrates who are volunteers. In some courts there is also a District Judge who is legally trained and can deal with cases on their own.

Crown Court

Crown courts deal with more serious offences. If somebody pleads Not Guilty to an alleged offence the case will go to trial and be decided by a jury who are directed by a legally trained and paid judge. The jury listens to evidence and decides if the person (defendant) is guilty or not guilty. If they are found guilty by the jury, the judge will decide what sentence they should receive.

If somebody pleads Guilty early on and there is no need for a trial, the Judge will decide what the sentence should be.

Where are young people tried?

A youth court is a special court for young people aged 10-17. It is presided over by three magistrates or a district judge.

Bail or custodial remand?

If the magistrates cannot deal with case straight away, they can choose to grant bail which means that the defendant can be released into the community whilst the case is being prepared. Sometimes there may be bail conditions like having to stay in a certain area or be home between certain hours (curfew). Or they can decide that the defendant must go to prison to wait for the next hearing to take place - this is called custodial remand.

Pre-Sentence Report

Judges and Magistrates may ask the Court Probation service to write a report about the defendant before deciding on what the sentence should be. The report can highlight welfare concerns which may or may not guide the judge when deciding on a sentence.



How do I know which court they will appear in?

When someone is charged to appear at court on a later date, they will be given details of the date and court location when they are released from police custody and by post. If they are already in prison, they will be taken to the court or to the prison's video link room. If you are not sure, talk to your Solicitor or contact Sussex Prisoners' Families who will be able to find out for you.

Sussex Magistrates Courts: 01273 670 888

Lewes Crown Court: 01273 480400

Can I attend the trial?

Under normal circumstances, families can attend the trial and sit in the public gallery. However, due to covid-19, the situation varies depending on the lockdown status and space available in courtrooms. Please contact us for updates.

How can I prepare for court?

If you are attending court in person, make sure you know which court you are going to, how to get there and that you arrive in good time. Report to the court usher for your courtroom when you arrive.

Be prepared to wait. Take reading material with you and change for the tea bar (although this may or may not be open due to covid).

Can I get support in court?

If you are supporting a family member or friend at court and would like someone to support you, please contact us and we will try to arrange for one of our court volunteers to meet you. Get in touch with us if you cannot get to court but would like updates about a trial or a result from a hearing.

Can children come to court?

No, unless they are giving evidence, children under 14 cannot go into courtrooms. If you are a witness giving evidence at court, you should be supported by the Witness Service. In some courts the Witness Service have child friendly facilities.

Can I attend a video hearing?

People cannot link into Magistrates courts hearings. For Crown court cases, people need to make a request to the court if they wish to link into a court case virtually. The request must then be agreed by the Judge.

Can I speak in court?

Unless you are a witness, you won't be able to speak in court. However, you will be allowed to prepare a family impact statement. Sussex Prisoners' Families will be able to help you do this so get in touch.



How can we prepare for a prison sentence?

It will help if you and your family member discuss big issues in advance - such as housing, finances and explaining to children. It's also a good idea if your loved-one visits the dentist and doctor to get details of any medications they are taking.

The defendant should also pack a small bag with socks and underwear, prescribed medications, a towel, a change of clothing, toiletries, a pair of flip-flops, a pair of trainers, a radio, writing materials and books. Don't forget to take an address book or list of phone numbers as they will not be allowed to have a mobile phone in prison.

What happens if the defendant is given a prison sentence?

They will be taken to the court cells immediately. There won't be a chance to make arrangements or say goodbye so it's important that you are prepared. They will be transferred to the local prison. Most male prisoners in Sussex go to HMP Lewes and most female prisoners go to Bronzefield. You can call the Youth Justice Board to find out where a young person has been taken.

Please contact one of our outreach team on 01273 499843 for more details