



02 March 2023

C164605

C Rainbow

fyi-request-21696-356382e9@requests.fyi.org.nz

Tēnā koe

Thank you for your email of 1 February 2023 to the Department of Corrections – Ara Poutama Aotearoa, requesting information about when Auckland Prison in-person visits will resume. Your request has been considered under the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA).

The safety of people in prison, our staff, and the community remains our top priority, and we're committed to taking action to ensure our facilities continue to operate in a way that's safe and secure. We also know how important visits from friends and whānau are to people in prison, and to supporting their rehabilitation and reintegration. Corrections staff are working towards resuming visits to all prisons as soon as it is safely possible to do so.

I will address each of your requests in turn. You requested:

- *Why does Auckland prison still not have face to face visits?*

As of Monday 20 February 2023, face-to-face visits have resumed in units 6 and 8 at Auckland Prison. Face-to-face visits remain paused for other units at this time. Our staff are working hard to resume visits at all parts of the prison as soon as possible, while making sure they can continue to keep staff, people in prison and any visitors to the site safe.

This reduced capacity to provide face-to-face visits is due to Corrections experiencing challenges when it comes to staffing. COVID-19 stressors, border closures and re-openings, combined with labour shortages across the country, have made it more challenging for us to recruit and retain frontline staff.

Auckland Prison is currently experiencing staffing shortages, which affects the activities that we can safely offer at the prison, including in-person visits. It is important to recognise that significant additional resourcing is required across the prison to safely facilitate in-person visitors of all types. Managing this increased level of risk safely requires staff to be specifically allocated to escorting and ensuring the safety of visitors. This impacts on available resource in other parts of the prison. Staff must also be allocated to manage visitors onto the prison via the Receiving Office whilst having sufficient numbers to respond to incidents on-site where necessary.

- *When is Auckland Prison planning to re-open visiting options?*

As noted, face-to-face visits resumed in some areas of Auckland Prison from Monday 20 February 2023. There is no confirmed date for when the remaining units at Auckland Prison will resume visits. Corrections staff are working to resume visits to all units as soon as it is safe to do so.

- *Has Auckland prison considered other options to allow for physical visits to occur?*
- *Is there a plan in place and what is that plan, on when visits will be starting again at Auckland Prison?*

Corrections is committed to ensuring that the pressure being experienced by our prisons is reduced and that our prisons and people remain safe and secure. Auckland Prison is constantly reviewing its operations to ensure the least possible disruption to routines and the Prison Director will only approve visits to all units when it is safe to do so.

Corrections has already taken significant steps to address our staffing challenges. This includes rebalancing the prisoner population in a way that alleviates pressure on our most impacted prisons, such as Auckland Prison. At the same time, we are making a concerted effort to recruit, train, and retain staff. This includes strengthening our recruitment processes, improving our onboarding processes, implementing new rosters which provide our staff with better work/life balance and help them to avoid fatigue, and continuously working to improve staff safety.

We are actively working to recruit new Corrections Officers across the country, including through a television advertisement campaign, which you may have seen. Our staff have also been carrying out recruitment activities in their local communities - for example, information evenings for people interested in working with us.

We have seen a strong increase in the number of job applications received for new Corrections Officers, with over 2,700 applications received since October 2022. We have received 978 applications so far this year. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, low unemployment, and border restrictions, we recruited 998 people to frontline roles in prisons and the community in 2021/22. While we have received a significant number of applications, it does take time to assess each applicant, and ensure they complete the required training before they are ready to be safely deployed in a prison environment.

While face-to-face visits have been restricted, contact with friends and whānau has still taken place by other means, such as over the phone, AVL and postal, courier and email communication in line with our legally privileged correspondence/documents processes. In the lead up to Christmas, we made an additional 100 laptops available to facilitate AVL visits between people in prison and their whānau at the sites where in-person visits are not possible.

We have implemented other measures to lessen the impact on people in prison and to assist them in maintaining contact with whānau and friends. This has included supplying all

people in prison with a weekly \$5 phonecard. As you may be aware, Auckland Prison has now transferred over to a new phone system, which provides free phone calls to all people in prison, eliminating the need for phone cards. We aim to transfer all prisons to the new phone system by mid-2023.

- *Is there any truth behind the statement that visits won't be on until mid year?*

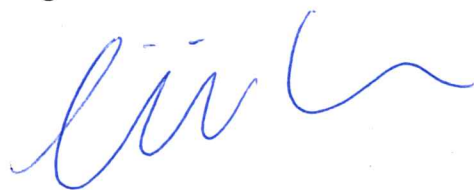
As noted above, face-to-face visits have now resumed in two units at Auckland Prison. Corrections staff are working towards resuming in-person visits to all prisons as soon as it is safe to do so. However, at this time, we are unable to provide an exact date for when all prisons will be able to fully resume face-to-face visits.

Currently, 15 of the 18 prisons have resumed face-to-face visits at some capacity. Corrections' website provides updates on the status of visits across all prisons, and any further updates about visits at Auckland Prison will be available at the following link: <https://www.corrections.govt.nz/our-work/in-prison/staying-connected-with-people-in-prison/visits/prison-visit-updates>.

Please note that this response may be published on Corrections' website. Typically, responses are published quarterly, or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

I trust the information provided is of assistance. I encourage you to raise any concerns about this response with Corrections. Alternatively, you are advised of your right to also raise any concerns with the Office of the Ombudsman. Contact details are: Office of the Ombudsman, PO Box 10152, Wellington 6143.

Ngā mihi



Brigid Kean
Deputy National Commissioner