



# CourtWatch London volunteer guidance

2025



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## Welcome to CourtWatch!

**COURTWATCH**  
LONDON



CourtWatch London is a mass court observation project, where citizen volunteers observe the daily hearings in court and write down what they see. The real-time data and stories volunteers collect will shine a spotlight on what really happens in our local courts, expose shortfalls and highlight systemic injustices.

This guidance is for CourtWatch London's volunteer courtwatchers. It explains what magistrates' courts are, how to observe court cases, and how to record and report what you see there.

Scan the QR code or visit [linktr.ee/courtwatchlondon](https://linktr.ee/courtwatchlondon) for more information and resources.



# How to act in court

If it is your first time visiting a courthouse, the culture and traditions may seem strange. But there is no need to feel intimidated! Members of the public are allowed to observe most hearings in the magistrates' courts. There is usually a list of rules displayed in the public gallery. Below, we've outlined some key things to be aware of.

## What to bring and wear

You don't need to "dress up" to visit a court but don't wear clothing that displays offensive pictures or text.

It's illegal to take photographs or record anything that happens in the court building, so courts can be strict around any use of phones or laptops. Make sure your phone is on silent while in the public gallery. If you are seen to be answering a phone or reading or sending a text, you may be called out by the judge. Laptops can technically be used to take written notes in the public gallery. However, this rule changed recently and there may be staff who aren't aware of the change. If you want to use your laptop to take notes, we will brief you about how to respond to queries from court staff in the training.

Make sure you bring your courtwatching booklet and a pen!

## Entering and exiting the courtroom

Enter the courtroom quietly and sit in the public gallery. It's traditional to bow (nod your head) to the judge if you enter a courtroom after the case has started, but you don't have to, and many don't.

When a judge enters or leaves a court the usher will usually say "all rise" or equivalent words. Everyone must stand. Be discreet when leaving the courtroom, and, if possible, aim to do so between hearings. Avoid entering and leaving the courtroom frequently, especially if it requires several people to get up to let you out.

Follow the instructions of an usher/list caller. If you think the usher is acting unfairly, stay calm, go to reception and ask to speak to someone about this.

## When to speak and what to say

Those in the public gallery are expected to be silent and watch proceedings. There may be other members of the public (including family members of the defendant) and the press in the public gallery. You have a right to take notes in the courtroom. If anyone in the public gallery tries to stop you doing so, please talk to the usher and/or leave that courtroom.

Unless asked, there is no need to explain your presence in the courtroom to anyone. A judge, lawyer or other member of court staff may ask who you are or why you're there. If they do, it is likely because they are genuinely curious, as members of the public rarely observe magistrates courts. Simply say that you are observing out of interest as a member of the public.

If the judge asks you whilst he or she is in court then answer politely. Magistrates should be addressed as Sir or Madam, and district judges should be referred to as Judge.

### DO



Bring courtwatching forms and a pen or a laptop



Stand when the judge(s) enter and exit



Answer questions directed to you

### DON'T



Use your phone



Talk during proceedings



Take pictures or make any recordings

## Hearings held in private

There are some types of hearings in magistrates' courts which are held in private and for which members of the public are not entitled to be present. These include, for example, a hearing in which a police officer is making an application for a search warrant. If such a hearing is taking place or is scheduled to be heard next, then the legal adviser will ask that the public gallery is cleared for the duration of that hearing. Also, the youth court – although not technically a magistrates' court – is often located in magistrates' courts buildings. The courtrooms where hearings relating to children are being heard are sometimes not clearly marked and observers may inadvertently enter them. If this happens, observers will be asked to leave.

# Who is in the magistrates' court

Some guidance to help distinguish the different individuals in the courtroom is set out below.

- Legal advocates: these will be the lawyers for the defendant (if there is one) and the prosecution. They will be the ones making arguments to the magistrates/district judge. They will likely be sitting on a row near the front of the courtroom and facing the magistrates or district judge.
- Legal adviser (sometimes referred to as the justices' clerk): this is a legally trained individual who is responsible for giving legal advice to the magistrates. They help the magistrates make decisions and state the legal reasons that underpin the decisions. The legal adviser will normally be sitting just in front of, or next to, the magistrates or district judge. Some district judges have a courtroom advocate instead of a legal adviser.
- Usher: this is the person that coordinates the court proceedings, including making sure that everyone is present and calling defendants up. This individual may also be referred to as the "list caller".
- Probation service officer: This will be someone from the probation service. If they are present, they will be there to help the court by providing risk assessments, advice on sentencing, or reporting to the court on breaches of bail or licence conditions. They may also, for instance, provide information on issues such as availability of accommodation. They normally sit near the lawyers or on the benches along the side of the courtroom. They may not be easily distinguishable, unless the court speaks to them.
- Magistrate or district judge: Either a district judge or magistrates will be hearing the case:



- A district judge sits alone. District judges are legally qualified specialists who will do the most complex cases in magistrates' courts.
- The magistrates sit as a "bench" of two or three individuals, who also sit with at least one legal adviser. One magistrate (the one sitting in the middle) takes the role of "the presiding justice" and will be the spokesperson for the bench.

# Types of hearing in the magistrates' court

## TYPES OF HEARING IN THE MAGISTRATES' COURT

|                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bail/remand</b>                            | For cases involving more than one hearing, the court decides whether the defendant can be released (bailed) or must be held in prison (remanded) until their next hearing. Bail/remand hearings are also used to review if someone on remand can be released on bail.                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Plea</b>                                   | The court asks the defendant to plead guilty or not guilty. Those who plead not guilty will have a trial date fixed and will be either bailed or remanded until their next hearing. Those who plead guilty may be sentenced immediately or their sentence adjourned pending reports.                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Trials</b>                                 | Those who have pleaded not guilty will be tried with the judges (bench of magistrates or a district judge) deciding as to whether the defendant is guilty or not guilty. The decision reached is conviction or acquittal with sentencing usually taking place at a subsequent hearing.                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Sentencing</b>                             | Those who have been on bail but pleaded guilty and those who have been convicted will be given a court date to be sentenced. At this hearing the defence and prosecution will put forward arguments as to how the defendant should be sentenced, taking into account whether there are any circumstances that make the crime more or less serious.                                                                          |
| <b>First appearance</b>                       | Some of the decisions described above may be taken in a first appearance hearing - the first time the case is in court. A first appearance hearing could include a decision about bail or remand, where the case should be dealt with (magistrates' or Crown), the plea, and sometimes even the sentence.                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Single justice procedure-related cases</b> | Single justice procedure cases are low level offences which are prosecuted by the police, rail companies, TFL, local authorities etc. Cases where defendants plead guilty or don't plead are heard in a closed court by a single magistrate. But if the defendant pleads not guilty or wants to reopen a case (make a statutory declaration) because they were not aware of the prosecution, an open court hearing is held. |
| <b>Other</b>                                  | Case management, breach and local authority are amongst the other hearings which may be listed. CourtWatch London focuses on the types of hearings outlined above.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

## Going to a magistrates' court

Members of the public can visit any magistrates' court in the country, but CourtWatch London is focusing on the following courts:

| COURT                                             | ADDRESS                                          | TRANSPORT                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Barkingside magistrates' court</b>             | 850 Cranbrook Rd, Ilford, IG6 1HW                | Nearest station: Barkingside (Central line), 10 mins walk                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Bexley magistrates' court</b>                  | Norwich Place, Bexleyheath, DA6 7ND              | Nearest station: Bexleyheath (National Rail), 26 mins walk                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Bromley magistrates' court</b>                 | The Court House, 1 London Rd, Bromley, BR1 1RA   | Nearest station: Bromley North (National Rail), 7 mins walk                                                                                                                    |
| <b>City of London magistrates' court</b>          | 1 Queen Victoria St, London, EC4N 4XY            | Nearest stations: Bank (Central, Northern and Waterloo & City lines, and the DLR), 3 mins walk; Moorgate (National Rail and Hammersmith & City and Circle lines), 10 mins walk |
| <b>Croydon magistrates' court</b>                 | Barclay Rd, Croydon, CR9 3NG                     | Nearest stations: East Croydon (National Rail and tram), 6 mins walk; West Croydon (Windrush line and National Rail), 15 minutes walk                                          |
| <b>Ealing magistrates' court</b>                  | The Court House, Green Man Ln, London, W13 OSD   | Nearest station: West Ealing (Elizabeth line), 9 mins walk                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Highbury Corner magistrates' court</b>         | 51 Holloway Rd, London, N7 8JA                   | Nearest station: Highbury and Islington (Victoria line, Mildmay line and Windrush line), 3 mins walk                                                                           |
| <b>Lavender Hill magistrates' court</b>           | 176A Lavender Hill, London, SW11 1JU             | Nearest station: Clapham Junction (National Rail, Mildmay line and Windrush line), 7 mins walk                                                                                 |
| <b>Romford magistrates' court</b>                 | Main Rd, Romford, RM1 3BH                        | Nearest station: Romford (National Rail, Elizabeth line and Liberty line), 13 mins walk                                                                                        |
| <b>Stratford magistrates' court (trials only)</b> | 389-397 High St, London, E15 4SB                 | Nearest station: Stratford (National Rail, Central, Jubilee, DLR, Elizabeth, and Mildmay lines), 5 mins walk                                                                   |
| <b>Thames magistrates' court</b>                  | 58 Bow Rd, Bow, London, E3 4DJ                   | Nearest stations: Bow Road (District line and Hammersmith & City line), 1 min walk; Mile End (Central line), 9 mins walk                                                       |
| <b>Uxbridge magistrates' court</b>                | The Court House, Harefield Rd, Uxbridge, UB8 1PQ | Nearest station: Uxbridge (Metropolitan and Piccadilly lines), 6 mins walk                                                                                                     |
| <b>Westminster magistrates' court</b>             | 181 Marylebone Rd, London, NW1 5BR               | Nearest stations: Marylebone (National Rail and Bakerloo line), 4 mins walk; Edgware Road (Circle, Hammersmith & City, and District lines), 6 mins walk                        |
| <b>Willesden magistrates' court</b>               | 448 High Rd, London, NW10 2DZ                    | Nearest station: Neasden (Jubilee line), 10 mins walk                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Wimbledon magistrates' court</b>               | The Court House, Alexandra Rd, London, SW19 7JP  | Nearest station: Wimbledon (National Rail and District line), 6 mins walk                                                                                                      |

Magistrates' courts open at 9am and the first hearings are meant to start at 10am. There is a break for lunch at around 1-2pm. Hearings usually run until 4pm or 5pm.

On entering the magistrates' court building you will have to pass a security check in which your bag and person may be searched for prohibited items. A list of prohibited items can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/entering-court-or-tribunal-building>. The search is usually quick and casual, but you may have to queue for up to 30 minutes if the court is busy.

Court lists setting out which hearings are planned for each courtroom that day will be displayed in the waiting area. These can often change at the last minute, and hearings moved from one courtroom to another with very little notice. If you want to see what cases are listed ahead of your court visit, you can do this on the [CourtServe](#) website. Create a free account, log in, and click 'Magistrates' court' on the left hand side to see all magistrates' court lists. Scroll down to your chosen court and you will see links to court lists for different days.

Look for hearings where the prosecuting authority is the CPS or Met Police (abbreviated to something like MPHQ). Try and avoid cases brought by other agencies such as the DVLA (driving offences), local authorities (abbreviations start with LB), HMRC, or probation (PO). You could also ask for the 'overnight or remand court', which sees cases where the defendant was arrested the previous day and held by the police overnight.

Court staff at the helpdesk are usually very helpful. You can tell the helpdesk that you are interested in observing criminal proceedings and they can advise which courtroom(s) to attend. Helpdesks are open 9am to 11am and 1:30pm to 2:30pm. Unfortunately, there are often delays in the courtrooms. If you find yourself waiting around, feel free to move to another courtroom.

## Filling in the courtwatcher forms

Courtwatchers should take the courtwatching booklet, which contains paper copies of the observation forms, into the public gallery of the courtroom to fill out during the hearings. Alternatively you can take notes directly on your laptop.

Courtwatchers have two types of forms to fill out:

- **Hearing form:** this is the standard form for use in all hearings. Fill out one form per hearing (although see note below).
- **Court environment/open justice form:** this captures information about your visit to the court, what the court building is like, and how easy it was to access. Please complete one of these forms per visit. This is available online as well as on paper.

We know the forms are long and detailed, and some hearings move very quickly. It's OK not to take notes for some hearings, so that you have time to finish your notes on others. For the rest, you could just fill in the tick boxes in your booklet. Or, miss out some hearings altogether until you are ready to take notes again.



## Hearing form – explanation



### ABOUT THE HEARING

|                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Who are the judges?</b>                                                 | Tick whether it is a district judge (one person making decisions on their own), or a group of two or three magistrates.                                                                     |
| <b>Type of hearing</b>                                                     | Tick which type of hearing it is. This may not become clear until part way through the hearing.                                                                                             |
| <b>Can you hear/see court proceedings clearly from the public gallery?</b> | Note down whether you were able to hear and see proceedings clearly from the public gallery. If not, tell us more in the reflections box at the end of the form.                            |
| <b>Was courtroom technology (e.g. video links) working properly?</b>       | Note down whether the courtroom technology, such as video links or the playing of video evidence, was working properly. If not, tell us more in the reflections box at the end of the form. |



### ABOUT THE DEFENDANT

|                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Year of birth</b>                                          | This will be stated at the start of the hearing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Gender</b>                                                 | Note down the gender of the defendant as you perceive it.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Perceived ethnicity</b>                                    | Note down the ethnicity of the defendant as you perceive it.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>First language English? (perceived)</b>                    | Note whether the defendant's first language is English.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>If no, was an interpreter needed, requested, provided?</b> | If you think the defendant's first language wasn't English, note down whether, in your view, an interpreter was needed, requested, and provided.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Is the defendant legally represented?</b>                  | Note whether the defendant has a defence lawyer or not. This will be the person speaking on behalf of the defendant to the bench.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Where is the defendant?</b>                                | <p>The defendant may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• be in the dock – an enclosed space, separate to everyone else. This happens if the defendant is brought to court from the police station, or from prison. Defendants may be asked to appear in the dock even if they haven't come from the police station/prison.</li> <li>• sit in the main area of the court near the lawyers and probation service officer, if they came to court under their own steam.</li> <li>• appear on a screen via video link.</li> </ul> |
| <b>If the defendant is on video, where are they?</b>          | If the defendant is appearing by video link, note whether they are appearing from prison, police custody or somewhere else.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

|                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Reason(s) for appearing by video link</b> | Note any information given in court about why the defendant, or anyone else, is appearing by video link. If no one is appearing by video link, leave blank.                                                         |
| <b>Offence details</b>                       | Write down what offence the defendant is charged with (one or more offences) and other relevant information, e.g. where and when it happened.                                                                       |
| <b>Plea</b>                                  | Note down what plea the defendant has entered – i.e. whether they are pleading guilty, not guilty or are not entering a plea. If it is a plea hearing, the plea will not become clear until the end of the hearing. |



#### DECISION/OUTCOME

|                                             |                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>What was the outcome of the hearing?</b> | Note down the outcome of the hearing.                                                                                            |
| <b>Other outcome details</b>                | Note down anything else about the outcome, such as sentence length, fine amount, or reasoning given by the magistrates or judge. |



#### IF THE HEARING WAS DELAYED/ADJOURNED

You only need to fill this section in if the hearing was delayed or adjourned.

|                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Why was the hearing delayed or adjourned?</b> | Cases can be delayed until later in the day, or formally adjourned and rescheduled for a different date. Note down the cause of any delay or adjournment. This won't always be obvious – if you can't tell, tick 'Reason unclear'. Use the box beneath to jot down any other information about the delay length, reason and what happened next. |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|



#### YOUR REFLECTIONS

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Your reflections</b> | <p>This space is for you to note down anything you find interesting, striking or concerning about the process or the outcome. You can also use this space to describe your reactions to what you have seen.</p> <p>Try to explain any conclusions with examples. If you think the magistrates were fair in their decision making, what did you see and hear that made you think that? If you thought the defence lawyer did or didn't do a good job, what did they say to bring you to that conclusion?</p> <p>Use the notes pages at the back of the booklet if you run out of space. Just make sure you note which hearing your notes relate to so you can upload it accurately later.</p> |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## Court environment form – explanation

This form (available online or on paper) asks you about your experience as a public visitor to the court. This includes questions about how accessible the court is, the security screening process, communication and signposting in the court and public facilities. The second section of the form is about whether anyone questioned your presence in the court.

## Uploading your data

Please upload any handwritten notes from your courtwatching booklet into the Google Form once you have left the magistrates' court. You will be sent the link to the Google Form by email. The questions in the Google Form mirror the questions in the paper forms so you can copy your responses directly into the Google Form. Try to fill in the Google Form as soon as possible after observing the court, before you forget what you have seen.

# Talking publicly about courtwatching

We think the more people who know about courtwatching, the better! We do lots of work promoting the project on social and mainstream media. This includes sharing stories and findings from your observations, based on the reports you send to us. We want to raise awareness of what's going on in the courts, draw attention to good and bad practice, and make the case for improvements.

If you're interested in being involved in communicating about the project publicly, we'd love to support and involve you! Opportunities that might come up include:

- Speaking to a journalist about your experience of courtwatching
- Writing a blog for the Transform Justice website
- Featuring in our 'volunteer spotlight' series on social media
- Posting about your courtwatching experience on our social media

Email [courtwatch@transformjustice.org.uk](mailto:courtwatch@transformjustice.org.uk) if you'd like to be involved. And keep an eye out for emails from us which we'll use to share any media opportunities.

You can post on social media yourself, however this requires more caution. There are rules and restrictions about what people are allowed to post about magistrates' court cases. Some information shared in court is prohibited by law from being published on social media or in other public places. Doing so can mean you are in contempt of court. It might not be immediately obvious what can or can't be shared when you're in the courtroom.

If you do want to post on social media, please bear in mind:

- It's illegal to take photographs or record anything that happens in court
- Don't tweet or report on any case live from the courtroom itself, though there is no bar on reporting/tweeting from the waiting areas of the courtroom

- Don't report on cases where the defendant or a witness was under 18 years old or where a reporting restriction is in place (this should be mentioned in the hearing)
- If you're talking about a particular case, only report the facts of a case, not opinion i.e. only what was said in court and the decisions made

Transform Justice's director Penelope sometimes tweets about court cases – have a look at some examples [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

We are always here to help you if you have questions about what you can or can't say publicly about courtwatching.

## Volunteer wellbeing

If you require any accommodations or adjustments in order to carry out volunteering with CourtWatch London, please let us know at [courtwatch@transformjustice.org.uk](mailto:courtwatch@transformjustice.org.uk) and we will discuss options with you.

The magistrates' courts hear a wide range of criminal cases from the mundane, such as speeding violations, to the very serious such as rape, murder or child abuse. These most serious offences go on to be decided in the Crown Court, but all cases start in the magistrates' court.

It is possible that courtwatchers may hear case details which cause distress or upset. Should this happen you are free to leave the courtroom at any time – you do not need to stay and complete your observations. You can move to a different courtroom, or leave the magistrates' court entirely. You do not need to explain to the CourtWatch London team why you left. If you would like to talk to us about what happened, email us at [courtwatch@transformjustice.org.uk](mailto:courtwatch@transformjustice.org.uk) and we will arrange a time for a debrief with you.



CourtWatch London will host online fortnightly check-ins for volunteer courtwatchers. These are optional and a space for courtwatchers to ask questions, raise issues or feed back anything they have not felt able to report via the courtwatching form.

If you become distressed outside of normal working hours, the Samaritans are available via a Freephone number (116 123).



## More information

Scan the QR code below or visit [linktr.ee/courtwatchlondon](https://linktr.ee/courtwatchlondon) for more information and resources, including:



- A digital copy of this guidance
- A full description of the CourtWatch London volunteer role
- A glossary of key terms
- Further reading
- Links to our social media

Email us at [courtwatch@transformjustice.org.uk](mailto:courtwatch@transformjustice.org.uk) if you have any further questions, and a member of the team will get back to you.