

# Courtwatching: a learning guide

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# About this guide

This guide summarises how Transform Justice, a criminal justice campaigning charity, delivered a courtwatching project in London's magistrates' courts. It is written for anyone interested in setting up their own courtwatching project, including charities, community groups and universities.

## Why courtwatch?

“It has felt like an important and inspiring collective endeavour.” – Courtwatcher

The public has full access to most criminal courts; anyone can visit and observe the daily hearings taking place there. Courtwatching brings community members together to collectively exercise this right to see how justice is done. Courtwatching is a growing phenomenon in the United States, where community observations have generated evidence to challenge unfair behaviour from judges and achieve changes to unjust and discriminatory laws. By being present in court and documenting what happens, courtwatchers highlight the failings in our justice system so we can make our courts fairer, more open and more just.

## About CourtWatch London

CourtWatch London was a mass court observation project which trained citizen volunteers to observe magistrates' court hearings and report back what they saw.

The project aimed to increase community ownership and oversight of our magistrates' courts, gather data to strengthen the case for change, and explore the potential of community courtwatching in England and Wales. The project was funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust and the Network for Social Change, running in 2023 with reports on the findings published in May 2024.

Network for  
Social Change  
Charitable trust



CHAMPIONING  
SOCIAL  
JUSTICE

Charity number: 1115476



# The volunteers

## Recruiting volunteers

Courtwatching projects depend on volunteers who are willing to visit their local magistrates' courts, take detailed notes and report back what they see. We had no existing volunteers to draw on so one of the first steps for the project was recruitment.

We didn't set quotas for volunteer recruitment but were keen to reach beyond people who worked or studied in criminal justice. We focused advertising on the geographical areas around our three target magistrates' courts (Highbury Corner, Thames and Croydon) in an effort to establish a community of volunteers in each area, and to make it easier for people to attend in-person training.



### Volunteer recruitment routes:

- Social media including **paid Facebook ads**: we spent £500 on Facebook advertising targeted to people living in the geographical areas around our three focus courts. The ads got 181 people to sign up to the volunteering list. We also posted on Twitter and LinkedIn.
- **Local council volunteer websites**: every borough in London has a local volunteering website where charities can list volunteering opportunities in the area for free.
- Articles in **local newspapers** such as Inside Croydon and Islington Tribune.
- **Posters** in local libraries, shops and cafes around the focus courts.
- A note in a few **criminal justice newsletters** such as Clinks Light Lunch and the Criminal Justice Alliance bulletin.



Inside Croydon



## Volunteers wanted to make sure justice is seen to be done



insidecroydon

1 month ago

A public-interest charity is recruiting volunteers to become the eyes and ears of their community in Croydon's courts.



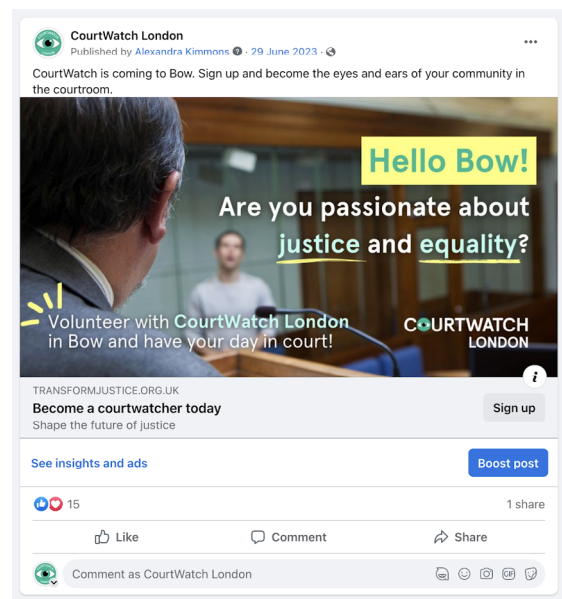
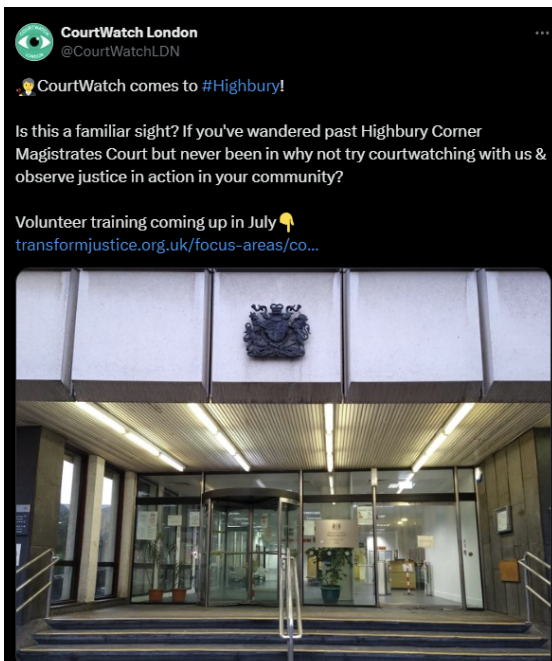
I Want to Volunteer We Recruit Volunteers About us VSCVF



Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets (VCTH) recruits volunteers for a wide variety of non-profit organisations in Tower Hamlets. We work with Volunteer Co-ordinators, providing them with free information, training and advice on all aspects of volunteering.



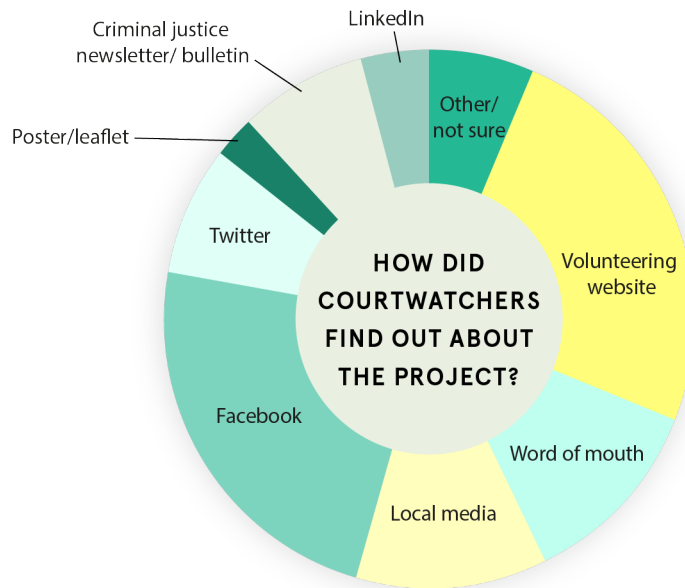
Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets is the quality accredited volunteer development agency for the borough of Tower Hamlets.



All recruitment routes asked people to sign up to a [mailing list](#). Anyone who signed up was sent a welcome email with a link to the [volunteer role description](#).

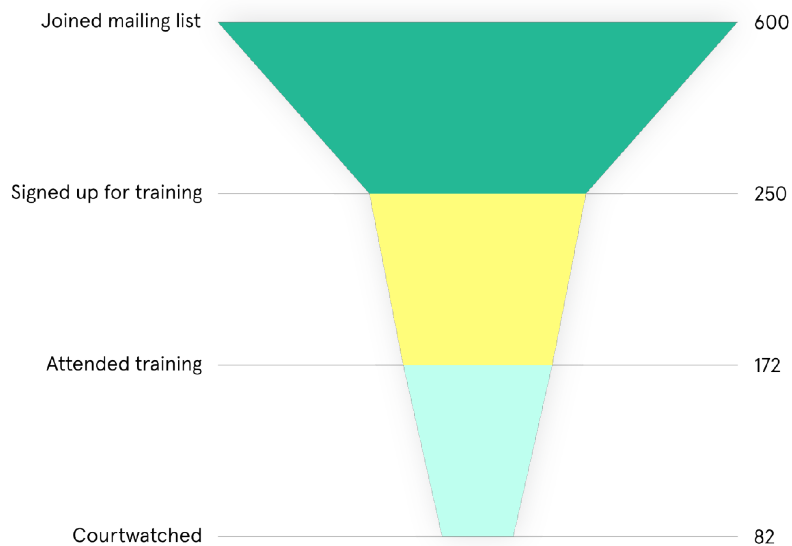
As shown below, our most successful routes for reaching volunteers were **social media** (particularly paid Facebook ads and Twitter) and **local council volunteer websites**.

## HOW DID OUR COURTWATCHERS HEAR ABOUT COURTWATCH LONDON?



Recruitment exceeded expectations and by September we had over 600 people signed up to the email list, although only a proportion went on to complete training and fewer still visited a court (see below).

## VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT BY NUMBERS



## Training volunteers

We advertised training sessions to everyone on the mailing list and used Google Forms to track sign ups. Training was in two parts:

- Part 1: A three-hour in-person session covering the aims of CourtWatch London, what happens in a magistrates' court, rules of the court, and the courtwatcher role.
- Part 2: A 90-minute online session to run through the data collection forms, how to upload notes and a few other practicalities.

In-person training sessions were held at a university near Highbury Corner magistrates' court in north London (offered pro bono by London Metropolitan University) and the Croydon Voluntary Action Centre (which we paid for). Here are the [agenda](#) and [slides](#) used in the training sessions.

All volunteers were given a [volunteer guidance document](#) (a written version of what we covered in the training) and a courtwatcher booklet, comprising blank forms to write their handwritten notes in during each visit.

## Supporting volunteers

We knew some volunteers might find visiting the courts daunting or distressing and so were keen to have a range of ways for courtwatchers to keep in touch. We also wanted to keep volunteers engaged and interested in the project. Support included:

- Covering in the **training** how people could contact us if they wanted to talk.
- Suggesting volunteers **buddy up** for their first visit, using the WhatsApp groups to coordinate.
- **Fortnightly online check ins** on Zoom, open to all trained courtwatchers. These had low attendance but were useful as a space for courtwatchers to bring questions, compare experiences, and give each other tips and encouragement.
- A CourtWatch London **email address and mobile phone number** for people to contact us with any questions or issues.
- **Weekly update emails** to everyone on the mailing list, giving progress updates and reminding courtwatchers that they could contact us with any questions or issues.
- Covering **volunteer travel expenses** to and from court visits, plus **lunch expenses** for anyone who stayed for the whole day.
- An electronic **courtwatcher certificate** emailed to volunteers who wanted one, after they completed their first court visit.



- A **CourtWatch London WhatsApp community** for trained volunteers, with court-specific WhatsApp groups. Courtwatchers used these groups to exchange practical information, for example about disabled parking bays or whether the lift was still broken. We also shared project updates and posted calls for volunteers interested in media opportunities.
- **Team member court visits** with an open invite to first-time courtwatchers so we could show them the ropes.
- **Extra support for courtwatchers of colour.** Volunteers from racially minoritised communities were offered one-to-one support from a criminal justice expert on our advisory group (herself a person of colour), with issues relating to race and their court experiences. This offer was in recognition of the fact that the CourtWatch London team members were all White, and that while the volunteer base was reasonably diverse, people of colour were still in the minority, and so might not feel comfortable discussing issues relating to race in group settings. In the end, the support was not drawn on by volunteers although we received feedback that the offer was appreciated.
- **Additional notetaking guidance** setting out tips for how courtwatchers could make their notes as useful as possible, based on a review of early courtwatching data.
- Two **online events** for interested courtwatchers, on the magistracy and on race and the magistrates' courts.
- An **in-person celebration event** to mark the end of the courtwatching phase with some courtwatcher awards and time to discuss recommendations for change and ideas for next steps.



## What have we learned about supporting volunteers?

Courtwatchers were generally very positive about their experience of volunteering for the project. Many found it a valuable opportunity to learn about the courts and criminal justice system, or to contribute to something they felt would improve the courts, their community or society more generally. However there was some learning, from volunteer feedback and our own reflections, of what we might have done better or differently.

### More training on dealing with court audibility issues

We were caught off guard by how many courtwatchers reported problems hearing what was being said by lawyers, judges and defendants from the public gallery. We wish we had covered this in more detail in training, particularly what to do if hearing is a problem (ask to sit in the main courtroom, ask the usher to request people speak up or use the microphones, or move to another courtroom). Longer term, improving audibility from the public gallery is a top priority for our advocacy on how courts can be improved.

### More support and encouragement for first-time courtwatchers

Less than half of the 175 people we trained went on to visit a court. Ideally this conversion rate would be higher given the resource involved in delivering training. We don't know why trained volunteers didn't end up visiting a court but one likely factor was that courts are intimidating places to visit for the first time. In future we would spend more time supporting trained volunteers to overcome this nervousness by having a team member visit a court once a week with an open invite for volunteers to join them. We did this a couple of times but could have made it a regular offer and advertised it more widely.

### More space for courtwatcher engagement and discussion?

We could have made greater use of the WhatsApp groups by initiating discussions on different themes and issues, to encourage courtwatcher engagement and reflection on what they saw in court. We didn't explore this potential as our small team was busy delivering training, and we were wary of the resource and safeguarding implications of having these wider ranging discussions on WhatsApp. Courtwatchers did bring issues and in-depth reflections to the online fortnightly check-ins, which indicates some appetite for deeper discussion of what they were seeing in courts. In a future project we would investigate how we could give courtwatchers more space and encouragement to discuss issues, e.g. through more regular online check-ins, or a specific WhatsApp group for people who wanted more discussion about the issues they were seeing, with moderation from the project team.

# The data

## Court selection

Volunteers were encouraged to focus their visits on three London magistrates' courts: Highbury Corner magistrates' court in Islington, Thames magistrates' court in Bow, and Croydon magistrates' court. We focused on three courts for a few reasons:

- We wanted to recruit volunteers who lived near to the magistrates' courts, and having a smaller number of courts allowed us to do this in a more targeted way.
- To make it practically easier for people to attend in-person training, as we could hold it in locations near to the target courts.
- To foster a sense of local connection between courtwatchers. We thought this would come more naturally if volunteers were grouped around local courts rather than London-wide.

We chose those three courts in particular because they were the busiest courts in London, with multiple courtrooms running at once, meaning volunteers would be less likely to spend time waiting for the next hearing to start. They also gave a reasonable geographical spread across London (albeit with no west London coverage).

Volunteers were encouraged to attend a mix of hearing types, although we suggested targeting hearings where the prosecutor was the Crown Prosecution Service rather than local councils or the DVLA.

## Data collection

We met with experts and conducted internet research on past courtwatching and court observation projects to guide the design of the data collection form. We also set up an advisory group at the start of the project, made up of eleven experts from academia and the voluntary sector. The group provided advice, support and constructive challenge to the project, by email and three online meetings, on topics including the approach to court engagement, data collection and analysis and reporting.



A group of students from London Metropolitan University kindly spent a morning in court testing out draft courtwatching forms (courtesy of a project advisory group member) and gave feedback.

To avoid putting the burden on volunteers to print their own forms, we provided courtwatchers with paper booklets of blank forms at the initial training session. The booklet contained:

- [Hearing observation form](#) (30 copies) – capturing details about the magistrates or judge, the defendant, the court process, the offence, and the outcome, with space for courtwatchers' own reflections. To be completed once per hearing.
- [Court environment form](#) (5 copies) – covering security procedures, court information, cleanliness, and how welcome the court was. To be completed once per visit.
- [Young adults form](#) (10 copies) – an additional form to complete when the defendant is a young adult (aged 18-25), a particular focus of our project. This asked if the young adult's maturity was mentioned and if so, the nature and perceived impact of those comments.
- Blank pages for additional notes (5 pages)

There are many courtrooms in each courthouse. In order to choose which courtroom to go to, we suggested courtwatchers look at court lists – printed lists of cases which should be displayed in a central lobby and outside each individual courtroom. Volunteers could also use the free online service [Courtserve](#) to find out about cases in advance.

Courtwatchers wrote notes by hand which they typed up into an online version of the forms once they got home. Any volunteers who completed a booklet were sent a new one in the post.

We also asked volunteers to complete a short online survey at the end of the training sessions so that we could gather some data on courtwatcher demographics and court experience to include in the reports as context for the findings.

## Data analysis and reporting

We used an analysis software called [Dedoose](#) to code the qualitative data using a theme-based coding framework, with freelance support from two academic researchers.

A [Statisticians for Society](#) volunteer statistician also looked over our data and advised on the approach to the analysis of the quantitative data.

Given the quantity and richness of the courtwatching data we split the findings into three reports, one on [open justice](#), one on [young adult defendants](#) and another on the [court process and decision making](#).

## What have we learned about courtwatching data collection?

### Laptops in the public gallery?

Courtwatchers took handwritten notes in their courtwatcher booklets which they typed up into an online form afterwards. This was time-consuming for volunteers. We took this approach because we understood that observers were not allowed to use laptops in magistrates' courts without permission. We have since learned that observers technically can use laptops, although in practice we still don't know if they would face questions by court staff for doing so. For a future project we would like to test whether observers can bring laptops into court without being challenged and, if so, offer this option to volunteers.

### Tweaks to the data collection forms

We asked courtwatchers to gather a huge amount of information. This led to an incredibly rich dataset but inevitably some data ended up not being used in the reports. In particular, the tick box data on the factors raised by the prosecution and defence, details about the grounds for remanding defendants (detaining them in prison pre-trial), and case start time. In a future project we might remove these questions from the form. In an effort to minimise the burden on courtwatchers, we also said they didn't need to fill out the court environment form on every visit. This made the conclusions we drew from that data less reliable; in future we would ask courtwatchers to fill out one environment form on every visit.



# The system

## Court engagement

We took a light-touch approach to informing those working in the courts system of the project, emailing the London senior judge and head of legal operations, and mentioning it to help desk staff at each of the focus courts. We wanted to understand what it was like to be an unknown public observer in the magistrates' court. We also wanted to get a true reflection of what is happening in the courts rather than have the conspicuous presence of volunteers prompt a change in court behaviour. It is worth noting that several US courtwatching projects are designed to do just that. One project had courtwatchers wear yellow vests to make it obvious to the court that someone from the community was watching, the hope being that this will bring about fairer and more just treatment of defendants.

## Communication and media

Different courtwatching projects have different tones and communication strategies. Some are more confrontational, for example naming and shaming judges on social media and writing strongly worded open letters flagging issues which emerge from the data gathered by volunteers. Some proactively communicate about the observations in almost real time, whereas others save sharing what courtwatchers have seen until their annual reports.

Our tone on social media was intentionally measured so as not to hinder relationship-building with key stakeholders in the judicial system, whilst still being able to address critical concerns. Our early communications mainly focused on recruiting volunteers through local media articles and social media. After that the emphasis shifted to raising awareness of the project and the issues emerging through courtwatcher observations.

In training we issued volunteers with guidance advising them against posting about court hearings on their personal social media (page 11 of our volunteer guidance [here](#)), to avoid them falling foul of contempt of court laws. For volunteers who were still keen to post about what they were seeing, we encouraged them to contact us so we could support them to do so.



We posted regular [volunteer spotlights](#) on Twitter and LinkedIn and wrote blogs about emerging issues such as the problems with [courtwatchers not being able to hear](#), or from [courtwatchers, reflecting on their experiences](#).

We arranged for a journalist to accompany one of our courtwatchers to court for an [article](#) about the project for the Evening Standard.

## Policy impact

We believe strongly that members of the public visiting courts is a good in itself. However we (and many of our courtwatchers) also wanted the project to lead to improvements to the courts system.

A key route to achieving this is the reports summarising the courtwatchers' findings and recommendations for change. But there were also opportunities for policy impact during the project. We arranged a meeting between the Ministry of Justice open justice policy team and a group of courtwatchers to discuss the government's [call for evidence](#) on open justice. Courtwatchers gave us positive feedback on the experience and asked if there may be other opportunities to feed directly into policy making.

Our courtwatching data demonstrated the challenges faced by unrepresented defendants in court. This was used by the counsel for the Law Society in their judicial review on legal aid. We also used courtwatching data to provide feedback on a new guide for members of the public attending courts and tribunals, produced by the courts service.

### COURTWATCH LONDON LAUNCH EVENT PANEL



## The system: learning and reflections

### Targeted training for comms-savvy volunteers

Concerned about volunteers falling foul of confusing contempt of court rules, we advised courtwatchers not to post publicly on social media or speak to mainstream media about the cases they observed. Whether volunteers were following our advice, or they were not that interested in the first place, this led to very few posts from courtwatchers on social media. A better approach might have been to identify a small number of courtwatchers who were particularly interested in communicating on social media about their observations and give them training and support in how to do so appropriately. This would mean the public hears more from courtwatchers directly about what they have seen in court.

### Project tone and aims

As outlined in this [blog](#), CourtWatch London's project aims were less confrontational and more explorative than the aims of many courtwatching projects in the US. There, many projects are overtly abolitionist and/or focused on racial injustices. Our aims reflected Transform Justice's reformist tone and approach and this will inevitably have had an influence on the sort of volunteers we attracted, the data gathered and the project's conclusions. We see much scope and value in courtwatching projects which adopt a different tone and approach, led by other people or groups with different interests. We hope this learning guide will be of assistance to anyone looking to start their own courtwatching project; if you'd like to speak to us, get in touch.

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