



HM Courts &
Tribunals Service

How you can attend or access courts or tribunals

- a guide for members of the public

February 2024



How to attend or access **courts or tribunals**

This guide will help you understand your rights when attending court or tribunal hearings as a member of the public. It also provides advice on how you can access information about a court or tribunal case.

There is specific guidance if you are [attending a court or tribunal](#) to participate in a hearing, [attending as a victim or witness](#), or [attending a trial as a member of a jury](#). We also [offer support to people with disabilities](#) to make sure they can access our courts and tribunals to reduce and overcome any barriers..

Our justice system is widely recognised as being fair, independent and transparent. It does have some complex processes that may make it challenging to understand what's happening and why.

An open and transparent justice system gives confidence that we live in a country that is fair and just. The principle of open justice – that justice must be done and be seen to be done – is fundamental to our justice system. It's this principle which gives you the right to know what happens in courts and tribunals.

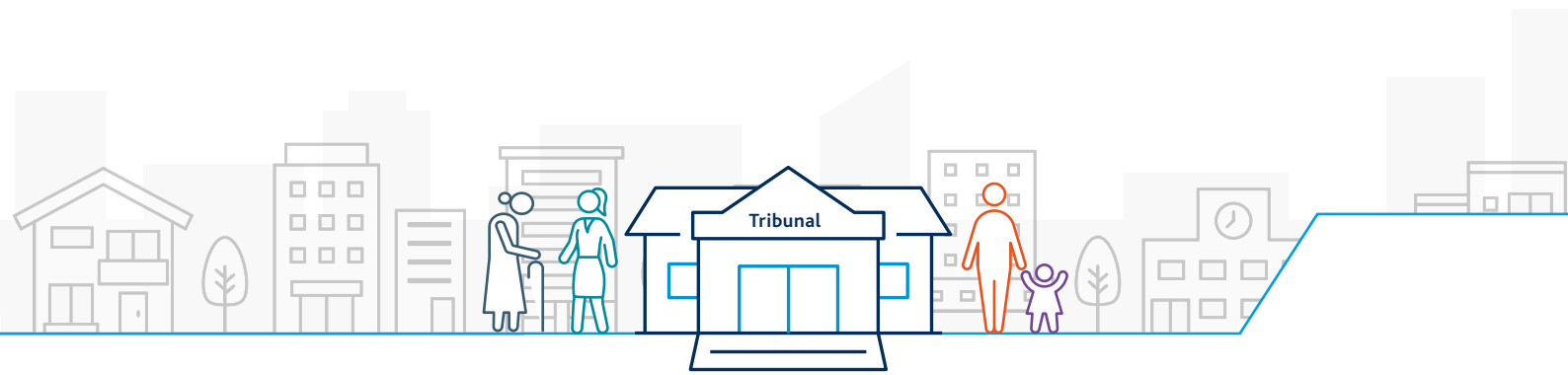
For centuries open justice has been fulfilled by having public galleries in courts and tribunals which allow you to observe proceedings in-person, to see justice being delivered. This is still the case and where a judge considers it appropriate, you can now observe a court or tribunal hearing remotely online.

Types of courts and tribunals

Hearings in the legal system are broadly divided into four types, known as jurisdictions:

- **Criminal:** Cases where an individual is alleged to have committed a crime. All cases begin in a magistrates' court, with more serious cases progressing to the Crown Court. Specialist magistrates' courts called youth courts deal with criminal cases involving children aged between 10 and 17.
- **Civil:** Usually disputes between people or organisations and include landlord and tenant disputes, debt recovery, claims between companies. These cases are mostly heard in the County Court. Magistrates' courts also have a civil jurisdiction which covers enforcement (e.g. council tax and child support), applications by public bodies for orders such as sexual harm prevention orders or stalking prevention orders and appeals against some local authority decisions.
- **Family:** Usually disputes between family members, for example over arrangements for children and other issues such as parental responsibility and divorce. Also applications by local authorities for orders to protect children from harm.
- **Tribunals:** These are specialist panels dealing with a range of day-to-day disputes such as asylum and immigration claims, unfair dismissal, social security appeals, and tax. They take evidence from parties and other experts.

The Judicial Office website has lots of helpful information about the [history of the justice system](#) and the [structure of the courts and tribunals](#).



Before a hearing

Most court and tribunal hearings usually take place in public. Proceedings in the Family Court and the youth court are held in private and what follows does not apply to them.

The judge or magistrate in each case decides how a hearing is held, including whether and how people can observe. On rare occasions, if they think it's necessary for the proper administration of justice, they can decide to hold a hearing in private, with no observers allowed. Depending on the decision, you may be able to observe a hearing:

- in person, in designated public seating (e.g. in a public gallery or designated part of a courtroom)
- remotely, using a video or audio link

You can use our [Find a Court and Tribunal service](#) to find out:

- location address and contact details
- opening times
- the area(s) of law it covers
- building accessibility

You can ask to observe a court or tribunal hearing remotely. To check if that's an option for a particular hearing, you'll need to contact the court or tribunal in advance and your full name, email address and any other information about yourself requested by the judge.

If a court or tribunal does not have the appropriate technology or resources, or a decision not to hold the hearing remotely has been made by a judge, they might suggest observing the hearing in person instead.

Some court jurisdictions stream some or all of their hearings online such as:

- Supreme Court live streaming
- Court of Appeal (Civil Division) live streaming
- Competition Appeal Tribunal live streaming

Court lists: Courts are responsible for publishing lists of hearings that are due to take place. These lists are available to all, free of charge, and should normally be available – online or in hard copy in court and tribunal buildings – by the morning the hearing will take place. Court lists can sometimes change, if you are unsure or have any questions please ask a member of court staff.

You can access our public court lists through the [GOV.UK website](#) or through our [Courts and Tribunals Hearing service](#).

Security processes: To help keep our court and tribunal buildings safe and secure you must go through security every time you enter. Please [read our guide to going through security](#) at a court or tribunal building when you plan your visit.

Once inside a court building, staff at reception can direct you to the relevant room and public seating area. If you are party or witness in a hearing, please let a member of court staff know when you arrive.

Observing a hearing

Public seating area/gallery: Where possible seating will be in a designated 'public gallery' or other designated seating area. This is a section of seats reserved for the public away from the parties involved in the case. A member of staff can direct you to this area. Unless the judge has specifically restricted public access for good reason, you can enter and leave the courtroom, provided you do so without disrupting proceedings.

Remote hearings: The judge hearing the case will decide if you can observe the hearing remotely. The factors the judge will take into account when making the decision will include: :

- the interests of justice
- the technical capacity of the court to provide remote observation
- what is necessary to secure the proper administration of justice.

On the day of the hearing, you'll need to follow the instructions sent by the court or tribunal. This usually involves the court or tribunal sharing a link with you by email which allows you to observe the hearing online.

Access restrictions: Each court or tribunal has the power to restrict public access to the courtroom where it's necessary to do so in the interests of justice, for example to prevent disorder or help a vulnerable witness give their best evidence.

Access may also be restricted to prevent members of the public, as well as participants in the proceedings, from entering and leaving the courtroom during the following parts of proceedings when:

- the charges are read out
- the jury is enrolled and sworn in
- people such as the jury or witnesses take an oath or affirmation
- the jury returns its verdict
- the judge passes a sentence

It is unlawful to issue a blanket policy for a court or tribunal to restrict access during other parts of the proceedings.



Court and tribunal processes: When a member of staff says "All rise/stand please" you must stand up. This means the judge or magistrate is about to come into the room. They will tell you when to sit down again. You must remain silent when observing a hearing. If you cannot stand because of a disability or condition please let one of our ushers know before the hearing starts.

Photography, filming and sound recording: It is illegal, and can also be a contempt of court, for an observer to take photographs, film, or make sound recordings in the courtroom, hearing room, court building or in any part of the court building. This also applies when attending hearings remotely. It is also illegal, and may be a contempt of court, to publish or broadcast images or recordings made in breach of this ban. In some cases the court may imprison a person doing any of these things.

Using phones and laptops: Mobile phones and other devices such as laptops can be taken into the court or the tribunal room subject to any contrary order from a judge. They cannot be used to record any audio or video of the hearing, and they must not be used to transmit any information about the hearing. If you do take a device in with you please keep it on silent or turn it off if it's not being used to avoid disrupting proceedings

Taking notes: You do not need permission to take notes. Where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that notetaking may be for an unlawful purpose, or that it may disrupt proceedings, you may be asked to stop. If you are unsure, please ask a member of court staff.. Examples include where there is reason to believe that notes are being used to:

- transmit live text-based communications without the required permission
- facilitate the contravention of a reporting restriction

Live text based communication (e.g. 'X' formerly Twitter): Transmitting information about hearings as they happen, for example by texting, tweeting, live streaming, emailing etc. is not permitted without prior permission by the judge or magistrate. All decisions around public access to court hearings are subject to judicial control. You should always check with a member of court or tribunal staff before proceedings begin, as restrictions may also apply in individual cases.

Wi-Fi in court and tribunal buildings: Free [GovWifi is available](#) for the public to use in all court and tribunal buildings.

Broadcasting in courts: Authorised media have permission to film sentencing remarks by some judges in the Crown Court. They may choose to broadcast these in their TV or online news bulletins or publish online. Only judges are filmed, other participants, parties to the case or the public gallery are not currently filmed.

Accessing information about court and tribunal proceedings

As well as observing hearings, you're entitled to receive information about what's happening in courts and tribunals whether or not you were a participant in the hearing.

In some circumstances you can apply for a transcript of a court or tribunal hearing (or specific parts of a hearing) if it was recorded. The court can refuse to provide part or all of a transcript (for example, if details of the hearing are confidential). Magistrates' courts do not record their proceedings.

You may be required to [pay for hearing notes or a transcript](#), please check with the court or tribunal if it's free or if there will be a charge.



Reporting restrictions: Some court or tribunal hearings are subject to restrictions which prevent anyone from reporting on cases or publishing information. If you are unsure if a hearing has a reporting restriction, please speak to the court or tribunal directly. You must adhere to these restrictions and should not publish restricted information. This would be classed as [contempt of court](#) and can carry a fine or prison sentence.

Request for information about cases: If you want information or documentation about a hearing you can contact the relevant court or tribunal. You may have a right to the information, depending on the court's or tribunal's rules. With other information, and information about criminal cases which ended more than 6 months ago, you must apply to a judge or magistrate via the local court or tribunal and explain the reasons for the request.

Contempt of court: '[Contempt of court](#)' happens when someone risks unfairly influencing a court case. It may stop somebody from getting a fair trial and can affect a trial's outcome. Penalties for contempt include fines and imprisonment. Contempt of court can include:

- disobeying or ignoring a court order
- taking photos or shouting out in court
- refusing to answer the court's questions if you're called as a witness
- publicly commenting on a live court case, for example on social media or online news articles

Contact points and further information

You may find useful information at the following websites:

- [HMCTS \(GOV.UK\) website](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-courts-and-tribunals-service)
https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-courts-and-tribunals-service
- [Judiciary website](https://www.judiciary.uk/)
https://www.judiciary.uk/
- [Crown Prosecution Service](https://www.cps.gov.uk/)
https://www.cps.gov.uk/
- [The Police](https://www.police.uk/)
https://www.police.uk/
- [Criminal Procedure Rules](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/rules-and-practice-directions-2020)
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/rules-and-practice-directions-2020
- [Civil Procedure Rules](https://www.justice.gov.uk/courts/procedure-rules/civil/rules)
https://www.justice.gov.uk/courts/procedure-rules/civil/rules
- [Family Procedure Rules](https://www.justice.gov.uk/courts/procedure-rules/family/rules_pd_menu)
https://www.justice.gov.uk/courts/procedure-rules/family/rules_pd_menu
- [Find a court or tribunal](https://www.gov.uk/find-court-tribunal)
https://www.gov.uk/find-court-tribunal
- [The Tribunal Procedure \(Upper Tribunal\) Rules](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2008/2698/contents)
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2008/2698/contents
- [Judiciary website judgments archive](https://www.judiciary.uk/judgments/)
https://www.judiciary.uk/judgments/
- [Find case law \(national archives.gov.uk\)](https://caselaw.nationalarchives.gov.uk)
https://caselaw.nationalarchives.gov.uk
- [Who's who in courts and tribunals](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hmcts-whos-who-in-courts-and-tribunals)
https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hmcts-whos-who-in-courts-and-tribunals
- [Reasonable adjustments in courts and tribunals](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-courts-and-tribunals-service/about/equality-and-diversity)
https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-courts-and-tribunals-service/about/equality-and-diversity
- [Attending court as a victim or witness](https://www.gov.uk/going-to-court-victim-witness)
https://www.gov.uk/going-to-court-victim-witness
- [Attending a trial as a member of a jury](https://www.gov.uk/going-to-court-victim-witness)
https://www.gov.uk/going-to-court-victim-witness
- [HMCTS guide to going through security](https://www.gov.uk/entering-court-or-tribunal-building)
https://www.gov.uk/entering-court-or-tribunal-building
- [Contempt of court](https://www.gov.uk/contempt-of-court)
https://www.gov.uk/contempt-of-court
- [Gov Wifi Service](https://www.wifi.service.gov.uk/)
https://www.wifi.service.gov.uk/
- [Apply for a transcript for a court or tribunal hearing](https://www.gov.uk/apply-transcript-court-tribunal-hearing)
https://www.gov.uk/apply-transcript-court-tribunal-hearing
- [History of the justice system and the structure of the courts and tribunals](https://www.judiciary.uk/about-the-judiciary/our-justice-system/court-structure/)
https://www.judiciary.uk/about-the-judiciary/our-justice-system/court-structure/
- [Support to people with disabilities](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-courts-and-tribunals-service/about/equality-and-diversity)
https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-courts-and-tribunals-service/about/equality-and-diversity



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