



# Pilot Study of CourtWatch London 2.0 Observation Forms

Dr Shaun S. Yates

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# Executive Summary

This pilot study examines seven volunteers' use of draft CourtWatch London 2.0 observation forms, investigating the usefulness of such forms for gathering data from the public galleries of magistrates' courts. The purpose of this evaluation is to aid CourtWatch London in its objective to develop policy reforms that improve the summary justice process in England and Wales. The results of this pilot were timely, as they were communicated to CourtWatch London before it rolled out the second iteration of the court observation project it successfully launched in 2023. That earlier project resulted in a series of policy-reform papers being produced and forwarded to the Ministry of Justice, influencing justice policy in England and Wales. To this end, this pilot has supported CourtWatch London's ongoing mission to improve the quality of criminal justice in England and Wales.

This pilot study, which took place on 15 January 2025 at Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court, London, involved one volunteer organiser, Dr Shaun S. Yates, and seven student volunteers enrolled in criminology-related higher education courses. The volunteers observed proceedings across various courtroom types over the morning period. Following this, the organiser conducted a two-hour unstructured group interview with the volunteers to collect feedback regarding the usefulness of the observation forms (see Section 3; also see Appendices 1 and 2). This pilot found that, overall, the forms for collecting data from the courts were useful but could be improved. The volunteers reported that the design of the forms made it difficult to record data (see Section 3.1). At the same time, the volunteers wanted the forms to be expanded to allow them to record data that they felt was pertinent to fully capturing the quality of justice the courts delivered (see Section 3.2).

This pilot study concludes by emphasising three points: (1) the importance of pre-observation training for volunteers; (2) the potential value of including digital means of note-taking, in keeping with Transform Justice's commitment to diversity and inclusion; and (3) the need for additional data collection boxes on the forms to allow volunteers, and subsequently CourtWatch London researchers, to comment on a greater range of issues relating to the quality of summary justice (further discussed in Section 4).

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# Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Method.....	2
3. Results.....	4
4. Conclusion & Recommendations.....	8
Appendix 1: Pilot Open Justice Observation Form.....	10
Appendix 2: Pilot Hearing Observation Form.....	12

## 1. Introduction

CourtWatch London is a project overseen by the charity Transform Justice. In early 2025, the project was being revised to better pursue its aims: to conduct research and advocacy that tangibly contribute to a fairer, more open and more compassionate justice system. The researcher, Dr Shaun S. Yates, is involved with the project as the Crime Challenge Champion for London Metropolitan University. In this role, Dr Yates supports the charity’s work primarily in an advisory capacity. The project also aligns with the goals of London Metropolitan University’s Crime Challenge Lab, particularly its mission to bolster the democratic integrity of London’s criminal justice institutions.

On 15 January 2025, Dr Yates and seven student volunteers piloted the draft CourtWatch London 2.0 observation forms (see Appendices 1 and 2). The purpose of this pilot study was to assess whether the forms were useful for collecting data that could inform policy reforms intended to enhance the summary justice process. As the CourtWatch London project planned to mobilise a large number of volunteers in late 2025 to observe lower criminal court proceedings, evaluating the design of these forms before the large-scale rollout was important. Doing so helped ensure that future volunteers would collect useful and policy-relevant data. This second iteration of the project has a renewed focus on how the summary justice process uphold the value of open justice. Such research is valuable because it offers practice-grounded insights into how the courts might be improved through concrete policy reform recommendations.



Image of City of London Magistrates' Court, exterior.  
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## 2. Method

The pilot organiser advertised the volunteering opportunity through London Metropolitan University channels. The organiser met with seven students outside Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court on 15 January at 9.15am. The organiser led the volunteers to conduct observations over the morning period (until midday). Following this, the organiser held a ~2hrs unstructured group interview with students to collect their feedback about the usefulness of the CourtWatch London observation forms (these forms are attached in Appendices 1 and 2).

### 2.1 Volunteers' Demography & Prior Knowledge

The volunteers had some to no experience with the lower criminal courts, although all were studying criminology. All of the volunteers apart from one were non-native English speakers. The age range of the volunteers varied, ranging from approximately 21 to 35. Before entering the courthouse, the organiser informed the student volunteers about the rules of courtroom proceedings and how they were to make notes from the gallery of their chosen courtroom.

### 2.2 Use of Revised CourtWatch London Observation Forms

The pilot study made use of two types of observation form that were created by Fionnuala Ratcliffe: the open justice form (see Appendix 1) and the hearing observation form (see Appendix 2). The organiser first presented the forms to the volunteers at 9.15am on 15 January, the day the observations were to take place. Here, in the 45 minutes before the courtroom proceedings began, the organiser allowed the volunteers to inspect the forms. The organiser gave each volunteer 10 copies of the hearing observation form and one copy of the open justice form. In this way, all of the student volunteers were given the same forms to complete.

### 2.3 Courtroom Sampling

This pilot study followed a convenience-based sampling method. The organiser did not instruct the volunteers to go into any particular courtroom within the chosen courthouse. In this way, volunteers were free to observe any of the proceedings of their choice without interference from the organiser. On the day of observation, no youth court proceedings were taking place.

### 2.4 Unstructured Group Interview

At midday, the organiser met with the volunteers and went to a local café to conduct a group unstructured interview, this lasted ~2hrs. All volunteers participated, sharing their observations. The results of this interview are presented in Section 3.

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## 2.5 Ethical Considerations

This pilot study was conducted in accordance with established socio-legal research ethics principles and the doctrine of open justice in England and Wales. Observations took place from the public galleries of a magistrates' court, which were open to the public. The researcher and student volunteers did not interact with defendants or witnesses; additionally, no audio recordings were made. Proceedings subject to reporting restrictions, including those involving youth or closed courts, were not observed.

Although hearings were publicly accessible, the pilot adopted a data-minimisation approach. Observation instruments were designed to record only non-identifying, categorical information directly relevant to testing the usability of the pilot forms. No names, case numbers, addresses, or other direct identifiers were recorded.

As mentioned, this pilot included a voluntary group discussion with participating student observers to evaluate the clarity and practicality of the observation tools. Participation was not linked to teaching or assessment; students were fully informed that their contributions would be anonymised in reporting and that they could decline to contribute to the discussion without consequence. No personal data about students were reported.

All completed observation forms and interview notes were stored in a secure room on campus, accessible only to the researcher. Raw materials (the piloted observation forms) were retained only until the evaluation was completed (at the six-month point), after which the researcher securely destroyed these materials. Only fully anonymised findings are reported here.



Picture of the outside of Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court, London.

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## 3. Results

What follows is a summary of the key issues raised during the group unstructured interview. The issues include a blend of reflections on the usefulness of the forms as well as the volunteers' general experiences of conducting the observations.

### 3.1 Self-Reported Barriers to Effective Data Collection

The volunteers expressed concerns about the accuracy of the data they were collecting because of the compounding factors of: (1) the speediness of proceedings, (2) not being native English speakers and (3) the poor acoustics of courtrooms. The volunteers, as a group, agreed that courtroom proceedings advanced too quickly, to the point that they could not complete all the required information on the forms. Some of the volunteers qualified this by saying that their non-native English status and specifically their English language proficiency may have been the primary reason they struggled to complete all the necessary parts of the form. At the same time, however, the single native English-speaking volunteer emphasised that proceedings indeed moved too quickly to reasonably complete all the sections of the form being



asked of them. This suggests that the speediness of proceedings was the primary reason for volunteers not being able to complete the entirety of the observation forms; rephrased, the volunteers' English language proficiency was not the primary issue that obstructed their data collection efforts. Volunteers also noted how it was difficult to understand what the court staff were saying during proceedings owing to the layout of the courtrooms and the lack of microphones (or the poor use of microphones when they were available). Together, these issues seemed to compound; volunteers felt they were often unable to complete the form accurately, resorting to 'best-guessing'.

The volunteers suggested that specific training on how each court hearing type proceeds would enable them to complete the forms fully and accurately. One volunteer illustrated this issue by pointing out that different courtroom participants announce the defendant's date of birth (sometimes it is the defendant, other times the legal adviser). As a result, volunteers were often caught off guard when important information was announced as they were unfamiliar with court processes. Similarly, some volunteers noted that the courts' use of legalese created a barrier to completing the forms. They proposed that training on how court proceedings operate, including the use of legal terminology, would better prepare them to collect the required data.

Continuing on the issue of barriers to effective data collection, one volunteer explained that she found the forms too cumbersome. Specifically, she found it difficult to navigate the forms during proceedings and instead made ad libitum notes in her notebook, later transcribing this information onto the observation forms. The volunteer recounted her difficulty in quickly locating the relevant boxes before proceedings moved on and expressed discomfort about the noise of rustling papers.

She suggested presenting the forms as a booklet (as was done in 2023/24) to mitigate both the navigation and noise issues. The organiser asked if participants would prefer laptops or tablets for data collection, all volunteers strongly preferred paper-based data collection.

### 3.2 Request to Expand the Scope of the Forms

While the volunteers expressed that the forms were too complex (as discussed in the prior section), they also somewhat paradoxically expressed strong opinions about expanding the focus of the data collection forms.

To begin, volunteers suggested that the forms be expanded to allow data collection of other court staff, not just the defendant and the magistrates/district judges. Specifically, they wanted to comment on the roles of ushers, legal advisers, and probation staff, who, according to the volunteers, have a significant impact on proceedings but are not adequately accounted for in the current draft of the observation forms.

Similarly, the volunteers also felt that the forms did not allow them to fully record their experiences of the 'majesty' and organisation of the courts. They noted that some court staff did not appear to respect the courthouse, which bothered them. For example, some staff were improperly dressed or displayed casual or inappropriate behaviour.

Bow Street Magistrates' Court.  
By chrisdorney - stock.adobe.com



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As one volunteer put it, “They don’t go by their own rules!” They suggested that the observation forms could be expanded to comment on issues of respect for the institution of criminal justice more broadly.

Concerns were raised about the ‘first language’ section of the hearing form. Volunteers argued that it should be revised to provide a more nuanced understanding of the events in court. Specifically, they suggested the form should ask, “Is the defendant able to communicate effectively?” and allow volunteers to explain the specific difficulties the defendant may face, such as living with a disability, rather than simply noting that English is not their first language.

The volunteers also wanted space on the forms to discuss the ‘quality of communication’ between court staff and defendants. They reported that defendants often seemed frustrated by poor communication, which, from the volunteers’ perspective, negatively impacted the quality of justice being delivered by the courts. They suggested revising the forms to allow for this important issue to be recorded.

Volunteers highlighted that outside of formal proceedings, there was important information the forms currently do not capture. For instance, during the interim between cases, staff would sometimes talk about a defendant as if they were not present, when they were. Volunteers found this dehumanising and argued that the forms should allow such important observations to be recorded.

Another dimension the volunteers wanted to capture was the pressure court staff appeared to be under. They noted that the workload in each courtroom varied significantly, shaping the character of proceedings. Volunteers suggested revising the forms to capture data on staff workload and pressure.

Continuing on the need to revise the forms, volunteers noted that the ‘fine’ section should be updated. They recognised that courts impose various financial penalties, such as victim surcharges, costs, and compensation orders. The forms, however, do not currently allow for a nuanced breakdown of these impositions, and the volunteers recommended revising them to improve data accuracy.

Some volunteers were particularly passionate about issues related to defendants’ mental health, homelessness, and drug use. They wanted additional boxes on the form to address these topics, especially in relation to the ‘supportive’ option presented in the hearing form’s grid question. They felt this term (and question) required greater nuance, which the current forms do not accommodate.

Furthermore, specifically in relation to the grid question, some volunteers did not understand certain terms on the forms, such as ‘erratic’ and ‘thorough’. They suggested that these terms should be explained during volunteer training and that definitions should be printed on the forms for reference.

Lastly, volunteers also wanted more space to provide comprehensive answers in the ‘other’ section of the forms, noting that the current boxes are too small.



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## 4. Conclusion & Recommendations

Based on the findings of the prior section, this section offers possible reforms that may enhance the data collection forms. First, this pilot study draws attention to the value that pre-observation training can have on volunteers and subsequently, the quality of data that the project can capture. Training should explain each type of courtroom hearing to volunteers, detailing the process and the role of different courtroom staff in each hearing. This will help prepare volunteers to anticipate what information is to be announced in court and therefore, enable them to complete the forms fully. This training should also explain some of the most commonly used ‘legalese’ of the magistrates’ courts to better prepare volunteer court observers in their data collection efforts.

Second, while the use of paper-based forms seems to be sufficient for the volunteers in this pilot study, it may be in Transform Justice’s interest as an organisation committed to accessibility to offer a digital data collection method to future volunteers.

Third, the forms should be revised both in terms of simplification and expansion. If possible, the forms should be revised once more to remove any unnecessary data collection boxes (as volunteers expressed being somewhat overwhelmed). At the same time and somewhat paradoxically, as based on the responses of the volunteers, the forms could also be expanded. Namely, additional boxes could be added that allow volunteers to comment on: (1) the contributions of all court staff to the justice process; (2) how staff demonstrate respect for the process and their clients/defendants/offenders; (3) the ‘quality of communication’ between staff and defendants/offenders (rather than whether the defendant is a ‘non-native English speaker’); (4) the events that occur between formal hearings; (5) whether the defendant is living with a mental health issue, is homeless or a substance user. Additionally, the ‘other’ boxes should be expanded, if possible, to allow for more comprehensive responses. Lastly, the terms listed in the grid question of the hearing form should have accompanying definitions printed on the forms; this may help volunteers to better understand the terms in this question (such as ‘erratic’).

Collectively, these recommended changes to the observation forms should enhance CourtWatch London 2.0’s efforts to collect useful data for policy reform purposes.



# Appendix 1 - Pilot Open Justice Observation Form

## CourtWatch London - open justice form

Please complete once per court visit.

<b>Volunteer name:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
<b>Court name:</b>	

Please respond to the following statements:

The court is accessible for everybody, with wheelchair access clearly signposted.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Not sure <input type="checkbox"/>	
Security screenings are carried out respectfully.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Not sure <input type="checkbox"/>	
Timings for court cases are clearly displayed and/or explained to court users.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Not sure <input type="checkbox"/>	
Courtroom rules are clearly displayed and communicated to court users.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Not sure <input type="checkbox"/>	
The information helpdesk provided clear and useful information.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A / Not sure <input type="checkbox"/>	
Public facilities in the building (including toilets and waiting areas) are well-maintained and clean.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Not sure <input type="checkbox"/>	
Delays to hearings are explained clearly to court users.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A / Not sure <input type="checkbox"/>	
Court proceedings can be heard clearly from the public gallery.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Some-times <input type="checkbox"/>	Not sure <input type="checkbox"/>
Any courtroom technology (e.g. video links) works properly and efficiently.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Some-times <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A/Not sure <input type="checkbox"/>
Use this space to note anything of interest in relation to the questions above:				

### Courtroom questions

Were you asked why you were in court?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Were you asked if you needed any assistance?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Were you asked to leave any courtrooms?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
If yes to any of the above, please explain who asked you and what happened next.		



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# Appendix 2 - Pilot Hearing Observation Form

## CourtWatch London - hearing observation form

Please complete one form for each hearing.

<b>Court name:</b>	<b>Date:</b>	<b>Time:</b>
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### About the hearing

<b>Who are the judges?</b>	District judge <input type="checkbox"/>	Two magistrates <input type="checkbox"/>	Three magistrates <input type="checkbox"/>
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<b>Type of hearing</b>	Bail/remand <input type="checkbox"/>	Sentencing <input type="checkbox"/>	Trial <input type="checkbox"/>	Plea entry <input type="checkbox"/>
	Other please specify:			

<b>Is the defendant legally represented?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>			
<b>Where is the defendant?</b>	Dock <input type="checkbox"/>	Main courtroom <input type="checkbox"/>	Video link <input type="checkbox"/>		
<b>If defendant on video, where are they?</b>	Prison <input type="checkbox"/>	Police custody <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>		
<b>Who (else) is on video link?</b>	Defence <input type="checkbox"/>	CPS <input type="checkbox"/>	Clerk <input type="checkbox"/>	Witness <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Reason(s) for appearing by video link:</b>					

### About the defendant

<b>Year of birth*:</b>						
<b>Gender</b>	Male <input type="checkbox"/>	Female <input type="checkbox"/>	Other/unclear <input type="checkbox"/>			
<b>Perceived ethnicity of the defendant</b>	White <input type="checkbox"/>	Black <input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please specify):			
	Asian <input type="checkbox"/>	Mixed/Multiple ethnicities <input type="checkbox"/>				
<b>First language English?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>If no:</b>	<b>What is first language?</b>	<b>Was an interpreter provided?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

### About the offence

<b>Offence details</b> e.g. type, date, location				
<b>Plea</b>	Guilty <input type="checkbox"/>	Not guilty <input type="checkbox"/>	No plea entered <input type="checkbox"/>	Unsure <input type="checkbox"/>

### Decision/outcome

<b>What was the outcome of the hearing?</b>	Not guilty <input type="checkbox"/>	Conditional/absolute discharge <input type="checkbox"/>		
	Prison sentence <input type="checkbox"/>	Suspended Sentence <input type="checkbox"/>	Community order <input type="checkbox"/>	Fine <input type="checkbox"/>
	Sentence length: Moved to Crown <input type="checkbox"/>	Conditional bail <input type="checkbox"/>	Unconditional bail <input type="checkbox"/>	Remand <input type="checkbox"/>
	Adjournment <input type="checkbox"/> (see below)		Unclear <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>

### If the hearing was delayed or adjourned:

<b>Why was the</b>	Defendant missing (delayed)	Defendant missing (other reason) <input type="checkbox"/>	Lawyer not present <input type="checkbox"/>	Interpreter not present <input type="checkbox"/>
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<b>hearing delayed or adjourned?</b>	transport from custody) <input type="checkbox"/>	Lawyer not ready <input type="checkbox"/>	IT/court system issue <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>
Other/further details e.g. length of delay:				

**How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
<b>The magistrates were /district judge was:</b>						
<b>Supportive</b>						
<b>Rushed</b>						
<b>Clear</b>						
<b>Rude</b>						
<b>Thorough</b>						
<b>Confident</b>						
<b>Erratic</b>						
<b>Prepared</b>						
<b>The defendant appeared to understand what was happening</b>						

Please note any examples or evidence about your responses to the statements above.

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<b>Your reflections/reactions/further notes (use additional notes pages if needed)</b>



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