

Autism in court: Practical guidance for autistic court users

Published: June 2026

Contents

Contents.....	1
Notes.....	2
Copyright notice	3
1. Introduction	3
1.1 Purpose of guidance and how it was created	3
1.2 Who the guidance is for	3
1.3 How to use the guidance	4
1.4 What the guidance covers	4
1.5 Language used	4
1.6 Overview of the sections	4
2. Challenges faced by autistic court users	5
2.1. Experiences before attending court	5
2.2. Experiences during court	6
3. Preparing for court	6
3.1. Pre-court support for autistic individuals	7
1. Seek legal advice early.....	8
2. Ask for written information and timelines.....	8
3. Seek additional support where needed.....	8
5. Preparing for sensory challenges	9
6. Plan calming strategies	9
4. Disclosure of autism and communication preferences	10
4.1. When to disclose	10
4.2. Why disclose?	10
4.3. When and how to disclose	11
4.4. Expressing your communication preferences	12
5. Support in court	12
5.1 Reasonable adjustments and special measures for autistic people	12

6. Reasonable adjustments.....	14
6.1 Commonly requested adjustments	14
6.2 Other possible adjustments.....	15
7. Special measures	16
8. Court types and layout.....	19
8.1. Types of court.....	19
8.2. Court layout	21
9. Court roles and etiquette.....	22
9.1. Who's who in the courtroom	22
9.2. Court etiquette and addressing officials.....	24
10. Common legal terms	25
11. Giving evidence and legal language	26
11.1. Giving evidence	26
11.2. Understanding legal language	27
12. Self-regulation strategies	28
12.1 Coping with unexpected changes	29
13. Understanding court decisions, rights, and what happens after court	30
13.1. Court decisions	30
13.2. Court users' rights and how to use them	30
13.3. After court – looking after yourself.....	31
14. Useful resources and further support	31
14.1. National charities and support networks	31
14.2. Legal advice and advocacy services	32
14.3. Court preparation and advocacy	32
14.4. Helplines.....	33
15. How this guidance will be maintained.....	33

Notes

This toolkit has been co-created, drawing on the expertise of a range of court professionals, project stakeholders, and autistic court users.

Please note: This toolkit should not be taken as legal advice. It reflects our understanding at the time of writing; however, readers should consult the most up-to-date law, procedures, and research, using the links provided within.

Copyright notice

The University of Bath Autism in Court project is the owner or licensee of all copyright in this toolkit. All rights reserved.

- You may read, print, or download this toolkit for your own personal use.
- You may not make commercial use of this toolkit, adapt, or copy it without our permission.
- Every effort has been made to acknowledge and obtain permission to use any content that may belong to third parties. The University of Bath will rectify any omissions at the earliest opportunity.
- Use of this toolkit is subject to our terms of use.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of guidance and how it was created

This guidance is part of the **Autism in Court project** at the University of Bath, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It aims to improve access to justice for autistic court users, including defendants, witnesses, and victims in the criminal justice system (CJS).

It applies to the Magistrates and Crown Courts in England and Wales.

The guidance was co-created with autistic people who have direct experience of court, legal professionals, and a project stakeholder group. We carried out focus groups, interviews, and surveys, and drew from other research and literature.

This guidance is designed to help autistic court users feel informed, prepared, and supported throughout the court process.

We also co-created a visual map of the changes we would like to see (called a theory of change) and a written narrative version [embed links].

1.2 Who the guidance is for

The guidance is for autistic people who will be attending Magistrates or Crown court as a witness, victim or defendant. We hope that the guidance is also helpful for supporters, such as family members, friends, and others who want to help.

1.3 How to use the guidance

You do not need to read the whole document. Each section is independent, so you can read the parts that apply to you if and when you need them. It is okay to skip sections if you want or need to.

1.4 What the guidance covers

This guidance includes:

- ways to prepare for court
- explanations of court processes and what to expect
- common legal terms
- information about your rights and adjustments, including special measures
- communication advice
- managing the court environment
- understanding court decisions
- further reading and support resources.

1.5 Language used

Throughout this guidance we use identity-first language (for example, autistic people) as opposed to person-first language (i.e. people with autism) (see Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). However, we acknowledge that there is diversity of language preferences within the autistic community (e.g., Robertson et al., 2025).

1.6 Overview of the sections

The guidance is structured as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Challenges faced by autistic court users
3. Preparing for court
4. Disclosure of autism and communication preferences
5. Support in court
6. Reasonable adjustments
7. Special measures
8. Court types and layout
9. Court roles and etiquette
10. Common legal terms
11. Giving evidence and legal language
12. Self-regulation strategies
13. Understanding court decisions, rights, and what happens after court
14. Useful resources and further support.
15. How the guidance will be maintained.

2. Challenges faced by autistic court users

NOTE: This guidance summarises real experiences autistic people have had before and during court. Some readers may find this distressing. Feel free to skip any sections.

Going to court can be difficult for anyone, whether or not they are autistic. However, our research shows that there may be some additional challenges faced by autistic court users. Autistic people experience court in different ways. Some people may need no or minimal support, while others may face significant barriers that make it hard to take part fairly, warranting greater levels of support.

Not all autistic people need extra support in court, but for those who do, this guidance explains what can help.

Many autistic people also have conditions such as anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), epilepsy, or a learning disability. These can affect how someone feels about going to court, and also their participation at court.

Autistic people may experience differences in executive functioning. This means things like planning, organising documents, keeping track of dates, following multi-step instructions, or managing deadlines can be harder, especially during stressful situations.

Some autistic people also have trauma histories. This can increase anxiety and make it harder to concentrate, remember information, or communicate clearly during legal processes.

This section is based on what autistic witnesses, victims, defendants and court professionals have told us, and on existing research about autism in court. Everyone's experience is different, but many autistic people face similar challenges before and during court.

2.1. Experiences before attending court

Many autistic people feel high levels of stress and anxiety before attending court. This stress often comes from the situation itself and can be worse if a person has additional mental health needs.

Common challenges include:

- **The complexity of the legal system**, including understanding your rights, the different processes and jargon, can make preparation overwhelming or unclear.
- **Reliance on verbal communication** (for example, phone calls from solicitors or court staff) without written follow-up, can create barriers for those who need time and alternative formats to process information.

- **Not knowing** what help, support or reasonable adjustments are available.
- **Inconsistent autism awareness** among professionals during pre-court processes.
- **Worrying about disclosing** a diagnosis or identity of autism due to fears of negative judgment, stereotyping or being dismissed, can feel “exhausting”.
- **Long waiting lists for autism assessment and diagnosis** can limit access to legal protections and adjustments.

Unequal access to emotional or financial support also plays a role. Some people have family, friends or paid helpers to support them. Others have no support at all. This can make it harder to prepare for court and can affect access to justice.

2.2. Experiences during court

Autistic people may face a range of challenges during court, including:

- **Difficulty navigating complex procedures and unclear expectations** (such as who is who, when to speak, what stage the case is at).
- **Struggles with the fast pace of proceedings**, making it hard to process questions or form responses. This can lead to short answers or agreeing to leading questions to avoid conflict.
- **Overwhelming sensory environments** including bright lights, noise, crowded spaces, and formal settings, which can trigger distress or meltdowns.
- **Sudden changes to schedules and lack of accessible facilities**, such as quiet waiting areas.
- **Perceived stereotyping or disbelief about autism**, and questioning styles that feel inappropriate or confrontational.
- **Limited ability to request breaks or special measures.** Focus group contributors told us they were unsure whether they were allowed to ask for breaks or special measures and more generally, could feel out of their depth when trying to advocate for themselves.
- **Feeling unheard**, leading to unjust outcomes.

3. Preparing for court

This section includes practical tips to support you before court.

Court can feel confusing or stressful, but there are many ways to prepare, get support and make the experience easier.

It is reasonable and legitimate to ask for support or clarification at any time. These requests are normal, and the court should take them seriously.

HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) has helpful videos on how to prepare for going to court:

[Before you go to court - Preparing to come to court](#)

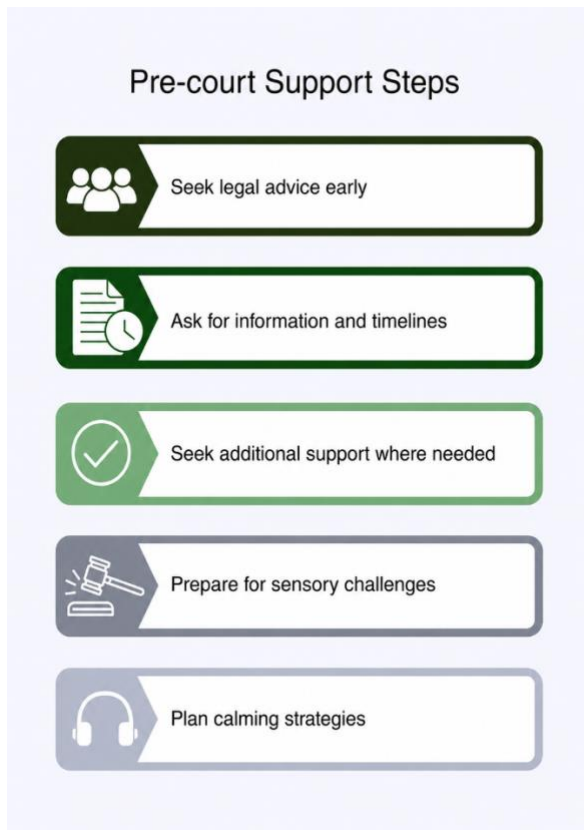


3.1. Pre-court support for autistic individuals

Preparing for court can feel overwhelming. Autistic people in our research described how stress could build up for a range of reasons, such as not knowing what to expect, and the unfamiliar language used. Taking small steps early can help you feel more in control.

This section explains what you can do **before your hearing** (when you go to court for your case) to prepare effectively.

The diagrams below show common steps in pre-court preparation and services that may be able to help.



1. Seek legal advice early

Try to work with solicitors or advocacy organisations that understand autism. They can help you prepare and request adjustments. The National Autistic Society has a [Legal Help directory](#) that you may find useful. If you are a witness, the police, Crown Prosecution Service or the Witness Service may be the people supporting you instead.

2. Ask for written information and timelines

Some people find verbal updates hard to process. You can ask for alternatives, such as:

- written schedules
- visual timelines
- easy read versions of key information
- letters instead of phone calls

This can make it easier to understand what will happen and when.

3. Seek additional support where needed

i. Witness Service

The Witness Service can arrange a pre-trial visit to the court to help witnesses feel more familiar with the court environment. The Witness Service supporter can show you around a courtroom and explain who will be there, and explain what will happen when

you attend court. Pre-trial visits can take place in-person, or through a virtual visit (video call).

ii. Intermediary services

Intermediaries are communication specialists who can help some people understand questions and communicate clearly in court. Registered intermediaries work with witnesses and HMCTS intermediaries work with defendants. Ask the person supporting you in court if this might help. The judge or magistrate makes the final decision.

iii. Arrange to bring a trusted person

Having someone familiar with you can reduce stress and help you feel supported.

iv. Support from other organisations

Charities such as the [National Autistic Society](#) and [Mind](#) can offer guidance and emotional support. You can contact them before your hearing.

v. Reasonable adjustments

Under the Equality Act 2010, you have the right to ask for changes that make court accessible (see Sections 5 and 6 for further information).

Examples include:

- a quiet waiting area
- extra breaks
- adjustments to the environment

5. Preparing for sensory challenges

Think about what helps you stay calm. Courts can be noisy, bright and busy. If you use things like noise-cancelling headphones, ear defenders, sunglasses or tinted lenses to help with sensory sensitivity, then you may want to consider bringing them to court. Please note that you may be asked to remove these when giving evidence.

6. Plan calming strategies

You might find it helpful to use breathing exercises or small comfort items such as fidget tools. Tell the person supporting you in court what you plan to bring so they can make sure this is agreed in advance.

4. Disclosure of autism and communication preferences

It is up to you whether to tell the court you are autistic. You do not have to disclose if you do not want to.

However, sharing this information can help the court understand your needs and help them to decide what adjustments they can make. Not all adjustments may be available or granted, but common ones include:

- extra breaks
- a quiet space
- written information
- support with communication (for example, an intermediary – see sections 5 and 7 for further information).

Read more about adjustments in Sections 5, 6, and 7.

4.1. When to disclose

You can tell the court at any time.

Telling them before your hearing gives more time to arrange support.

If you don't want to name a diagnosis, you can still ask for adjustments by explaining what you need.

4.2. Why disclose?

Disclosure can:

- help the court understand your needs
- make it easier to arrange adjustments
- support clearer communication and decision-making.

Do I have to tell the court I am autistic?

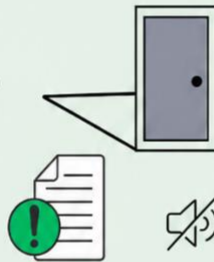
- No. You do not have to tell the court if you do not want to.
- But, if you tell the court, it can help them understand your needs



Why tell the court?

They can make changes so you can take part fairly. These changes are called reasonable adjustments.

- ✓ Extra breaks
- ✓ A quiet space
- ✓ Written information
- ✓ Communication support (like an intermediary)



Benefits of telling the court:

- ✓ Helps them understand your needs
- ✓ Makes it easier to get adjustments
- ✓ Supports clear communication

When to tell the court:

- Before your hearing to give more time to arrange adjustments.
- At the start of the hearing - you can still ask for help then.

4.3. When and how to disclose

- Tell court staff or the person supporting you in court as early as you can.
- You can say: “I am autistic and need adjustments to help me take part.”
- Be specific, for example: “I need written information” or “Bright lights are difficult for me.”
- A trusted person or advocate can help you explain your needs.
- Remember that disclosure is optional.

4.4. Expressing your communication preferences

Let professionals know how you communicate best. You could say:

- *“I prefer written information.”*
- *“I need short, clear questions.”*
- *“I need extra time to answer.”*
- *“Diagrams or schedules help me understand.”*
- *“Step-by-step explanations are easier for me.”*

It is also ok not to know what your communication preferences are and for these to change.

If you have a communication passport, this would be a useful point to share it.

5. Support in court

5.1 Reasonable adjustments and special measures for autistic people

Support to assist people in court broadly falls under two categories: [reasonable adjustments](#) and [special measures](#).

You do not need a formal autism diagnosis to ask for reasonable adjustments that will help you participate in court. However, requests for reasonable adjustments are considered by the court on a case-by-case basis.

Special measures are a different set of support options for vulnerable witnesses to give evidence. You do not need a formal autism diagnosis to be eligible for special measures, but the court needs to decide that your ability to give evidence would be affected without this support in place.

Telling the court that you are autistic does not automatically mean you will be considered vulnerable. The court will look at your needs and how these may affect your ability to give evidence.

For vulnerable defendants, only some special measures are available and these will only be granted in limited circumstances (see Section 7 of this guide). However, other forms of assistance may be available.

Table 1 (below) and Sections 6 and 7 of this guide provide further information for witnesses and defendants about reasonable adjustments and special measures.

Table 1. Support in Court

Term	Meaning	Legislation	Eligibility	How to request
Reasonable adjustments	Reasonable adjustments are changes or support put in place to help someone take part in court proceedings. In court, reasonable adjustments can include things like breaks, extra time to process questions, or changes to the environment. Section 6 provides further examples and information.	Equality Act (2010)	A person may be eligible if they have a disability, health condition which will make taking part in court more difficult. This includes people who are neurodivergent, including autism. A person does not need a formal diagnosis to ask for reasonable adjustments. Decisions are made on a case-by-case basis based on the person's needs. Not all adjustments may be possible or allowed by the court.	You can ask for reasonable adjustments by speaking to a person involved in your case, such as: Your solicitor or barrister, the witness service, or through contacting the court directly. You can ask at any time, but it is best to do this as early as possible. It helps to explain what you find difficult and what would help.
Special Measures	Special Measures are specific types of support and adaptation to help witnesses to give evidence in court. These include things like giving evidence by live video link (instead of being in the courtroom) or having an intermediary to help with communication.	Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act (1999)	A witness may be eligible if the court decides that the quality of their evidence is likely to be affected because they are vulnerable or intimidated. People who can be considered vulnerable include those under 18, and people with disabilities, communication needs, or neurodivergence. Special measures for witnesses are not automatically granted	Special measures must be formally applied for and then approved by a Judge or magistrate. You can ask for them by telling: your solicitor or barrister, The police or the witness service, or through contacting the court directly.

	Section 7 provides further examples and information.		and decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. Vulnerable defendants are not necessarily eligible for special measures, but the Judge may agree for support to be provided.	Explain what you find difficult and how it affects your ability to give evidence.
--	--	--	---	---

6. Reasonable adjustments

Our contributors told us that court can feel overwhelming because of unfamiliar routines, complex language, and sensitivity to noise, light, or social interactions.

Under the **Equality Act (2010)**, if you are autistic, you have the legal right to ask for **reasonable adjustments** to help you participate in court. The court will decide what support can be provided in your case. There is further information in Section 5 of this guide.

6.1 Commonly requested adjustments

- **Sensory aids:** Ear defenders, sunglasses, tinted glasses or dimmed lighting.



- **Quiet spaces:** A separate waiting area away from crowds and noise.



- **Comfort/grounding items:** Fidget toys, weighted blankets, or familiar objects.



- **Support person:** You can bring a trusted person (family, friend, or support worker). Please note that this person won't be allowed in the live link room or witness box when you give evidence.



- **Breaks:** Having planned breaks, and being able to ask for them during the hearing.

6.2 Other possible adjustments

There are other possible adjustments that could be made for you in the courtroom, such as:

- **reducing bright lights or loud noises** where possible
- **allowing extra time** to answer questions
- **using plain English** and avoiding jargon
- **signposting to support services.**

7. Special measures



Under the **Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act (1999)**, some vulnerable and/or intimidated **witnesses** can be eligible for **special measures** to assist them to give evidence. In certain cases, vulnerable defendants may be allowed access to special measures. To find out if you are eligible for special measures, you should ask someone working with you on your case as early as possible – for example, a defence barrister or the witness service. There is further information in Section 5 of this guide.

HMCTS (gov.uk) has a helpful video about special measures:

[Special measures - Preparing to come to court](#)



Table 2 provides a list of the main special measures, explains what they are, and whether they are available for witnesses and defendants.

Please note that just because a special measure is available to some witnesses (and in certain cases, defendants), this does not mean that special measure will be provided, even if it has been requested. The judge decides if any special measures will be allowed on a case-by-case basis.

Table 2. Special measures and their availability for witnesses and defendants

Special Measure	Definition/Purpose	Availability for witnesses	Availability for defendants
Screens	Physical screens placed around the witness box to prevent the witness from seeing the defendant (and the defendant from seeing the witness).	Yes, available to some witnesses.	Yes, but only under certain circumstances.
Live link	Rather than the person giving evidence in the courtroom, they give evidence via a live video link from	Yes, available to some witnesses.	Yes, but only under certain circumstances.

	another room or building.		
Evidence given in private	Anyone who doesn't legally need to be present will leave the public gallery during testimony.	Yes, available to some witnesses.	Yes, but only under certain circumstances.
Removal of wigs and gowns by judges and barristers	Changes to clothing to help make the environment feel less formal.	Yes, available to some witnesses.	Yes, but only under certain circumstances.
Video Recorded Interview	A video recording of a witness' police interview is played in court as their 'evidence in chief'.	Yes, available to some witnesses.	Not available to defendants.
Pre-trial recorded cross-examination	Cross-examination is done before the trial starts and is video recorded. The video recording is played during the trial so the witness doesn't need to attend court.	Yes, available to some witnesses.	Not available to defendants.
Intermediaries	A communication specialist who assesses communication needs and/or supports a witness or defendant to give evidence.	Yes, available to some witnesses.	Yes, available to some defendants.
Aids to communication	For people who need a device to communicate, such as symbol boards or voice synthesisers.	Yes, available to some witnesses.	Yes, available to some defendants.

Further reading:

- National Autistic Society – Criminal Justice Guidance**
 Helps autistic individuals, victims, and their families understand and navigate the criminal justice process, including police interviews, court procedures, and support options.
[Criminal Justice – National Autistic Society](#)
- HM Courts & Tribunals Service – Equality & Diversity / Reasonable Adjustments**
 Official senior court and tribunal guidance on rights under the Equality Act 2010, examples of reasonable adjustments and how to request them.
[Equality and diversity – HMCTS \(GOV.UK\)](#)
- Equal Treatment Bench Book**
 A judiciary reference manual outlining fair treatment of vulnerable and neurodivergent court users. Includes clear guidance for judges on communication, environment, questioning strategies, and accommodations.
[Equal Treatment Bench Book – Courts and Tribunals Judiciary](#)

8. Court types and layout

Going to court can feel unfamiliar or overwhelming, especially if you have never been before. Courts are formal places with specific rules and routines.

Autistic people have told us that their stress was increased by uncertainty about what would happen, who would be there, or what the environment would look like.

This section explains the basics, so you know what to expect.

HMCTS (gov.uk) has videos on what to expect:

[Preparing to Come to Court - Crown Court](#)

[Preparing to Come to Court - Magistrates](#)

8.1. Types of court

Courts in England and Wales have different purposes. Knowing the type of court you are in can make things less confusing.



Table 3. Types of court in England and Wales

Court	What it deals with
Magistrates' Court	Less serious criminal cases (e.g., minor theft, driving offences). Usually no jury. Magistrates or a District Judge make decisions.
Crown Court	Serious criminal cases. Involves a judge and has a jury if the defendant pleads not guilty and the case goes to trial.
County Court	Civil cases like money disputes, property, and contract issues.
High Court	Complex civil cases and appeals from lower courts.
Court of Appeal	Reviews decisions from Crown Court and High Court.
Family Court	Handles family-related matters, such as divorce and child arrangements.

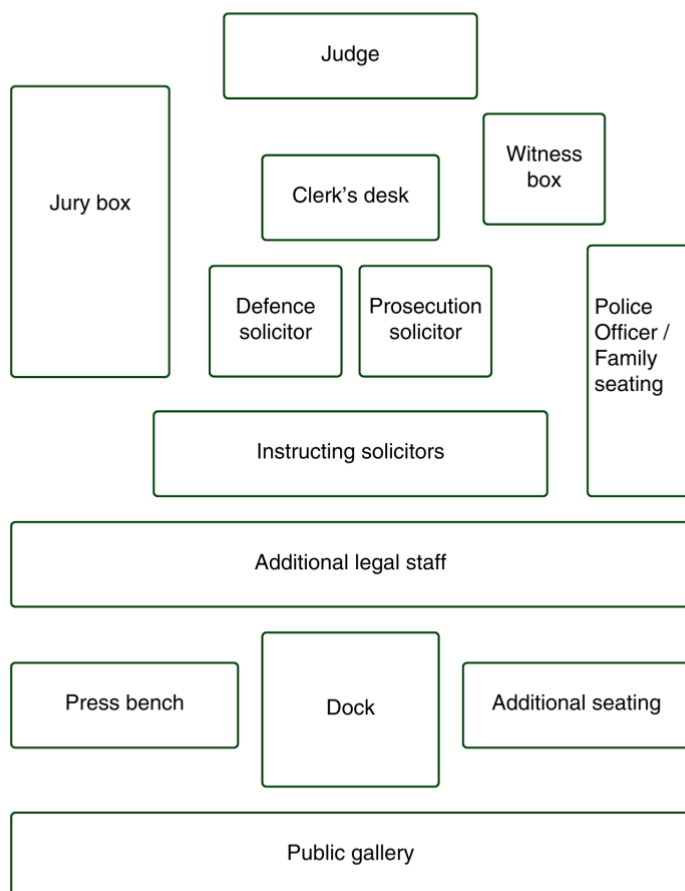
Court	What it deals with
Tribunal	Covers specialised issues like benefits, immigration or employment disputes. There are also dedicated Mental Health Tribunals.

8.2. Court layout

Courtrooms can feel unfamiliar. Understanding the layout can help you feel more prepared. Below is an example of the layout for some courtrooms (though other courtrooms will be different).

Tip: You can ask for a pre-court familiarisation visit through the person supporting you in court or by contacting the court directly.

Criminal Court layout



In most English and Welsh courts:

- The judge or magistrate sits at the front on a raised bench.
- Lawyers sit facing the judge.
- If you are a defendant, you may sit in the dock.
- Witnesses give evidence from the witness box (or via live link, if it is being used).
- The jury sits to one side of the courtroom.
- Supporters may sit in the public gallery.

If you're unsure where to go or what to do, you can ask the usher – they are there to help.

Further reading**Judiciary – Structure of the Courts & Tribunals system:**

<https://www.judiciary.uk/about-the-judiciary/our-justice-system/court-structure/>
[judiciary.uk]

9. Court roles and etiquette

9.1. Who's who in the courtroom

Courtrooms can feel unfamiliar because there are many people with different roles. Knowing who is who can make the process easier.

The police or Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decides whether someone should be charged after a police investigation. If a person is charged with a criminal offence, CPS lawyers (sometimes called prosecution barristers in court) present the case in court.

Table 4. Court roles

Role	What they do
Judge	In Crown Court, the judge oversees proceedings, provides directions to the jury, and determines the sentence for the defendant.
Magistrate	Usually, a panel of three Magistrates oversee cases in Magistrate's Court. They often work alongside a clerk or legal advisor who advises on legal issues.
Prosecution Barrister	Presents the case on behalf of the state (the Crown Prosecution Service).

Role	What they do
Defence Barrister	Represents and argues on behalf of the defendant.
Solicitor	Advises and prepares the case and may represent defendants in Magistrates Court (though not usually in Crown Court).
Court Clerk / Legal Adviser	Assists the judge with points of law and administrative procedures.
Usher	Guides participants into the courtroom and signals when to enter or exit.
Witness	Gives evidence about what they saw or know. People who allege that they are a victim of a crime are usually referred to by the court as a witness, and sometimes as a complainant before the case reaches court.
Defendant	The person accused of a crime.
Jury	Group of 12 members of the public (in Crown Court) who decide the verdict (the final decision) based on evidence.
Intermediaries	Intermediaries are communication specialists who work with people in court who are considered to be vulnerable, and help them to give evidence and participate in the court process. Registered Intermediaries work with witnesses and HMCTS Intermediaries work with defendants.
Witness Services	The Witness Service provide support to people who give evidence in court as witnesses. Witness Service supporters are available in a separate court waiting area, away from the general waiting area, before a witness gives evidence.

Further reading

- HMCTS – Who's Who in Courts and Tribunals:**
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hmcts-whos-who-in-courts-and-tribunals> [gov.uk]

9.2. Court etiquette and addressing officials

Courts have formal rules about behaviour and how to address judges and magistrates. These rules help hearings run smoothly. If no one explains, you can ask the usher or the person supporting you in court.

- When the judge enters, you may hear “All rise, if able.” Stand if you can. If you can’t, that’s okay – just stay seated.
- How you address the judge depends on the court.

Table 5. Addressing judges

Court Type	How to Address the Judge in Court
Crown Court / County Court	“Your Honour” (sometimes senior judges: “My Lord/My Lady”)
High Court	“My Lord” or “My Lady”
Family Court	“Judge,” “Sir,” or “Madam”
Magistrates’ Court	District Judge: “Judge” Lay magistrates: “Sir,” “Madam,” or “Your Worship”
Tribunals	Tribunal Judge: “Judge” Lay members: “Sir” or “Madam”

Further reading

- **Addressing judges – What do I call a judge?:**
<https://www.judiciary.uk/guidance-and-resources/what-do-i-call-a-judge/>
- **Crown Court procedure tips – Crown Court advocacy procedure tips:**
<https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/advocacy/crown-court-advocacy-procedure-tips>

10. Common legal terms

Table 6. Common legal terms (final decisions)

Term	Meaning
Judgment/decision	The formal outcome of a case. The written explanation is called the judgment.
Verdict	The final finding (e.g., guilty or not guilty) by magistrates, judge or jury.
Acquittal	When someone is found not guilty.
Sentence	The punishment decided after a criminal guilty verdict.
Order	A court command requiring someone to do or not do something.
Appeal	Asking a higher court to review a decision, conviction, or sentence.
Precedent	A legal rule based on past decisions that must be followed in similar cases.

Table 7. Criminal court terms

Term	Meaning
Plead guilty	The defendant admits the crime (the offence). The case ends faster, but they 'll have a criminal record that may affect employment or travel.
Plead not guilty	The defendant says that they did not do the crime. The case goes to trial, which can take longer.
Discharge	For minor offences, no punishment is given despite a guilty verdict.
Absolute discharge	No further action is taken, but a record remains.
Conditional discharge	No punishment unless another offence occurs during a set period.
Bail	If a defendant does not have to stay in custody up until the trial, there may still be specific rules to follow (e.g., regular reporting to police) to meet their bail conditions. The defendant will need to return to court at a future date.

Remanded	The court decides that the defendant is denied bail and has needs to be remanded (stay) in custody until the trial.
-----------------	---

11. Giving evidence and legal language

11.1. Giving evidence

If you are giving evidence as a witness or defendant, you will usually stand or sit in the witness box and speak to the judge or magistrate. In Crown courts, you may also speak in front of a jury.

Here's what typically happens:

- Ask early if you need adjustments or special measures such as a **screen, video link, or extra time**.
- You may be asked to take an **oath on a religious book or an affirmation**, which is a promise to tell the truth.



- Both the **prosecution and defence lawyers** will ask you questions.
- It's okay to **say if you don't understand, don't know or don't remember something**.
- You can **ask for a break at any time**.
- Hearings can run late or change unexpectedly, so **be prepared** to wait.

Tips for during court proceedings

Before your hearing

- Bring your hearing/court summons letter and any papers you need.
- You can bring food, non-alcoholic drinks, and hand sanitiser. No glass is allowed.
- Bring items that help you feel comfortable (e.g., ear defenders, sunglasses, fidget items).

What to wear

- There are no strict rules, but dress smartly if you can.
- Hats are only allowed for religious reasons.

When to arrive

- Allow time to arrive before the time on your letter.
- Your case may not start straight away, so bring something to help you wait. For example, something to read.

Security checks

- Your bags and pockets will be checked.
- You may need to remove shoes or coats.
- You may be scanned by security who use a handheld device or you may be asked to go through a scanner like in an airport.

Support and adjustments

- If you need help (breaks, easy-read documents, quieter space), tell the court staff before the hearing.
- You can wear a Sunflower lanyard to show you need extra support.
- Ask if you can bring a supporter.

During the hearing

- Your mobile phone must be switched off or in silent mode. You mustn't look at your mobile phone while the judge is in the courtroom.
- If you can, stand when the judge enters and when a member of staff says, "all rise if able." They will tell you when to sit down again.
- Speak clearly and politely. It's okay to ask for a break or say if you don't understand something.

At the end of the hearing

- The judge or magistrate may leave the room to think about their decision.
- Ask your lawyer or usher if you're unsure what to do next.
- Leave the building after your hearing.

Further reading

- **GOV.UK – What to expect coming to a court or tribunal**

<https://www.gov.uk/going-to-court>

11.2. Understanding legal language

Legal words can be confusing. Misunderstanding legal terms can affect important decisions, such as whether to plead guilty or what a court order means. There is further information in Section 10 of this guide.

Things that can help:

- asking for plain-English explanations
- requesting written definitions
- using official glossaries
- asking the judge or person supporting you in court to explain.

You can also request easy-read documents.

Further reading:

- **Easy to Read Court Guide – explains court processes and language in an accessible format:**
<https://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/site-elements/documents/pdf/social-health/adult-care-and-wellbeing/disability-support/learning-disabilities/easy-read-information/your-guide-to-going-to-court-easy-read.pdf>
- **Understanding legal terms for defendants:**
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5df766b640f0b60959adc738/defendant-understanding-legal-terms-eng.pdf>
- **Ministry of Justice glossary of terms – explains common legal words in plain English:**
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63c5647de90e074eefce155a/glossary-of-terms-large-print.pdf>

12. Self-regulation strategies

Court can feel overwhelming because of formal processes, unfamiliar routines, and unpredictability. Planning strategies to manage these kinds of issues can help you feel more in control.

This section also explains where to find mental health support and helpful resources.

Remember that regulation is not only your responsibility. The court should also make adjustments to help reduce stress.

But, do **be prepared** that the court will not necessarily agree to the adjustments that are requested (for example, a break may be refused or it is suggested that the break will take place later).

Things that may help:

- breathing exercises, mindfulness apps, or listening to music
- comfort items such as fidget toys, weighted blankets, or familiar objects
- ear defenders, sunglasses, or asking for dimmed lights
- asking for breaks at any time in the hearing
- contacting your GP or mental health services if you feel low in mood or anxious.

There are lots of charities that can offer support (see section below).

12.1 Coping with unexpected changes

Sometimes court schedules change with little warning. Occasionally, the case may even need to take place in a different court than planned. Other times the courtroom layout cannot be adjusted. The visual below has some ideas on how to cope.

Coping with unexpected changes



Further reading

Here is a short list of support organisations and helplines:

- [National Autistic Society](#): offering comprehensive directory services, advice, and support for autistic people, and their families.

- **Mind:** UK-wide support that provides a safe space for you to talk about your mental health.
- **Samaritans:** the national helpline is always free to use 24/7 and you can also email, chat or visit a branch.
- **Shout:** a free, text-based mental health messaging service.

13. Understanding court decisions, rights, and what happens after court

13.1. Court decisions

Court decisions use specific words that can feel confusing. Ask the person supporting you in court to always explain in plain English or writing. It's okay to ask for clarification.

Always ask your lawyer or solicitor to explain terms in plain English or provide it in writing.

- Don't hesitate to ask for clarification – it's your right.
- Never make decisions on your own; always seek legal advice.

Further reading

- **MoJ Victims' Guide: Glossary**
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-victims-code>
 Glossary of common criminal justice terms for victims and witnesses.
- **Family Procedure Rules Glossary**
<https://www.justice.gov.uk/courts/procedure-rules/family/glossary>
 Definitions of key terms used in family and civil proceedings.
- **Civil Procedure Rules Glossary**
<https://www.justice.gov.uk/courts/procedure-rules/civil/glossary>
 Official explanations of civil litigation terms and processes.

13.2. Court users' rights and how to use them

Knowing your rights helps you take part fairly. There are court rules and you have rights under the Equality Act 2010. These include:

- asking for reasonable adjustments (quiet spaces, breaks, sensory aids)
- having an intermediary if you need help with communication
- being treated fairly with respect.

If you feel treated unfairly:

- tell the person supporting you in court or court staff
- you can make a complaint to the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office
- keep records of what happened in case you need it later.

13.3. After court – looking after yourself

Court can be exhausting. Some autistic people told us they experienced a “post-court crash” or delayed emotional response.

Give yourself time to rest. Spend time doing something familiar and calming.

If you feel anxious or low, reach out for support:

Mind – www.mind.org.uk

Samaritans – Call **116 123** (free, 24/7)

Shout – Text **SHOUT** to **85258**

National Autistic Society – www.autism.org.uk

14. Useful resources and further support

Below is an overview of some key resources.

14.1. National charities and support networks

- **National Autistic Society (NAS)**
Offers guidance on criminal justice, family law, and reasonable adjustments in court. Their Autism Services Directory lists local advocacy and legal support services.
<https://www.autism.org.uk>
- **Ambitious about Autism**
Provides advice on legal issues and signposts to organisations covering education, social care, family law, and housing. Campaigns for systemic improvements in justice for autistic people.
<https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk>
- **Autism Alliance UK**
A network of autism charities sharing resources and connecting families to local support services.
<https://www.autism-alliance.org.uk/>

- **Autistic UK CIC**

A user-led organisation advocating for autistic people's rights and offering training to improve accessibility in public services, including justice.

<https://www.autisticuk.org/>

14.2. Legal advice and advocacy services

- We can't recommend any legal services but there are some firms with tailored services for autistic court users. The Autism Services Directory is the UK's most comprehensive resource for finding services adapted for autistic people. There is a section on legal help. [Autism Services Directory](#)

- **Disability Law Service** – Free legal advice for disabled people on discrimination, housing, and benefits.

<https://dls.org.uk/>

- **Citizens Advice** – General legal advice and referrals.

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

14.3. Court preparation and advocacy

- **Witness Service**

The Witness Service supports anyone giving evidence in criminal courts. They can explain what will happen on the day, show you around the court building, and offer emotional support before and during the hearing. They are independent and free to use.

<https://witnessservice.org.uk/>

- **Ministry of Justice Witness Intermediary Scheme**

Registered Intermediaries who assess and help with communication for vulnerable witnesses and complainants.

[Read more](#)

- **HMCTS Intermediary Services**

HMCTS-approved intermediaries who assess and help with communication for vulnerable defendants.

[Read more](#)

14.4. Helplines

If you need immediate advice or emotional support before attending court, the following organisations can help:

- **National Autistic Society (NAS)**
Autism Helpline: **0808 800 4104**
Mon–Thu: 10am–4pm, Fri: 9am–3pm
autism.org.uk
- **Ambitious about Autism**
General Enquiries: **020 8815 5444**
ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk
- **Autistic UK CIC**
Email: info@autisticuk.org
autisticuk.org

Additional emotional support:

- Samaritans: 116 123 (24/7)
- Shout: Text 85258 (24/7 crisis text support)

15. How this guidance will be maintained

This best practice guidance is intended to be a living document, evolving in response to feedback, emerging evidence, and changes in court practice. To ensure it remains relevant and effective, the University of Bath will periodically review the material.

Contact us

For further information, suggestions, or to share feedback, please contact:

autismincourt@bath.ac.uk