

THE COURT PREP CHECKLIST



What to bring · What to wear · What to say

*Designed to be opened on the morning of court —
not read on the sofa.*

ANDREW BARLEY

READ THIS FIRST

How to use this pack

This isn't something to read once and file away. It's a printable tool, designed to be used in the moment — the week leading up to court, the night before, the morning of, and the hour after.

Each page does one job. Print the pages you need. Tick the boxes as you go. Keep the pocket card with you on the day.

PAGE 3 Hearing Day Pocket Card

Print, fold, keep in your pocket on the day. The absolute essentials.

PAGE 4 The Week Before

A 7-day prep ticklist. Use it to arrive ready, not scrambling.

PAGE 5 What to Bring & What to Wear

Pack your bag and lay out your clothes the night before.

PAGE 6 Phrases Reference

What to say in court, what to avoid. Glance at it before you go in.

PAGE 7 After the Hearing

What to do — and not do — in the first 24 hours.

PAGE 8 Quick Reference

Addressing the judge, etiquette, the things you'll forget.

HEARING DAY POCKET CARD

Read this in the car park.

BEFORE LEAVING

- ☐ Document bundle packed
- ☐ Second printed copy of the bundle
- ☐ Photo ID (driving licence/passport)
- ☐ Phone fully charged + charger
- ☐ Pen, notepad, water bottle
- ☐ Collared shirt, smart trousers
- ☐ Polished shoes, belt on
- ☐ No trainers, no slogans
- ☐ Court address & room confirmed
- ☐ Leaving 90 minutes early

ON ARRIVAL

- ☐ Arrive 45–60 minutes early
- ☐ Through security — pockets out, belt off
- ☐ Find courtroom on the hearing list
- ☐ Speak to usher: "litigant in person"
- ☐ Find your McKenzie friend if you have one
- ☐ Use the toilet
- ☐ Phone to silent (NOT vibrate)
- ☐ Sit away from your ex
- ☐ Stay off social media
- ☐ No corridor talk with the other side

IN THE COURTROOM

- ☐ Stand when the judge enters/leaves
- ☐ Address the judge as "Judge"
- ☐ Sit upright, hands visible, face neutral
- ☐ Speak to the judge, not your ex
- ☐ Pause before answering
- ☐ Keep focus on the children
- ☐ Don't react when she speaks
- ☐ Don't interrupt — wait your turn
- ☐ If unsure: "Could I have a moment?"
- ☐ Don't guess — say so if you don't know

AFTER THE HEARING

- ☐ Exit without engaging with your ex
- ☐ Note any deadlines from the order
- ☐ Write detailed notes while it's fresh
- ☐ Don't drink to decompress tonight
- ☐ No social media, no messages to her
- ☐ Wait for the typed order before acting

Print, fold in half, keep in your pocket on the day.

USE THIS 7 DAYS OUT

The Week Before & The Night Before

Tick each item off as you complete it. Don't leave it to the day.

7 DAYS BEFORE

- ☐ Confirm hearing date, time and court address in writing
- ☐ Plan how you'll get there — add 30 minutes to map estimates
- ☐ Sort parking or transport tickets
- ☐ Confirm with the court you're a litigant in person
- ☐ Re-read every order and letter received so far

5 DAYS BEFORE

- ☐ Position statement written or reviewed
- ☐ Read your statement out loud at least once
- ☐ Document bundle organised, paginated, indexed
- ☐ Two copies of your bundle printed

3 DAYS BEFORE

- ☐ Hearing notes prepared, short and bullet-pointed
- ☐ McKenzie friend confirmed (if attending)
- ☐ Childcare or work cover booked for the full day

1 DAY BEFORE

- ☐ Final read-through of statement and bundle
- ☐ Outfit laid out (see next page)
- ☐ Bag packed (see next page)
- ☐ Court address confirmed one final time
- ☐ Alarm set — leaving 90 minutes early

THE NIGHT BEFORE

- ☐ Clothes laid out
- ☐ Bag fully packed
- ☐ Phone on charge overnight
- ☐ Position statement read one final time (don't edit)
- ☐ No alcohol
- ☐ No news, no social media
- ☐ In bed early — even if you can't sleep
- ☐ Spoke to the children if you could

If you can't sleep

Don't panic. Most dads don't sleep well the night before. It's normal.

You'll function on little sleep — your body holds up for one day under adrenaline.

Lying down in the dark is still rest.

PACK THE NIGHT BEFORE

What to Bring & What to Wear

Pack and lay out the night before. Don't leave anything for the morning.

WHAT TO BRING

DOCUMENTS

- ☐ Full document bundle
- ☐ Second printed copy of bundle
- ☐ Bundle index page
- ☐ Your hearing notes (short, bullet-pointed)
- ☐ Court letter confirming the hearing

PRACTICAL

- ☐ Photo ID (driving licence or passport)
- ☐ Phone + charger
- ☐ Two pens
- ☐ Notepad
- ☐ Water bottle
- ☐ Cash and card
- ☐ Travel tickets or parking details

USEFUL EXTRAS

- ☐ Tissues
- ☐ Mints or lozenges (mouth goes dry)
- ☐ Small snack — waits run long
- ☐ Reading glasses (if you use them)
- ☐ A book to read during the wait
- ☐ Paracetamol

DO NOT BRING

- ✗ Anything sharp (penknives, scissors)
- ✗ Large bags or rucksacks
- ✗ Anything smelling of alcohol
- ✗ Loose printouts to wave at the judge

WHAT TO WEAR

Signal: reliable, calm, serious father. Not wedding, not nightclub, not weekend casual.

WEAR

- ☐ Plain collared shirt — ironed (white, blue, or neutral)
- ☐ Smart trousers (chinos or suit) — dark colour
- ☐ Polished leather shoes or smart boots
- ☐ Belt that matches your shoes
- ☐ Jumper or blazer optional in winter

AVOID

- ✗ Sportswear (trainers, hoodies, joggers)
- ✗ Ripped or distressed jeans
- ✗ T-shirts with slogans or logos
- ✗ Hats indoors
- ✗ Strong aftershave or cologne
- ✗ Flashy watches, chains, sunglasses on head

GROOMING

- ☐ Shaved or beard tidy
- ☐ Clean hands and nails
- ☐ Recent haircut
- ☐ Brushed teeth, no strong breath

GLANCE AT THIS BEFORE YOU GO IN

What to Say & What Not to Say

Address the judge as "Judge" — not "Your Honour", not "Sir/Madam". Family court is less formal than Crown Court. Keep every answer focused on your children, not on your ex.

✓ WHAT WORKS

"Judge, I would like to propose..."
 "My understanding is..."
 "I would ask the court to consider..."
 "My priority is ensuring the children..."
 "I'm happy to agree to..." (when you can)
 "Could I ask for clarification on..."
 "I'd like to respond to that — my recollection is..."
 "I'm not sure, Judge — I don't want to guess."
 "Could I have a moment to find that in my notes?"
 "I'd like to think about that for a moment."
 "Could I request a brief pause?"

✗ WHAT DOESN'T

"She's lying."
 "She's trying to..." (theorising motives)
 "Everything she's said is wrong."
 "I just want to see my kids." (too vague)
 Raised voice or sarcastic tone
 Interrupting her, her lawyer, or the judge
 Eye rolls, sighs, head shakes
 Long defensive monologues
 Guessing rather than admitting you don't know
 Bringing up her past to score points
 "Your Honour" — this isn't Crown Court

Six rules that hold in every hearing

1. Keep the focus on your children — not your ex.
2. Answer the question asked, not the one you wanted.
3. Be specific, not abstract. Propose actual times and days.
4. Say less, not more. Concise beats long every time.
5. Pause two seconds before answering. It signals composure.
6. If you don't know — say so. Don't guess.

THE FIRST 24 HOURS

After the Hearing

How you handle the day after a hearing often matters more than you'd think. Tick these off in order.

LEAVING THE COURTROOM

- ☐ Stand when the judge rises to leave
- ☐ Gather your papers calmly — no rush
- ☐ Exit without speaking to your ex
- ☐ If approached: "I'd rather not discuss anything outside of court"
- ☐ Don't post on social media on the way home
- ☐ Don't make calls about the hearing while driving

THE FIRST 24 HOURS — DO

- ☐ Write detailed notes while it's still fresh
- ☐ Save those notes somewhere secure and organised
- ☐ Note any deadlines from the order — put them in your calendar
- ☐ Eat a proper meal
- ☐ Rest. Don't schedule anything important
- ☐ If you have your children — be present, not distracted

THE FIRST 24 HOURS — DON'T

- ✗ Don't contact your ex about the outcome
- ✗ Don't post on social media
- ✗ Don't make major case decisions today
- ✗ Don't drink heavily to decompress
- ✗ Don't tell the children specifics — keep it neutral
- ✗ Don't assume the verbal decision is final until written order arrives

In the week after

- ☐ Wait for the typed order. Read it carefully when it arrives.
- ☐ If the typed order differs from what you understood — raise it with the court promptly.
- ☐ Start preparing for whatever comes next: next hearing, CAFCASS, further evidence.
- ☐ If the outcome wasn't what you hoped — feel it, then refocus on the next step.

THE THINGS YOU'LL FORGET

Quick Reference Card

ADDRESSING THE JUDGE

- District Judge → "Judge"
- Deputy District Judge → "Judge"
- Circuit Judge → "Judge"
- Magistrates → "Sir" or "Madam"
- Never "Your Honour" (Crown Court)
- Never "My Lord" / "My Lady" (High Court)

WHEN TO STAND

- When the judge enters the room
- When the judge leaves the room
- When directly addressed (if asked)
- Many family judges keep it relaxed — follow their lead. Stand if unsure.

IF YOU GET BLINDSIDED

- Don't panic, don't get angry
- Don't rush to deny
- "Judge, this is the first I've heard of this."
- Could I have a moment, or respond in writing?"
- If serious — judge will pause for evidence

IF YOU FORGET WHAT TO SAY

- Pause. Breathe. Look at your notes.
- "Judge, could I have a moment to find the point in my notes?"
- Judges expect this from litigants in person.

IF YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED

- "Judge, could I request a brief pause?"
- Most judges allow 5–10 minutes
- Use the time to breathe and reset
- Get water, get air — come back composed

IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER

- Say so. Don't guess.
- "I'm not sure, Judge — I don't want to guess."
- Better than being caught out later
- If you need a document — go and find it

*This is the checklist I wish I'd had on the morning of my first hearing.
If it helps you walk into yours a little more prepared — it's done its job.*

ANDREW BARLEY

The Present Father Project