



Re-imagining Magna Carta for Today

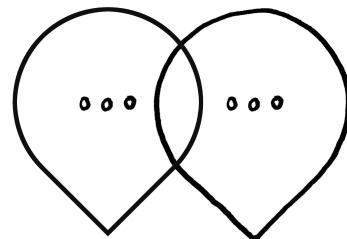
**A facilitation guide for teachers
and youth workers**



**Cumberland
Lodge**



**Attorney
General's
Office**



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Please let us know if you use the guide, and how it went.

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Introduction

2025 marks the 800th anniversary of the final Magna Carta's sealing by Henry III, son of King John. It remains a landmark document in British law, establishing principles of civil liberties and that no one, not even a king or prime minister, is above the Rule of Law.

However, we now face a time when these principles are being challenged by populist and authoritarian leaders across the world. This is made worse by declining trust in democratic and civic institutions, particularly among young people.

In June 2025, the Attorney General's Office and Cumberland Lodge brought together 50 young people to learn about the importance of Magna Carta and the Rule of Law, how it still applies to their lives, and what they would include if they were writing Magna Carta today.



This facilitation guide for teachers and youth workers has been developed as part of that workshop, including material and activities used during the day. Aimed at 16-18 year olds, the guide contains material for approximately four to five hours, although this can be broken down into shorter segments, and activities can be adjusted to suit the group.

The learning outcomes include:

- raising awareness of the importance of the Rule of Law and how it affects young people's lives;
- identifying and addressing contemporary challenges to the Rule of Law;
- and re-designing Magna Carta for the 21st century.

This guide provides an overview of what the Rule of Law means and a brief history of Magna Carta, with links to supporting resources and additional material at the end. There are activities and prompts that can be used to generate discussion and guide participants in writing their own Magna Carta.

We recommend the following resources: flip chart, post-it notes, felt tip pens, spare pens and paper on tables arranged cabaret-style for group work.

1. What is the Rule of Law and what's it got to do with my life today?

This section explores how the law is embedded in things we do every day, and what might happen to our society if we didn't have it.

Icebreaker (15 minutes)

Working in small groups, ask participants to identify a law they followed that day and share it with the rest of their group. They can make a list of these laws and then think about what would happen if those laws didn't exist. Ask each small group to then share their responses with the rest of the group. (*Examples could include: road rules, wearing seatbelts, access to education*).

You could also use a **movement-based activity**. For example, ask participants to move around a room in the same direction. Gradually, quietly, ask several participants to 'break the rules' by moving in the opposite direction or placing obstacles in the way of people's movement. At the end of the exercise ask participants how it felt when the rules were 'broken' or when they had to navigate around obstacles.



Key points for discussion (15 minutes)

Focus on participants' responses to the question of 'what would happen if these laws didn't exist'. The activity highlights that laws allow society to function more smoothly. Laws can keep us safe, provide a way to resolve disputes, and help us make better plans because we can predict what will happen, whether that's driving a car on the same side of the road or running a business knowing that everyone has to follow the same rules.

This legal system is part of **the Rule of Law**: a set of principles based on the idea that we are governed by established laws rather than random decisions by political leaders. The Rule of Law sets out our rights, what we can and can't do in a society, and ensures we are all protected and treated the same. The Rule of Law limits the power of governments, ensuring they are accountable to the law and have to follow it. It also sets out 'a separation of powers', which means that governments, parliaments and courts are independent of each other (e.g. if you are the Prime Minister of the UK, you shouldn't tell a judge what to do, or if you are a member of Parliament you don't have to approve a new law that the Prime Minister introduces, although if you are from the same party you might feel that you have to).

The Rule of Law: Benchmarks

The Council of Europe has set out five key benchmarks for the Rule of Law:

1. Legality: that there is a legal framework that governments and public authorities abide by;
2. Legal certainty: that laws are accessible and widely understood, stable and consistently applied. People know in advance that there will be penalties if the law is broken;
3. Prevention of abuse of powers: that there are safeguards against any abuse of power or corruption;
4. Equality before the law: that there is no discrimination and that equality before the law is guaranteed;
5. Access to justice: that the judiciary are independent and impartial (part of the separation of powers) and that there are fair trials with a presumption of innocence.

In our everyday lives, we can see the Rule of Law in action in the protection of our civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, the right to a fair trial, the ability to peacefully protest, and the right to access the legal system.

For more detail on the Rule of Law Checklist, adopted by the Venice Commission, visit the website of the Council of Europe (link at the end of this guide).

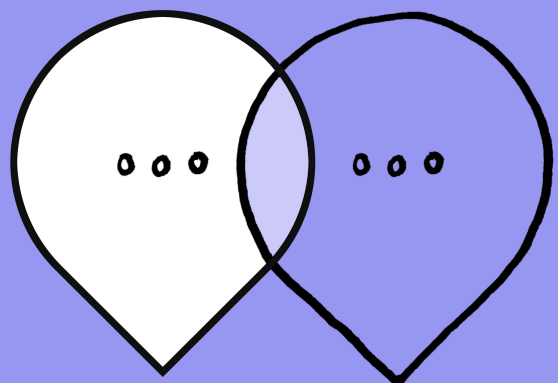
The European Commission also conducts an annual assessment of how the Rule of Law is being implemented across the European Union, available on its website.

These are some of the ideas that young people came up with when we asked them to define the Rule of Law:

'The Rule of Law is a principle that ensures law is applicable and relevant to all, regardless of status.'

'The Rule of Law is how we hold those in power accountable, and must be upheld.'

'The Rule of Law is a balance between the rights of the individual and the exercise of power by others.'



Introducing Magna Carta (20-30 minutes)



The Magna Carta memorial at Runnymede, near to where the charter was sealed.

The Rule of Law developed gradually over hundreds of years but Magna Carta became an important document in enshrining these principles in the UK and internationally.

Initially drawn up in 1215, the original agreement between King John and the barons limited the power of the king, and emphasised the individual's right to a fair trial. Magna Carta was finally confirmed in 1225 by his son, Henry III, after several revisions.

For more background to Magna Carta and why it is still regarded as a foundational document for the Rule of Law, there are links to the following resources at the end of this guide:

- The **Magna Carta Trust** resources for schools
- **The National Archives'** online collection includes excerpts from the original document
- and **History Tools** provides a summary of Magna Carta's enduring importance.

From the 17th to the 20th centuries several more important documents were created that further enshrined the Rule of Law and our civil liberties, including:

- **1689 The English Bill of Rights**, establishing rights including free elections, freedom of speech, the right of petition and just treatment by courts.
- **1787 The Constitution of the USA**
- **1789 French Declaration on the Rights of Man and the Citizen**
- **1789 USA Bill of Rights**
- **1948 The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

For the Rule of Law to work effectively, it is important that people in a society respect the laws and know where there are limits to what we can and can't do.

Questions for participants (20 minutes)

Ask participants to identify examples of where the law places limits on their freedoms. Do people have different beliefs about what freedoms they have?

For example, we have the right to protest, but not to protest violently or commit crimes while protesting. We have the freedom to buy what we want, but sometimes there are conditions on our purchases (e.g. how many times you can return clothes to an online retailer). We have the freedom to hold political beliefs, but also a duty to respect democratic outcomes (e.g. to accept the results if our preferred party loses an election or referendum). We have the right to free speech, but not to cause harm by what we say. But our legal system reflects our society at a particular moment in time and our laws can change as society changes. Much of Magna Carta has been repealed and replaced since the 13th century, although it still retains the charter to protect our liberties and protect the right to a fair legal process.

Sometimes there are demands from people to change laws they feel are unfair or unjust. Sometimes there are demands to try to protect existing laws that people want to keep. Examples could include updates to anti-discrimination laws to strengthen social cohesion in the UK (such as changes made under the Equality Act 2010), amendments to environmental regulations to tackle climate change more effectively (like updates to the Environment Act 2021), or changes to existing online safety rules to better protect young people from harmful content (such as amendments introduced under the Online Safety Act 2023).

Activity (20 minutes)

Place a number of marbles, sweets or similar objects on each table, ensuring there is an odd number of objects relative to the number of people at the table so that they cannot be equally divided. Ask participants to work out their rules so that the marbles can be divided among themselves. ALL the marbles have to be given out.

Key points for discussion (20 minutes)

The aim of this activity is to get participants to begin thinking about how different people and groups in society might have different ideas about what is 'fair' or 'just'. This can be related to different levels of power that individuals and groups have, and links to the next section on how the Rule of Law is being threatened.

- What were the principles they used to work out how to share the marbles (e.g. did participants think about 'fairness'? They could use other criteria like age, or ask who might need more marbles).
- Was it difficult to negotiate?
- Is it always possible to be 'fair', especially when there are limited resources?

2. How is the Rule of Law being challenged and what can we do about it?

This section introduces examples of how the Rule of Law and civil liberties are being threatened by governments, using case studies from the UK and around the world.

Activity (20 minutes)

In small groups, think of any examples, in the UK or internationally, where the Rule of Law is being challenged.



This is not about individuals who might break a law, but rather governments or organisations who challenge the legal system, that is, the principles and civil liberties noted earlier that make up the Rule of Law. If participants have connection to Wi-Fi they can research online to find examples.

What are some of the justifications that a government or organisation might use to roll back the Rule of Law? Are these justifications valid?

Key points for discussion (20 minutes)

Examples could include:

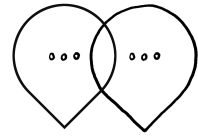
- cases in some countries where judges have faced political pressure or attempted bribes
- countries that have experienced threats to free speech
- cases where governments have undermined decisions and due process by the court system for personal or political gain.

A common theme in these examples is that when governments or political parties try to push back against the principles of the Rule of Law, they are trying to place themselves above the law. But there are also more subtle ways that the Rule of Law can be challenged and eroded.

For examples of challenges to the Rule of Law, take a look at section 2 on the resources page of this guide.

Questions for participants (10 minutes):

- Can everyone afford legal representation in the UK? If not, do they have fair access to the law?
- Do young people have as much influence on how laws are made in the UK as older people?



Key points for discussion (20 minutes)

The principles of the Rule of Law are widely considered as necessary for maintaining a strong society, economy and democracy. But as the examples above show, the Rule of Law can be ignored by an authoritarian government, or it can be made inaccessible to some people because of forms of inequality.

So how can we support the Rule of Law and make it even stronger so that everyone can be protected by its principles of justice, fairness and civil liberties?



The Jurors art installation at Runnymede, near the Magna Carta site.

Activity (20 minutes)

In small groups, come up with ideas for how we might reverse a decline in respect for the Rule of Law.

These are some of the responses that young people came up with when we asked them this question:



- education: make politics a compulsory subject;
- understand what it would be like without the Rule of Law;
- economic equality: to decrease support for political parties that are not democratic.
- better representation among politicians;
- make government more transparent and the justice system more accessible;
- politicians to uphold the Rule of Law;
- listen to a broader range of opinions on social media, and negatively rate social media channels if they spread false information.



We can see examples across the world of how people can come together to check government power, or protest against governments that try to roll back the Rule of Law.

Can you think of examples in parts of the world where social groups have stood up for their beliefs to protect their rights?

Building on these ideas, the following section guides participants to think about how we might support and strengthen the Rule of Law through re-imagining what Magna Carta might look like today if it was updated.

3. Re-imagining Magna Carta (60-90 minutes, depending on numbers)

In this section, participants will have a chance to take what they have learned from the previous two sections, and update Magna Carta so that it will include protections for issues that are important to them.

Introducing Magna Carta (20-30 minutes)

1. Recap the key points from the first two sessions.

This can include thinking about how our understanding of rights and civil liberties has changed and what we might need to protect in the future, for example:

- can the environment or artificial intelligence have rights?
- with new forms of digital surveillance, do we need to have more checks on the power of corporations and governments to ensure greater accountability?
- how do we balance the interests of individual countries with living in a global world, where people and goods can move across borders?
- do we need new protections for the rights of migrants and asylum seekers?
- how do we balance minority rights with majority community concerns?
- how are new forms of humanitarian crises impacting on our ideas of human rights and the Rule of Law?

2. Divide participants into small groups to think about how they would update Magna Carta so that it reflects the issues important to them today. There are three questions that you can use as prompts for young people to work with:

1. *Who or what contemporary issues would you like to add to a modern Magna Carta?*
2. *Who in society do you think should help you write your new Magna Carta? (e.g. experts, other young people, politicians, marginalised groups)*
3. *How would you make sure everyone agrees with your new Magna Carta and respects the new laws?*

We encourage young people to be as creative as possible: lots of flip chart, post-it notes, and coloured pens. They can sing or act it out if they want!

3. After they have drawn up their new Magna Carta, the small groups come back to present their Magna Carta to everyone. Leave time for questions for each group:

- Why did groups choose the issues they did?
- Was each group able to agree on all aspects of their Magna Carta?
How did they encourage agreement or deal with disagreement?
- Is there anything missing that other groups thought should be there?

Let us know how it went! Post your new Magna Carta on social media and tag us @cumberlandlodge @attorneygeneral

Section 1: What is the Rule of Law?

The Venice Commission Rule of Law Checklist:

www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/cdl-ad-2016-007-e

The European Commission assessment:

https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/annual-rule-law-cycle_en

Introducing Magna Carta

Magna Carta 800th (Magna Carta Trust):

<https://magnacarta800th.com/schools/books/history-rocks-magna-carta/>

The National Archives:

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/explore-the-collection/explore-by-time-period/medieval/magna-carta/

History Tools:

www.historytools.org/stories/the-enduring-importance-of-magna-carta-a-landmark-document-in-the-fight-for-individual-rights-and-the-rule-of-law

Section 2: How is the Rule of Law being challenged?

World Justice Project: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>

Young Citizens: <https://www.youngcitizens.org/programmes/the-big-legal-lesson/>

Council of Europe: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/north-south-centre/rule-of-law-youth-network>

Act 4 Rule of Law: <https://www.act4ruleoflaw.org/en/news/youth>