



# A Human Rights Charter for the future

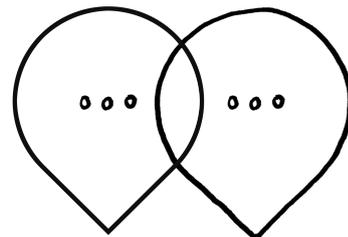
A facilitation guide for teachers  
and youth workers



Cumberland  
Lodge



Attorney  
General's  
Office



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*This guide was produced by Cumberland Lodge with support from the Attorney General’s Office. Dr John Stanton, City St George’s University, was the academic consultant.*

*For further information, or to support our work, please contact [programmeteam@cumberlandlodge.ac.uk](mailto:programmeteam@cumberlandlodge.ac.uk)*

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

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## Introduction

**Following the devastation of World War II, countries across the world collaborated to develop landmark legal frameworks that enshrined core human rights and everyday protections including the right to life, freedom from torture, a fair trial, freedom of expression, and protection from discrimination.**

These frameworks call for human dignity to be safeguarded and for governments to remain accountable to their citizens through the rule of law. They have influenced legislation, shaped court decisions, and facilitated social change over the last century.

Yet the principles enshrined in human rights declarations and legal practice now face new pressures, including political polarisation, disinformation, the climate emergency, mass migration, and declining trust between institutions and citizens, particularly among young people.

In order to raise awareness of the continued importance of human rights law, the Attorney General's Office and Cumberland Lodge brought together 50 young people in November 2025 to learn more about national and international human rights law, how it applies to their lives, and what they would include if they were writing a Human Rights Charter today.

This facilitation guide for teachers and youth workers draws on that workshop, including activities used during the day that generate discussion and support young people in designing their own Human Rights Charter. The guide also includes links to additional resources that give more detailed history and an overview of how human rights law has developed.

Aimed at 16-18 year olds, the guide contains approximately 4 to 5 hours of learning material, although this can be broken down into shorter segments, and activities can be adjusted to suit the group. The learning outcomes include:

- deepening understanding of human rights law, its history, and why it still matters today;
- identifying new and emerging threats to human rights and how they intersect with young people's lives;
- producing a Human Rights Charter that will engage other young people in learning about the importance of human rights.

*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 are human rights and what have they got to do with my life today?

This section explores how human rights are embedded in things we do every day and that we may take for granted. It explores what society might look like if we didn't have laws that protect our human rights. There are additional links to resources to learn more about specific charters, declarations and laws designed to protect human rights.

### Activity 1: Icebreaker (15 minutes)

Working in small groups of 4-6, ask participants to work together to list all the human rights they can think of, and then share their responses with the rest of the group. Examples could include: free speech, the right to vote, right to a fair trial, freedom of religion or belief, access to education and health care, freedom from discrimination.

### Activity 2 (20-30 minutes)

Ask each group to compare their list of human rights with those in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Are there any that they missed out? Were they surprised by any differences? If they included rights that aren't in the Declaration, why were these rights important to them?



**Handout: The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights**  
(see link in Resources)



Students working together at the event at Cumberland Lodge in November 2025.

## Key points for discussion

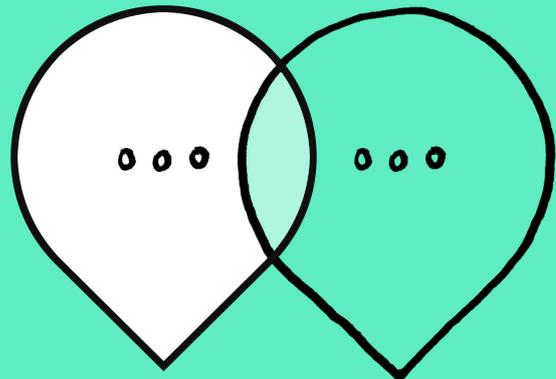
The UDHR was one of the first attempts by countries around the world to agree on a charter of human rights that could apply to everyone. It was developed in the aftermath of World War II, to try to prevent such atrocities and devastation ever happening again. Drafting began in 1946 and the Declaration was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1948. It is generally thought to be the foundation of international human rights law on which countries and regions have developed legally binding regulations.

However, the rights listed in the UDHR emerged from hundreds of years of debate about what it means to be human. In the UK, Magna Carta (1215) was an important historical document that established the right to trial and equality before the law, and has influenced the creation of other charters.



See excerpt below and Resources for links to further information on Magna Carta.

'No Freeman shall be taken or imprisoned, or be disseised of his Freehold, or Liberties, or free Customs, or be outlawed, or exiled, or any other wise destroyed; nor will We not pass upon him, nor condemn him, but by lawful judgment of his Peers, or by the Law of the Land.' (**Magna Carta, Clauses 39 and 40**)



## Key points for discussion (continued)

Influential enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke (1632-1704) argued that there are 'natural' or 'inalienable' rights; rights we have simply because we are human. For example, the right to life, liberty, and happiness. Other philosophers, like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), argued that rights were part of a social contract between governments and citizens, each with responsibilities to ensure the smooth functioning of society.

Other important documents that embedded these idea of rights include France's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) and the United States' Declaration of Independence (1776, see excerpt p5).

'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.' (USA Declaration of Independence)

### Activity 3 (15 minutes)

Following the UDHR (1948), there was further development in how governments approached human rights law. Categories of rights were outlined, for example:

- political and civil rights e.g. voting, protest
- social rights e.g. leisure, education
- economic rights e.g. right to work, not to be exploited
- cultural rights e.g. right to identity

**Refer back to participants responses in Activity 1. Could they break down their rights into these distinct categories? Or other categories?**

In the decades following the UDHR, regions and countries have developed their own human rights frameworks. The Organisation of African States (1986), Organisation of American States (1969), and League of Arab States (2004) all have regional frameworks (see *Resources for links to these documents*).

**Ask participants to compare the UDHR and these regional declarations? Do they notice any differences?**

One of the arguments put forward by regional organisations, was that the UDHR was European-centric and didn't take into account the cultural contexts of other countries. The African Charter, for example, calls for the right to development, and the right to end all forms of colonialism. The Council of Europe created the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in 1953, and then established the European Court of Human Rights to interpret the ECHR and enforce the protection of these rights. In the UK, the Human Rights Act of 1998 enshrined the ECHR into UK law, further protecting human rights in this country. It requires the government to respect the rights set out in the ECHR. There are also other legal protections such as anti-discrimination laws.

## 2. How are existing ideas about human rights being challenged?

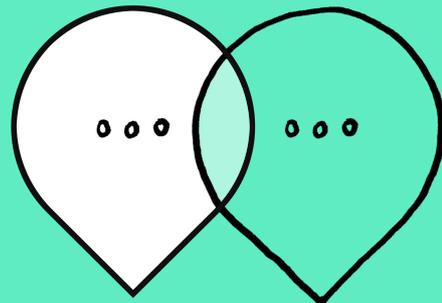
This section highlights how our ideas about rights are changing as society changes and introduces contemporary examples of how existing human rights charters and regulations are being challenged, using case studies from the UK and around the world.

### Activity 4 (15 minutes)

Back in their small groups, ask participants to think about what would happen if the existing laws protecting human rights didn't exist. What aspects of everyday life would be different?

Some examples of responses from young people include:

- increased inequality
- 'chaos'
- injustice
- exploitation
- segregation.



Embedding human rights into law can protect individuals and create a safer and more inclusive society that allows for differences. There have been some notable success stories in the UK, for example, the abolition of slavery and the death penalty, the recognition of same-sex marriages, the emergence of the right to privacy, and anti-discrimination legislation.

But as our society changes our ideas about human rights can also change. For example, new technology such as social media has shifted how we might think about the right to privacy. An increasingly digital economy means that there are new ways of working, in the 'gig economy' for example, which is changing how employers manage workers' rights. The environmental movement and artificial intelligence have complicated our understanding of rights as something exclusively human.

### Activity 5 (10 minutes)

**Ask participants if an animal or artificial intelligence can have rights that need to be protected? What makes something deserving of rights or not?**

It is too soon to say if AI will ever be granted the same rights as humans but there are examples today of the allocation of rights to the environment. For example, in 2025 the constitutional court of Ecuador, gave its marine ecosystem rights so that it now has to be protected from human activity such as industrial fishing. Similar cases have been heard in Colombia to protect the Amazon. Animal rights groups have argued in court that animals like elephants have a right to challenge their captivity.

The environment and climate change also highlight areas where national and international law are in tension. Island nations, for example, face threats to life and property due to rising oceans, but international human rights regulations that are meant to protect everyone's rights can be ignored by larger countries that contribute most to the climate crisis.

Even at the local level, in your town or neighbourhood, one person's or group's rights may be felt to infringe on someone else's. For example, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have a right to play. But sometimes housing estates restrict this right by putting up signs that forbid 'ball games' or skating, because older residents have a right to not be disturbed.

So how do we balance competing rights? And who has the power to define, determine and enforce them?

### Activity 6 (15 minutes)

**Place a sign that says 'agree' and 'disagree' on opposite walls. Ask your participants to stand and arrange themselves from one side of the room to the other based on whether they agree or disagree with the following statements. They may change their position when they hear other arguments for why people are standing where they are (they can fully agree/disagree, partially agree/disagree, or stand in the middle if they are not sure):**

- You have the right to say anything you want.
- People have the right to protest in public even if it disturbs other people.
- A social media company has the right to use anything you post on their platform.

**Ask participants why they have taken the position they have and reflect together on what influences our different positions (e.g. different family upbringing; different cultural background and different personal experiences).**

**It's important to ensure that all opinions are validated, stemming from participants' personal experience.**

## Key points for discussion

It is generally agreed that rights have limits, but there is often disagreement over where the limits are. Legal differences can reflect personal and cultural differences. In the USA, for example, there is a strong emphasis on the right to free speech and people can say things they would not be legally allowed to say in the UK under anti-discrimination law. A government might argue that it has to limit the right to protest in order to ensure the safety of other members of society. A social media company could argue that they have a right to do what they want with their platform as it's their property.

There is always an element of interpretation even though the original UN UDHR talks about 'universal' human rights.

Governments can also disagree on how rights are prioritised and interpreted and this has led to a rolling back of some rights, even in countries that have signed the UDHR and regional charters like the ECHR. In some countries there are now laws that restrict the right to protest, laws that restrict prisoner voting, laws that restrict the expression of homosexual identity, and questions over who gets to claim citizenship in an era of mass migration. Sometimes governments ignore certain rights, or sometimes inequalities can make rights inaccessible to some people. For example, young people in poverty may not be able to exercise their right to play due to lack of safe spaces, equipment, or free time.

## Activity 7 (20 minutes)

**In small groups, think of any examples, in the UK or internationally, where human rights are being challenged. If participants have connection to Wi-Fi they can research online to find examples. How can we tackle threats to human rights and support how human rights adapt to a future where society will be different, so that everyone can be protected?**

Some examples of responses from young people include:

- more input from the public into discussions about rights and in decision making
- hold inquiries
- hold governments to account; ensure a greater flow of information
- governments need to act more quickly before conflicts breaks out
- use social media to share/learn
- pressure governments, shifting public opinion can influence government
- recognise it can take a long time
- learn from past mistakes
- be open to different ideas, break away from echo chambers
- update human rights law to reflect changing society.



### 3. Creating a Human Rights Charter for the future (60-90 minutes, depending on numbers)

In this section, participants will think further about how we might support and strengthen human rights through creating a Human Rights Charter for the future, including protections for the rights that are important to them.

Recap the key points from the previous sessions. This can include thinking about how our understanding of human rights has changed and what we might need to protect in the future, for example:

- can the environment or artificial intelligence have rights?
- how do we check the power of corporations and governments to ensure they don't breach human rights regulations?
- how do we balance the interests of individual countries with living in a global world, and particularly the challenge of mass migration? 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?

Divide participants into small groups of 4-6 to create a new Human Rights Charter that reflects the issues important to them today. There are four questions that you can use as prompts for young people to work with:

1. What human rights do you believe are essential to have in your Charter (try to list 5-10)?
2. Are there new human rights that we will need in the future?
3. How can you ensure these rights will be upheld by everyone?
4. What is one key message you would give to future decision makers or politicians to ensure they protect human rights?

We encourage young people to be as creative as possible: lots of flip chart, post-it notes, coloured pens, lyrics if they want to sing it!

After they have drawn up their new Charter, the small groups come back to present it to the rest of the group. Leave time for questions for each group:

- Why did groups choose the elements they did?
- Was each group able to agree on all aspects of their Charter? How did they encourage agreement or deal with disagreement?
- Is there anything missing that other groups thought should be there?
- Did anything surprise you about other groups' presentations?

Let us know how it went! Post your charters on social media and tag Cumberland Lodge and the Attorney General's Office.



## Section 1: What are human rights?

**The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights:**

[www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf](http://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf)

**The Magna Carta Facilitation Guide:**

<https://www.cumberlandlodge.ac.uk/resource/magna-carta-facilitation-guide/>

**France's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789):**

[www.elysee.fr/en/french-presidency/the-declaration-of-the-rights-of-man-and-of-the-citizen](http://www.elysee.fr/en/french-presidency/the-declaration-of-the-rights-of-man-and-of-the-citizen)

**USA's Declaration of Independence (1776) and Bill of Rights (1789):**

[www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript](http://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript)

[www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript](http://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript)

**The Organisation of African States framework (1986):**

<https://achpr.au.int/en/charter/african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights/>

**The Organisation of American States framework (1969):**

[www.oas.org/en/iachr/mandate/basics/3.american%20convention.pdf](http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/mandate/basics/3.american%20convention.pdf)

**The League of Arab States framework (2004):**

[www.leagueofarabstates.net/en/humanrights/Committee/Pages/CommitteeCharter.aspx](http://www.leagueofarabstates.net/en/humanrights/Committee/Pages/CommitteeCharter.aspx)

**The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)1953:**

[www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/Convention\\_ENG](http://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/Convention_ENG)

**The UK Human Rights Act (1998):**

[www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1)

## Section 2: How are existing ideas about rights being challenged?

**Ecuador marine life:** <https://oceanographicmagazine.com/news/landmark-ruling-gives-ecuador-marine-ecosystems-legal-rights/>

**Animal rights:** [www.independent.co.uk/news/science/elephant-animal-rights-colorado-supreme-court-b2635067.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/elephant-animal-rights-colorado-supreme-court-b2635067.html)

**UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:** [www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/](http://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/)