

A MODERN CHARTER FOR LOCAL FREEDOM

In 1215 the Magna Carta set out the first constitutional freedoms for England. In turn, it influenced all of Britain and the rest of the world, creating the foundations of modern parliamentary democracy and the rule of law. That historic act questioned the divine right of royalty to rule arbitrarily on matters for the whole country. Today, we question the right of central government to dictate so much of what local government does, and what local people can decide.

800 years on there is a need to think once again about how we build a modern, mature state for the UK, capable of succeeding equally at every level from the global to the local. Achieving this means handing some powers and functions further down the line, empowering citizens with more local choice to address the urgent challenges of: *driving prosperity, increasing equality and strengthening democracy.*

Prosperity. Internationally, cities and regions have more freedom to shape their localities than those in the UK and deliver more economic growth because of that. Despite progress on national devolution and City and County Deals, we remain one of the most centralised states in the world, so risk being left behind in a hard fought global race for growth. The evidence shows that devolution will deliver more growth and jobs.

Equality. Despite the reductions in public expenditure in recent years, significant sums are still being spent on demand failure such as crime, poor health and unemployment. At a time of constrained budgets, localities need the freedom to radically reform and improve public services and put them on a sustainable footing so that we can offer opportunities to everyone in our communities. This cannot be done from a distant centre; action has to be joined up locally, getting solutions closer to problems, services closer to people. By linking policies for economic growth to those for service reform within places, we can strengthen local economies, get more people into jobs and save public money.

Democracy. This Charter is a major opportunity to reverse the loss of faith in politics and strengthen civil society, which cannot be restored by remote national governments. Greater local power is the only way to strengthen both local and national democracy, giving people a stake in their own future, trusting them to make the right choices for where they live.

At the dawn of the industrial revolution Britain led the world in industry, infrastructure and economy, coupled with celebrated social reforms in planning, health and justice that still echo down the ages. Local power may have been eroded, but local ambition and vision has not. With more freedom Britain's local leadership can drive the next economic revolution and make sure everyone can share in the rewards.

We welcome devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but what's good enough for nations is good enough for cities, towns and counties, which should be afforded greater freedom, each according to their proven need and ability to deliver, across all the UK's borders. And devolution must not stop with councils, their business and other partners, but seek to push power down ever further to neighbourhoods and individuals, the right controls at the right level.

This Modern Charter calls for a different relationship between local and national governments and devolution based on clear practical outcomes for the people of Britain. Devolution is more than just passing powers from one centralising parliament to another. We propose to fundamentally shift the balance of power and responsibility from a remote Westminster, Holyrood and Cardiff Bay to local people who know their places best, putting the principles of this Charter into new legislation with cross-party support.

This is a low-risk, high-impact strategy for securing a bolder, better national future: creating jobs, improving lives, renewing democracy. Delivering what our businesses and our people want. Now is the time to commit to the following three point plan. ***A Modern Charter for Local Freedom: to Decide, to Invest, to Deliver.***

1. Freedom to decide: independence, but not one size fits all

Local freedom will look different in different places, and should be a matter of local choice. What works for a big city may not be the same for a London borough, smaller town or rural area, but each should have access to the freedoms they need, judged not by vested interests, but fairly and independently.

Based on the RSA City Growth Commission recommendations, Government should immediately establish an independent body to receive proposals and oversee the transfer of freedoms from the centre to local people and places, based on publicly available criteria.

Over the longer term, we should establish full constitutional and legal independence between central and local government, not with the aim of one rejecting the other, but so the right responsibilities are held at the right level, joining up delivery more effectively in places. This should be based on the principles of the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee, extended across the UK's borders.

2. Freedom to invest: prosperous places, not stagnant states

Devolution to the nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are welcomed, but we will not stop there. Centralising power, whether in Holyrood, Cardiff Bay or Westminster, is bad for economies, and further devolution should be available to cities and other places that want it across the UK. This should ultimately include more control over some taxes - not to raise the level of taxes – but to improve efficiency, get a better return on public investment, and create more local investment for infrastructure, housing, jobs.

Places that want it and meet the criteria should be able to retain the proceeds from selected taxes, including property taxes and a percentage of income tax, to redesign places and how they are developed, investing to create growth and jobs as well as improving delivery of previously centralised services. With more local control over resources, policies for growth can be linked to service reforms, strengthening economies, creating jobs and saving public money.

We also need a mature national debate on how we can fully devolve some taxes into local control over the longer term, in consultation with business and local communities, within a system that doesn't disadvantage places that don't have a strong tax base to start with.

3. Freedom to deliver: better services, improved lives

Local services are vital to local quality of life and place, fundamental to a strong business environment, yet they are under pressure like never before. Devolving control will mean places can remove duplication, align services, get better results, save money.

In light of recent Devolution Deals, Government should make the following available to those that want it and can show they will deliver.

Skills and jobs. Locally tailored skills provision to meet the needs of business and get more people into the jobs they train for. Locally commissioned welfare to work programmes bringing more people out of unemployment.

Transport. Devolved and joined up long-term transport funds, freedom to deliver bus regulation, local train station policy and smart ticketing.

Business, trade and investment. Fully, locally integrated business support, trade and investment budgets and services to simplify and get more bang per pound of investment.

Housing. Freedom to decide how housing funds are best spent locally, to an agreed plan for increased housing numbers.

Planning. Freedom to create a statutory spatial strategy for city regions, linked to economic plans, managing land to maximise growth and development.

Public Sector Reform. Freedom to join up services at a local level to deliver better outcomes including those for: Early Years; Complex Families; and Health and Social Care integration.

Police. The freedom to take responsibility for Policing into locally determined governance structures.

A fundamentally different approach to public spending is required, changing the way Whitehall departments and government agencies work, making them more accountable at the local level, devolving 'Whole-Place Budgets' for as much of public spending across different services and agencies as places want, where they can show they can deliver and improve results.

In return: local government and other local agency signatories to this Charter commit to:

- Create stronger local economies, more growth and jobs, more people into work.
- Invest more in housing, transport and other infrastructure.
- Radically improve local services and service choice, transforming results.
- Devolve decision making even further down to communities, neighbourhoods and individuals.

An historic opportunity exists to once again determine a new and different path for Britain, a modern, mature state, succeeding globally, delivering locally in: driving prosperity; increasing equality; and strengthening local and national democracy. We the undersigned commit to this Modern Charter which embodies that opportunity. Its delivery is Britain's best bet for a brighter future.

We base all our proposals on evidence. The details of how policies can operate, the what, when, how and why of devolution can be found in a series of reports [here](#) .