

Magna Carta 800th and the 750th Montfort Parliament anniversaries

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This note updates Members on latest LGA activity to support councils across the country to involve communities in the Magna Carta and Montfort 2015 anniversaries.

Lord Bew, Co-Chair of the Speakers' Advisory Group for the 2015 Anniversaries, and Caterina Loriggio, 2015 Anniversaries – Senior Parliamentary Campaign Manager, will join the Board for a discussion about how Parliament and local government can best work together to maximise the opportunities presented by the anniversaries.

Recommendation

Members are invited to note the progress update and to discuss key issues arising from the report and presentation with Lord Bew and Ms Loriggio.

Action

Officers to action in line with Members' steer.

Contact officer: Laura Caton

Position: Senior Adviser

Phone no: 020 7664 3154

E-mail: laura.caton@local.gov.uk

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Introduction and Background

1. In 2015, local, national and international communities will celebrate and reflect upon the 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta in Runnymede. Regarded as the founding document of our political freedoms, Magna Carta's anniversary is highly relevant to local government. Plans will culminate 15 June 2015 with commemorations taking place in Runnymede to mark the day that King John sealed Magna Carta.
2. Also in 2015, UK Parliament will involve communities, schools and councils across the country in marking the 750th anniversary of the de Montfort Parliament. This was the first time representatives from towns and shires came to Westminster together to discuss issues of national concern. Although representatives of counties had been summoned before, this had been in the context of agreeing taxation rather than for general political discussion.
3. Councils up and down the country are using both anniversaries as an opportunity to reflect on civic life, boost UK plc through increased visitor numbers, and engage young people about how Magna Carta and the history of Parliament gave rise to the individual liberties they enjoy. It is through local councils that national programmes will be given locally relevant expression and communities engaged.
4. The Barons' challenge to an over-mighty King 800 years ago resonates with the LGA's own campaign to reverse years of centralising top-down government by devolving powers and funding to a constitutionally independent and rejuvenated local government. The prospect of constitutional reform and greater devolution, coupled with general and local elections, gives both anniversaries immediate relevance to the biggest political issues of today.
5. Lord Bew, Co-Chair of the Speakers' Advisory Group for the 2015 Anniversaries, and Caterina Loriggio, 2015 Anniversaries – Senior Parliamentary Campaign Manager, will join the Board for a discussion about how Parliament and local government can best work together to maximise the involvement of communities in marking the anniversaries.

LGA's Role

6. The CTS Board leads the LGA's engagement on Magna Carta and the Montfort anniversaries and has been very involved from the outset. The LGA represents councils' interests to the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Committee (Cllr Peter Golds is the LGA's representative), Ministers and Parliament, and promotes opportunities for councils across the country to get involved. In particular, we have launched a web resource that brings together information for councils in one place on the LGA website <http://www.local.gov.uk/magna-carta>.
7. As the anniversary gets closer and planning ramps up to the next level, the Board has provided a strong steer that we need to make quicker progress influencing national plans to build on the already strong engagement of the Magna Carta Towns and Cities by engaging more councils and ensuring effective coordination.

8. There are a multitude of local, national and international plans already underway to celebrate the anniversary and raise awareness about the continued relevance of Magna Carta. Strong local government engagement will not just ensure well-organised and inclusive events, but will explicitly link the anniversary to democratic renewal. Further information on the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Committee's plans is in their November newsletter, which features an article on Durham and its "Changing Face of Revolt" exhibition which opens in June 2015:
http://magnacarta800th.com/newsletters/Magna_Carta_Newsletter_November_2014.pdf

UK Parliament

9. Parliament is launching "Parliament in the Making" on 20 January 2015, the date of the Montfort parliament anniversary. The programme will present, recognise and acknowledge the past as well as encourage debate about the future of democracy. Highlights include exhibitions, creative projects in schools, new online learning and education resources, ceremonial events, participatory opportunities, conferences, lectures and partnership programmes.
10. Kent, Norfolk and the Tyne and Wear Archives and Museum partnership, are among the councils already involved. There will be plenty of opportunity for councils right across the country to get involved in "Parliament in the Making". In particular, "LiberTeas" on 14 June 2015. Delivered by the Houses of Parliament and National Trust, LiberTeas will encourage communities to host local tea parties, picnics, debates, or any kind of event that enables them to reflect, debate or celebrate the rights that we enjoy today or to commemorate those who worked to gain those rights. Any council or community wishing to join will be able to sign up via a website (www.liberteas.co.uk, live from January 2015) where they can register their event, source information to help plan their activity and request promotional materials.
11. More information on UK Parliament's plans is on Parliament's website www.parliament.uk/2015.

Progress Update

12. Since the Board last met in September, we have undertaken the following actions:
- Cllr Peter Golds represented LGA at the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Committee on 17 September and 19 November. These are important opportunities to highlight how the LGA is building upon the already strong engagement of the 10 Magna Carta Towns and Cities to involve the wider sector.
 - Cllr Ian Stephens, CTS Board Chair, spoke at the launch of the Magna Carta Tourism Trails on 25 September, and highlighted the opportunity to boost the visitor economy across the country. Sir Robert Worcester, Chairman of the Magna Carta 800th Committee, said that local government was a critical partner for the Committee.
 - Planning continues apace for the LGA's annual CTS Conference 3 -4 March in Durham, which is home to three copies of Magna Carta. We are delighted that Sir Robert Worcester is a keynote speaker. The conference dinner will be at Durham Cathedral. The study tours will include an opportunity to view Magna Carta as well

as to hear about how Durham County Council is marking the anniversary. Democratic renewal will be a key theme running through the conference.

- Cllr David Sparks OBE, wrote an article in the 7 November edition of First magazine, encouraging councils across the country to get involved. The magazine is sent to more than 8,000 councillors and the article is attached at **Annex A**.
 - Promoted the latest plans and opportunities for the Magna Carta and Montfort anniversaries through the CTS bulletin in October and November. This included Parliament in the Making, the British Library exhibition in February and LiberTeas, as well as signposting to the very latest national plans and local case studies on the LGA Magna Carta web resource.
 - Updated the case studies on the Magna Carta web resource. New additions include Lincoln, Surrey and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.
 - Submitted a bid to the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Committee for funding to support wider local government engagement in the anniversary. Unfortunately the bid was unsuccessful.
13. Attached at **Annex B** is a recent article from the Observer, which highlights the challenge of igniting public interest in the Magna Carta anniversary. This is why local government engagement is so critical, because it is through councils and local partnerships that the anniversary will be brought to life and rooted in place.

Next Steps

14. The 2015 anniversaries will continue to have the highest profile at the LGA with a range of actions over the coming weeks to ensure that we keep representing councils' interests to the Magna Carta 800th Committee, UK Parliament and others, and raise awareness amongst all councils about the opportunities for them to get involved.

This will include:

- Submitting a revised bid for the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Committee for funding to support wider local government engagement.
 - A double-page spread in the 20 December edition of First magazine to share latest case studies and promote key dates and opportunities for councils.
 - Supporting the launch of Parliament in the Making in January by raising awareness amongst councils.
 - Councillor Peter Golds will represent the LGA at the Magna Carta 800th Committee on 28 January 2015.
15. National media attention and focus on the anniversaries will really step-up from January. The BCC has recently launched its programme of specially commissioned content, which will run from early 2015 through to June.

16. The Board is an opportunity to discuss with Lord Bew and Ms Lorrigio how we can maximise our partnership with UK Parliament to raise awareness and engagement in our democratic heritage through the 2015 anniversaries.

Annex A – Extract from LGA First Magazine, 7 November

Next year will mark the 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta. As elected local representatives, our democratic legitimacy can be traced back to the principles first written down in this document.

When barons forced King John to seal the Magna Carta in 1215, he enshrined into law the basic principles of freedom that have been at the heart of political and legal systems across the democratic world ever since.

The challenge to an over-mighty king 800 years ago resonates with the LGA's campaign today to devolve powers from a centralised government to local government. In what will be the year of a general election and local elections, the anniversary is a unique opportunity to rejuvenate local democracy, debate the relationship between citizen and state and engage young people in civic renewal.

While only three of the 63 original clauses remain part of the law, these enshrine the principle that the government, including the monarch, must be subject to the law, and clarify the right to trial by jury. Because of this, Magna Carta is still very relevant to every single citizen and council.

National commemorations are being coordinated by the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Committee, chaired by Sir Robert Worcester. The LGA and the ten Magna Carta towns and cities that were directly connected to the momentous events of 1215 are represented.

It is through councils that the national plans will be given local relevance and communities will be engaged. Events are planned across North Yorkshire, Durham and Cleveland to mark the role of the Northern rebel barons. In Windsor and Maidenhead, a magnificent river pageant will be led by Gloriana, the Diamond Jubilee barge. This month, London's 1297 copy of Magna Carta is the centrepiece of the Lord Mayor's show.

The LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board is working to involve councils in the anniversary. As plans gather pace, we will continue to represent councils' interests to the committee and promote opportunities for all councils to get involved. The LGA's online Magna Carta resource is at www.local.gov.uk/magna-carta.

We would also like to hear how your council is marking the anniversary, from promoting local civic heritage, to holding exhibitions in libraries and museums; from holding debates on the health of democracy to encouraging digital engagement. Please keep in touch by contacting the LGA's culture, tourism and sport team at cts@local.gov.uk.

I can think of no greater legacy than the events in a field in Runnymede 800 years ago for helping young people to understand the importance of the basic rights and freedoms that we enjoy today.

David Sparks is Chair of the LGA

Annex B – Extract from The Observer, 1 November

Prepare for a surfeit of television historians strolling across a meadow in Surrey, gesturing into cameras. Plans are taking shape for lavish celebrations – including a host of TV and radio documentaries and books, and even a float at the Notting Hill carnival – of an anniversary that many hope will bring belated recognition to one of England’s greatest but most overlooked creations.

Eight hundred years ago next year, on 15 June 1215, on the banks of the Thames in Runnymede, an embattled King John met the English barons, who had backed his failed war against the French and were seeking to limit his powers. The weakened monarch had little choice but to witness the sealing of what some say is the world’s most important document, one that, symbolically at least, established a new relationship between the king and his subjects.

Thus the original Magna Carta, 3,500 words in Latin on a calfskin parchment, came into being, its enduring relevance confirmed in the many legal cases in which it is cited today. But while lawyers worship Magna Carta for laying the foundations for modern democracy, the defence of personal liberty and the protection of freedoms around the world, Britain largely ignores it. The 750th anniversary passed in 1965 with little fanfare. Plans for the 700th anniversary were abandoned due to the first world war. An appeal to the government for a national holiday next year, backed by many MPs, was rejected.

History as an academic discipline has also often been reluctant to pay homage. The 1214 battle of Bouvines, the decisive battle after which England was forced to concede it had lost most of its lands in France, a pivotal moment in the weakening of John’s position, has been described as “the most important battle in history that nobody has ever heard of”. And until recently Magna Carta was only on the periphery of the history syllabus. Even David Cameron, when asked on a US chat show, was unable to say what Magna Carta means in English (answer: “Great Charter”).

Runnymede also appears underwhelmed by its place in history. The only memorial to Magna Carta within the National Trust park that incorporates the meadow, bisected by a busy road, is a small, domed shelter built in 1957 by the American Bar Association. Two signs explain how the Pilgrim Fathers took a copy of Magna Carta with them, which helped Americans to frame their constitution, and how the document was used by Nancy Astor to promote universal suffrage, and by William Wilberforce and Abraham Lincoln to press for the abolition of slavery.

The absence of a more fitting British memorial is surprising. Apparently the National Trust feared that putting Runnymede on the cultural map would cause traffic problems.

“I’ve been wondering why that is [the absence of a visitor centre] for 20 years,” said Sir Robert Worcester, chairman of the [Magna Carta 800th Committee](#) who can trace his family back to the Pilgrim Fathers. He describes Magna Carta as “England’s greatest export”, and reels off the key tenets it has bequeathed to the world – “due process of law; no one is above the law; justice delayed is justice denied; no taxation without representation; the English Church shall be free”.

Worcester and his fellow enthusiasts hope 2015 will be the year Magna Carta gets the anniversary it deserves. Tens of millions of national lottery pounds are being poured into key

Magna Carta [sites across England](#). Websites have been constructed; commemorative gold coins and stamps are to be issued; a peal of bells will ring from churches; a series of lectures around the world, starting with one by Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, will emphasise the document's enduring importance; the British Library will host the largest exhibition in its history; special songs and poems will be performed; Magna Carta will even get its own display at the Notting Hill carnival. The creation of a visitor centre near Runnymede could also become a reality. Worcester talks optimistically of signing a deal with Royal Holloway University, which is a couple of miles away.

However, capturing public interest remains a challenge. "Unlike other artefacts which may be a bit more sexy, it's a piece of parchment with some rather unintelligible words written on it in Latin," acknowledged Sandra Matthews-Marsh, chief executive of Visit Kent, the body that promotes tourism in the county keen to put itself on the [newly launched Magna Carta tourist map](#).

"But the exhibition designers and curators we've appointed are really excited about the job. Their task is to bring the thing to life, not only to tell the story of why it was so important but what its relevance is today."

It is a task in need of fulfilment. Last Thursday a British Asian family, father, mother, grandmother and three daughters, walked across the meadow at Runnymede and stood in front of the American Bar Association's memorial. "What do you mean, 'Is that all there is?'," the mother hissed in response to a mumbled observation from one of her daughters.

For several minutes the family examined the signs and took selfies. Then they made their way back to the nearby car park and its National Trust tearoom. The US-built memorial stood unobserved in the autumn sunshine. Across the meadow came the roar of traffic, its drivers oblivious to the fact they were speeding past history.