



# Strengthening UK Soft Power: Strategic Recommendations

## Executive Summary

Proud co-convenors:



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# Strengthening UK Soft Power: Strategic Recommendations

Since 2023, when the UK Soft Power Group first developed a strategic framework for UK soft power, the international environment has become increasingly volatile. Conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, growing trade wars, the decline of the multilateral system, the rise of new technologies, and the spread of populism have all contributed to an increasingly difficult and uncertain global future. This challenging geopolitical context has placed hard power at the forefront of global politics - and the UK's approach to it - in recent years. While hard power is clearly critical, soft power - that is, the ability to achieve a goal through attraction - is essential for creating the conditions for strengthening the UK's alliances, diplomatic influence, and international credibility.

Ranked the third most attractive nation brand in the world, the UK has long had a wealth of soft power, derived from everything from the UK's scientific prowess, to its rich cultural history, the beauty of its countryside and its sporting prowess. These soft power assets play an essential role in how the UK is seen, and how it is able to act, in the world. They therefore play a critical role in achieving the UK's international objectives, from tackling Russian disinformation in Ukraine to providing leverage in negotiations over the resetting of relations with Europe, and strengthening public support for climate action.

The UK's soft power assets have proved remarkably resilient in the face of significant domestic, political, economic and social change. However, while the UK is in an enviable position as an attractive and trusted international actor, this status is not guaranteed. Internationally, strategic rivals such as Russia and China are investing heavily in their soft power and using it to exert significant influence in multilateral institutions and increasingly geostrategically important regions of the world, such as Africa. Meanwhile UK allies, not least the United States, are stepping back from their traditional roles in the international arena, creating a vacuum of influence that will likely be filled by the UK's strategic rivals, if the UK and other allies don't step up. It is therefore critical that the UK thinks strategically about how to leverage its soft power.

However, there are a number of challenges limiting the UK's ability to harness its soft power. Some of these are the result of the wider international and domestic environment such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK's departure from the EU and the rise of technology, for which support is needed to help soft power assets recover and respond to these external pressures. Others arise, first and foremost, from a lack of prioritisation placed on soft power, which has limited strategic thinking and cross-departmental understanding around soft power and led to its underutilisation.

The UK has begun to recognise some of these challenges and in January 2025 the UK announced a new Soft Power Council, as well as plans to develop a new soft power strategy. These are very welcome developments and reflect some of the key recommendations made in the first iteration of this report. We look forward to seeing the initiatives of the Council bearing fruit and stand ready to assist wherever we can. In the meantime, there are a number of opportunities to ensure better coordination and cooperation in the soft power space, both within Government and between Government and the wider soft power ecosystem, to further strengthen UK soft power.

## Recommendations

- 1) Establish a formal Government engagement mechanism with the wider soft power sector, including the UK Soft Power Group, to run concurrently with the Soft Power Council. This should also include establishing a formal contact point in FCDO for the wider soft power ecosystem to connect with the Government.
- 2) Provide clarity on the Government's strategic priorities and long-term planning horizons and develop predictable funding mechanisms to encourage alignment between Government and the wider soft power ecosystem, while ensuring an enabling environment for independent efforts.
- 3) Enhance connectivity between soft power assets and overseas Posts by better leveraging existing on-the-ground expertise, mechanisms and institutions.
- 4) Develop a 'digital gateway to the UK', a soft power digital platform where UK soft power assets can share resources, information on upcoming events and collaborate on projects to enhance the UK's global influence.
- 5) Develop provision for Whitehall Departments and devolved administrations to collectively address strategic issues and find practical solutions to opportunities and challenges in the soft power space, to improve Government's ability to speak with one voice to the independent sector. This might include the development of soft power training resources for departments across Whitehall and the devolved administrations, to encourage a whole-of-Government approach to soft power.

## UK Soft Power Group

The UK Soft Power Group (UKSPG) is the leading non-governmental organisation collectively representing soft power organisations in the UK. We represent many of the UK's most treasured, compelling and active soft power organisations and institutions, with a truly diverse membership spanning the full breadth of UK soft power. The UK Soft Power Group aims to amplify the voice of the soft power sector and increase its centrality to Government strategic planning, emphasising the value of soft power as a foreign policy instrument.

## UK Soft Power Group Members

Academy of Sport, Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), Ascot Racecourse, British Council, British Film Institute, British Foreign Policy Group, British Library, British Standards Institution, City of London, Coalition for Global Prosperity, Core Cities UK, The Jockey Club, London Higher, National Open College Network (NOCN), Premier League, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (RBG Kew), Science Museum Group, UK Sport, Wellcome Trust, Wilton Park