



Wilton Park

In partnership with



Report

**The UK in the World: the future of UK ideas,
innovation and influence overseas**

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The Great Park, Windsor, Berkshire, SL4 2HP,
UK

In association with the British Council.

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In the current geopolitical context, there has never been a more critical time to examine how the UK can maximise its non-governmental levers of influence to develop and maintain strong, trusted partnerships and to promote UK values overseas – especially the importance of the rule of law, democratic freedoms, and the protection of human rights.

This joint Wilton Park and British Council conference convened cross-sector experts, UK Government and political stakeholders from across the UK to debate and identify the most effective strategies for strengthening the UK's influence overseas and building successful partnerships to tackle global challenges.

Participants at the meeting represented a wide range of sectors: sports, cities, science, research and innovation, education and universities, the business and private sector, international development, cultural institutions, music, the arts and creative sector.

In a world of increasing competition for influence and geopolitical complexity, the UK's ability to lead on responding to global challenges as a trusted partner has never been more important.

The UK has significant assets to be attractive and have influence internationally, from financial institutions and fashion brands, to education, football and culture. But the UK can do more strategically and collectively to use these assets to build partnerships and to share its ideas, influence, and inspiration around the world.

This event identified areas of shared priority, co-operation and mechanisms for effective strategic dialogue between the UK Government, independent institutions, and international partners.

“Soft power should be thought of as collaboration and collective gain. Power with others, not power over others.”

“Trust is generated when you collaborate and build win-win situations together.”

“Soft power is most powerful when it is not used instrumentally, we need to be independent and impartial.”

Key points from the discussion

- Frustratingly slow progress is being made on the UK’s long-term vision and short-term action to maintain and enhance its trust, influence and persuasion in a global order that is changing at an increasingly rapid rate.
- There is an urgent call to support key actors present at the meeting, and others, to build a shared long-term vision and develop a collaborative framework for action to build the UK’s soft power, endorsed by the government, and achieved through independent societal institutions, partnerships and networks.
- An audit of the UK’s soft power assets is desirable to identify the strengths and potential that exists across HMG and society, sectors and institutions in Britain, and to identify the most effective ways in which HMG can support and empower soft power actors.
- Telling the stories of successful UK soft power is a vital activity, both at home to the public and internationally.
- Foreign diaspora in the UK, UK diaspora overseas, and students that have returned home overseas after studying in the UK present largely untapped opportunities and there is scope for building on their links with business, culture, international development, academia and sport.

Urgency for action

1. British society is rich and various with deep roots and has a significant presence in world politics that goes beyond its formal and government influence. While the UK has frequently featured at or near the top of soft power rankings, analysis by Helen Ramscar and Michael Clarke in their [recent book](#) suggests that British soft power has declined in the past decade. There is still time to make changes and do more.
2. The strength and depth of societal values and the influence of western societies across the world are contested and challenged every day. Crises, such as COVID-19 and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine both test and demonstrate the impact of soft power of the UK and its allies.
3. While the UK has held many discussions about its soft power, frustratingly little practical progress has been made to consciously build and harness it. Action to create mechanisms for better collaboration, complemented by far-reaching long-term vision and investment commitments from government, is urgently called for.

Harnessing soft power

4. Soft power matters but it operates differently from hard power. Soft power is founded on relationships informed by perceptions others have of us, and attraction and trust generated over time. It can engender cooperation and shared values, and help achieve common goals. Research shows that key UK soft power assets include those across culture, education, science and sport.
5. Soft power takes time to build and effort to sustain. It flows from society and its institutions as well as through government. But does the UK know and understand all its assets and how to harness them to project UK’s current society authentically?

6. Values of inclusion, innovation and integrity are critical for the UK to navigate its way through the global geopolitical landscape.
7. Soft power is at its strongest when it is aligned with commonly recognised national traits and values. Having principles and acting according to stated values, are both key to success. Fairness, the rule of law, a willingness to champion independent voice, personal liberty, stable governance, democracy, and respect for minority rights are all important British traits that are recognised by publics overseas. If government is seen to undermine these values, a nation's soft power is also undermined.
8. Independent actors, in association with the government, can collectively identify the following: the most effective and credible perceptions of the UK to be promoted overseas; the UK's key national assets that drive these perceptions; the steps that soft power actors, the government, and potential donors can take to maximise these drivers; the conditions under which soft power can thrive; and how the government can provide support (including financial) to institutions while not endangering their independence.
9. The British Council, as the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities, has a particular role to play in leading the UK's international effort to build the relationships and trust that result in increased UK soft power.

“We ask countries what they want. All this adds up to trust.”

Proposed next steps

10. Participants identified a series of priorities.
 1. **Create a shared vision and narrative.** Actors, including the government, must work together to create a shared long-term vision for UK soft power that is specific enough to enable targeted action and general enough to be meaningful for a broad range of capable actors. This would enable the creation of a shared narrative and for the UK to tell its story in the right way, at the right time and place both in the UK and overseas.
 2. **Develop a strategic framework for collaboration and action.** Participants rejected the notion of developing a formal government strategy, and requested support to develop a framework for collaboration on soft power that is endorsed by government, and owned by actors everywhere.
 3. **Maintain autonomy from government.** While financial investment from government in key strategic assets is vital for building UK soft power, institutions and actors need to be independent of government, as soft power is tarnished when people perceive it to be an instrument of the state.
 4. **Consider an audit of UK soft power strengths.** An audit of soft power strength inside and outside of government is desirable. This would help to understand what the UK has in its soft-power toolkit and also identify and weaknesses areas of untapped potential.
 5. **Clarify points of government contact and fora** for independent actors who are unsure of how best to engage with different government departments to address issues and seize opportunities. Though it would be helpful for government to confirm a lead department for soft power, there is a sense that work on soft power should include domestic policies through most, if not all, other departments alongside FCDO.

“Cultural institutions need to be seen to be independent, which offer an unvarnished reflection of our culture and lifestyle.”

The British Council and Wilton Park are well placed to convene multiple actors to work collaboratively to take forward these agendas.

6. The first and main focus of action coming out of the conference is to take the development of a strategic framework forward, working with the already established UK Soft Power Group.

“Music for the sake of music, science for the sake of science, museums for public consumption - doing things for themselves, and their own benefit is what matters.”

7. The second step is to consider the feasibility and scope of an audit of UK soft power, also drawing on the assistance offered by Core Cities and other volunteers.
8. The third step is to continue to convene action-focused conversations to help maximise collaboration and impact across the full range of capable soft power actors across the whole of the UK and all sectors – inside and outside of government.

The UK Soft Power sector’s ask of government

11. Participants suggested that the government should consider the following actions to create an enabling environment for independent institutions and actors who represent much of UK’s soft power:
 1. **Take a whole-of-UK approach**, representing the full diversity of the UK.
 2. **Actively engage with a proposed strategic framework** as it develops.
 3. **Consider a small-scale HMG examination** of any cross-Whitehall and devolved administrations’ soft power activities and mechanisms for engagement.
 4. **Ensure that support given is at arm’s length** and maintains the independence of institutions and sectors.
 5. **Support the joining up of forces** with, and among, those independent actors who can build long-term influential relationships.
 6. **Create opportunities for partnerships and networks**, giving time and resources for them to develop.
 7. **Encourage voices, creativity and innovation** and give different people and sectors a platform.
 8. **Communicate the benefits of soft power**; have a conversation with the UK public about foreign policy that supports peace and prosperity internationally and at home.
 9. **Adhere to the values for which the UK is associated by keeping promises** and ensure the continuation of its reputation for integrity and fairness.
 10. **Sustainably fund the UK’s core soft power assets**, from its national museums and scholarships to the BBC World Service and the British Council.

Conclusion

Being trusted, liked and respected has never mattered more in the world. The UK will increasingly rely on soft power and its society’s attractions to shape and influence the world. When different actors, partners and networks behave and collaborate authentically and with integrity both at home and overseas, the UK’s soft power will be strengthened as a by-product. The call from this meeting was clear and strong to create a long-term shared vision for strengthening the UK’s soft power, to build a collaborative framework to work more effectively together, and to be intelligent about telling the story of the UK’s soft power successes.

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