

PLAYING TO OUR STRENGTHS

The future of the UK's soft power in foreign policy



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In today's fractious world, soft power has increasingly become a critical tool for states seeking to maintain or expand their influence, and the United Kingdom (UK) is uniquely positioned to excel in this domain. While no longer a superpower in traditional hard power terms, the UK has the assets to be a global leader in soft power.

This report proposes a way forward for the UK Government to develop and implement a soft power strategy as a central component of its foreign policy.

The UK's soft power landscape is broad and dynamic with an 'always on' element, encompassing government institutions, non-governmental organisations, and its creative industries - film, music, sport, media, and education. These actors generate significant economic returns while also shaping global perceptions of the UK.

The case studies included in the report, on the BBC World Service, the Premier League, and the John Smith Trust, demonstrate how such actors project values, foster people-to-people networks, and enhance the UK's cultural footprint worldwide, which can be leveraged at a lower marginal cost to the state than hard power.

Interviews conducted with nearly 30 stakeholders across government, Parliament and the creative sectors, as part of this report, reinforced the need for a more structured, deliberate approach. Particularly as soft power is a two-way street; just as the UK would seek to communicate its values outwardly, so other countries already seek to influence UK citizens and have already been mobilising their own cultural and diplomatic influence.

This report puts forward an **'80/20' approach** for a UK soft power strategy that balances space for cultural and creative actors to thrive independently - the 80%; with areas requiring active government engagement, whether through leadership, funding, regulation or partnerships - comprising the other 20%.

"In an increasingly volatile world, the UK has the assets to be a global leader in soft power, and this report offers a way forward."

As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the British Council and Soft Power, and Chair of the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union, I see first-hand the profound impact of our cultural and parliamentary diplomacy. Bringing together our values and likeminded allies, it's important that we embrace a clear national narrative, founded on democracy, creativity, and openness, to ensure the UK remains a political and cultural powerhouse. The future of our global influence depends on our ability to harness these strengths with both purpose and precision."



Fabian Hamilton MP

"Soft power has always been an important tool for countries. However, there is now an urgency for a soft power strategy to be a central point of a country's foreign policy. Through its diverse and strong creative sectors, NGOs and institutions the UK is well-placed to become a 'soft power superpower', but there is a gap where the Government needs to take on an active and strategic long-term lead - whether through setting the narrative, assuring funding, implementing regulation or forging partnerships at home and abroad."



Poppy Ogier

Communications and
Research Manager, FPC

At its core, the strategy must be rooted in a compelling national narrative that communicates the UK's values consistently across domestic and international platforms. With the establishment of a Soft Power Council by the Government in January 2025, the UK now has a timely opportunity to consolidate efforts, ensure long-term commitment, and position itself as a cultural and value-driven powerhouse. The proposed '80/20' approach provides both structure and flexibility, ensuring the UK can adapt to emerging challenges while leveraging its strengths.

A snapshot of the report's six recommendations are set out below, providing practical steps on how to achieve this.

Six Recommendations for the UK Government:

- Adopt a '80/20' approach towards UK soft power assets and strategy.
- Resource and develop the newly established Soft Power Council.
- Establish a 'Central Soft Power Unit' in the Cabinet Office to drive implementation of Government strategy and narrative on soft power across Whitehall.
- Set up a monitoring body to scrutinise the implementation of the strategy, and maintain checks and balances on the use of soft power, both by UK entities and foreign bodies.
- Develop strategic partnerships between non-governmental soft power actors and the UK Government.
- Review and address the need for proper resourcing of governmental and publicly-funded soft power actors.



SCAN ME

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"Over the past two decades the UK Government has taken its soft power assets for granted. Yet how our country is perceived internationally has direct consequences for both security and prosperity. In an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, soft power is critical to attracting visitors, forging stronger alliances, promoting UK services, countering disinformation, and advancing our core values – from freedom of expression to the rule of law. Whilst the Government cannot determine our reputation single-handedly, this report highlights how it can take a more active role in shaping international perceptions of the UK – and some of the tangible benefits that could follow."

Eliza Easton

Director, Erskine Analysis

"We've been discussing Britain's soft power for at least twenty years, and the notion that Britain should be (or, according to some, already is) a "soft power superpower" recurs endlessly. These conversations are fascinating but oddly slippery and frequently circular. What we've never managed to get to grips with is how we can strategically activate the country's undoubted soft power capabilities and set them to work for the concrete, measurable, long-term benefit of Britain and the world."

The bad news is that today, Britain is very far from showing international leadership in this area. The good news is that it's still something that no other country has done properly or consistently, so the title of "soft power superpower" is still up for grabs, if we play this right. Let's hope that this report is the first step towards such an approach. Make no mistake: for the United Kingdom, this is now a matter of survival."

Simon Anholt

Founder, Anholt Nation Brands Index
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