



British Council

Annual General Meeting

17 July 2019 14:00-15:00
Portcullis House, Meeting Room M

Attendees:

John Baron MP
Stephen Kinnock MP
Baroness Smith of Newnham
Baroness Grey-Thompson
Lord Watson of Invergowrie
Baroness Bonham-Carter
Lord Stone of Blackheath
Lord Anderson of Swansea
Lord Alderdice
Baroness Hooper

Sir Ciaran Devane, CEO, British Council
James Hampson, Director UK Region and External Relations, British Council
Melike Berker, British Council APPG Secretariat (Minutes)

1. Officer Elections Agreed by Group

Change noted: Baroness Grey-Thompson to move from Vice-Chair to Secretary.

Role	Name	Party
Chair & Registered Contact	Mr John Baron	Conservative
Treasurer	Stephen Kinnock	Labour
Vice Chair	Baroness Hooper	Conservative
Secretary	Baroness Grey-Thompson	Crossbench
Vice Chair	Baroness Coussins	Crossbench
Vice Chair	Lord Alderdice	Liberal Democrat
Vice Chair	Mr Mark Prisk	Conservative
Vice Chair	Baroness Suttie	Liberal Democrat
Vice Chair	Lord Purvis of Tweed	Liberal Democrat
Vice Chair	Conor McGinn	Labour
Vice Chair	Lord Watson of Invergowrie	Labour

2. Expenses Agreed and Signed by Chair and Group

3. John Baron MP: APPG Activity and Inquiry Update

John Baron MP gave an overview of the APPG's activity this year. He highlighted the meeting at the last AGM that briefed members on countries at risk and the British Council's status in conflict affected and fragile states. Another meeting of the Group included the plans for British Council's Tailored Review with Minister Mark Field and a roundtable on the US/UK special relationship.



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A focus for the Group this year has been Soft Power; this has included a series of roundtables, a written call for evidence and trips to both Paris and Madrid. A more recent meeting for the APPG brought the newly formed Soft Power Group to Parliament to discuss the UK's coordinated soft power efforts.

John Baron MP gave an update on the APPG Inquiry on "The role of education and culture in the UK's future relationships with Europe". He noted that the report is being drafted and the Group will have the chance to consider this following Summer Recess. The Group hopes for engagement with the FCO Minister responsible for Soft Power and other departments across Government prior to its launch. Initial findings of the inquiry say that collaboration is effective in building bilateral relationships, barriers to multilateral collaboration are apparent and there is a certain optimism about the future across Europe. Other more technical details have been highlighted including the £30,000 salary restrictions on visas and funding aspects.

It was noted by Lord Alderdice and Baroness Smith that there might be a good way for the British Council to connect with the German political foundations and other cultural and political organisations from across Europe in the meantime. It was noted that this would be considered.

4. Sir Ciaran Devane: British Council Update

Sir Ciaran Devane provided the Group with an update on the British Council colleague currently being detained in Iran.

Parliamentarians asked whether there was anything they could do, and the answer was not too much, but that the Secretariat could keep the Group updated on any progress. British Council appreciates their efforts so far to keep the topic live in Parliament.

Sir Ciaran went on to advise that the office in Sudan has closed, Russia work is strong and the British Council strives to remain open wherever possible across the world. The Middle East team are working with community programmes in Syria through partners in country.

The British Council Annual Report is due to be laid in Parliament on Thursday 18 July. The British Council has engaged with 80 million people directly and reached over 100 million teachers and learners of English through online resources. For every £1.00 of grant received, it generated £5.80 and has a total income of £1.25 billion. The commercial side of British Council's work has grown by 7%.

Sir Ciaran highlighted the commitment to still work in the developed world. He then highlighted geographical priorities:

- India and China are the British Council's biggest operations and remain priorities.
- Russia and its neighbourhood: the British Council now works from within the Embassy and continues to work on cultural relations between the UK and Russia. It has not reopened in St Petersburg. It was noted that neighbouring countries like Kazakhstan are also considered priority and more work is to be done to support work there.
- The Gulf area is important, Saudi Arabia has a good programme, and this is to be extended to the wider region. Societal and political shifts are important for British Council.
- The British Council remains committed to supporting the UK's relationships with Europe though its country relationships and operations on the ground and through things like the APPG inquiry.



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5. AOB/Q&A

The Group then questioned Sir Ciaran on various aspects:

Baroness Bonham Carter highlighted the Latin America region and Sir Ciaran agreed that work in our biggest operation in the region, Colombia, was growing, and recent visits by the Venezuela Country Director had highlighted the British Council's commitment to the region.

Refugee work was highlighted by Lord Anderson. Sir Ciaran agreed that this was important and highlighted work of the Cultural Protection Fund in countries like Iraq and Jordan and work with the Lebanese Education Ministry in the English language provision arena. It was also noted that translation of UK cultural texts into Arabic could be considered.

Lord Purvis highlighted the Community of Practice Group set up following the last APPG inquiry on radicalisation in MENA. He then highlighted a potential inquiry by the International Relations Committee on Africa.

Lord Watson asked whether the British Council was still present in Gaza, and it is. The operation has changed to be more digital and has increased its reach.

It was suggested that following the British Council Annual Report being laid in Parliament on Thursday 18th July, that the Group might analyse its findings and write a response. This will be considered during the last week of Parliamentary sitting time.

It was noted by Ciaran that the UK Government and British Council both fully support the work being done to maintain relationships with countries in the developed world and this was something that wouldn't change.

Lastly, Baroness Hooper highlighted the visit of Venezuela Country Director and said that submitting more information on this to Parliament via a committee would be useful.

Ciaran closed his remarks by thanking all Members for supporting the British Council throughout the year.



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ANNEX 1: Inquiry Update

The British Council APPG is conducting an inquiry into the role of education and culture in the UK's future relations with countries of Europe. The inquiry is exploring the role that various aspects of UK education, research, arts and culture can play in maintaining and strengthening ties with European countries, and in supporting UK soft power.

Countries investing in more culture and education around the world can help to build international trust and understanding, support mutual respect and mutually beneficial ties between states. This work can also help foster international peace, security and prosperity. Currently the UK is the world's leading soft power. However, there has been a significant increase in levels of investment in cultural institutes and soft power activity globally. Vast sums being invested mean that the UK is at risk of falling behind. This inquiry aims to highlight further risks to this work, and opportunities to increase impact in Europe and globally.

Engagement so far:

The APPG has held roundtable evidence sessions with the following sectors, followed by written calls for evidence.

- Arts and creative industries
- Higher education and research
- English language teaching, exams and publishing
- Primary and secondary education and modern foreign languages

The APPG also conducted fact-finding trips to Paris and Madrid where it met with French and Spanish sector stakeholders and attempted to understand how they viewed UK-European bilateral relationships as well as what they foresaw as risks and opportunities to those relationships.

Emerging themes

- Collaboration in culture and education has been and will be effective in improving the UK's relationship with European countries and will be important in regaining trust lost through the Brexit process. Mobility was crucial for students and artists to prosper in this area.
- The main barriers to collaboration are a lack of clarity over multilateral programmes, and questions around immigration and fee status of Europeans wishing to work or study in the UK.
- Participants argued that in the future multilateral collaboration is preferable to bilateral, that young people should be more involved in decision-making, and that existing networks and arms' lengths bodies should be utilised too, especially if we cannot be part of multilateral programmes.
- Participants were optimistic that the history of collaboration between the UK and European countries will not vanish post-Brexit.

Future plans

The APPG is now beginning to formulate the report, based on written evidence and findings from sessions.

The APPG would also welcome Government engagement on the inquiry and is aiming to demonstrate a preliminary findings session with the FCO and other departments to discuss the UK's approach to soft power.