

Minutes: APPG on the British Council and Soft Power

Soft Power in an Age of Geopolitical Competition

The Macmillan Room, Portcullis House

24 June 2026, 10:00–11:20

Parliamentarians: Monica Harding MP (Chair), The Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP, Lord Randall and The Earl of Clancarty.

Other attendees: Andrea Pfeil (Goethe-Institut), Víctor Ugarte (Instituto Cervantes), Tereza Sidlova (Czech Centre London), Luke Chapman (Westminster Foundation for Democracy), Jack Pannell (British Foreign Policy Group), Poppy Ogier (Foreign Policy Centre), Camila Mateos Betancourt (Foreign Policy Centre), Aura Woodward (Romanian Cultural Institute), Hyo-Keon Park (Korean Cultural Centre UK), Paul Wadey (Korean Cultural Centre UK), Ūla Tornau (Lithuanian Culture Institute), Nathan D'Arcy (DAAD), Kaoru Miyamoto (The Japan Foundation), Natsumi Abe (The Japan Foundation), Anna Tryc-Bromley (Polish Cultural Institute), Laetitia Mason, David Thompson (British Council), Thomas Brayford (British Council), Alexandra Holker (British Council) and Diana Arghirescu (British Council).

Apologies: Sarah Champion MP, Steve Race MP, Phil Brickell MP, Baroness Bonham Carter and Lord Hannay of Chiswick.

1. Welcome

1.1 APPG Chair Monica Harding MP welcomed attendees and outlined the purpose of the meeting, which was to explore the role of cultural diplomacy and soft power in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment.

1.2 Monica Harding MP noted that governments are operating in a changing international environment and highlighted the importance of cultural institutions in strengthening international relationships.

2. Presentation from the British Council

2.1 Monica Harding MP introduced David Thompson, Director of UK & External Relations at the British Council.

2.2 David Thompson outlined the British Council's role in advancing UK soft power through cultural relations, education and the English language, highlighting its contribution to the UK's international engagement.

2.3 David Thompson explained the British Council's organisational and funding model and outlined the organisation's strategic priorities.

2.4 David Thompson reflected on the opportunities for the UK to strengthen its international influence through cultural relations, while also highlighting the financial and geopolitical challenges facing cultural diplomacy organisations.

3. Presentation from the Goethe-Institut

3.1 Andrea Pfeil, Deputy Director of the Goethe-Institut London, introduced the organisation and reflected on its 75th anniversary.

3.2 Andrea Pfeil explained that the Goethe-Institut was established to strengthen international understanding through language, culture and dialogue. She noted that the organisation is headquartered in Munich, operates independently of government and has a presence in around 100 countries.

3.3 Andrea Pfeil described language as a long-term investment in international relationships, noting that cultural exchange helps build the foundations for civil society cooperation.

3.4 Andrea Pfeil highlighted growing demand for German language learning and examinations and emphasised the importance of maintaining physical cultural spaces where people can meet and engage.

3.5 Andrea Pfeil noted that although the German Foreign Ministry had experienced budget reductions, these had not been passed on to the Goethe-Institut. She also outlined the development of new delivery models, including pop-up institutes in the United States, and highlighted the Institute's commitment to strengthening European cultural cooperation.

4. Presentation from Instituto Cervantes

4.1 Víctor Ugarte, Director of Instituto Cervantes London, outlined Spain's approach to cultural diplomacy.

4.2 Víctor Ugarte explained that Instituto Cervantes was established in 1991 to promote the Spanish language and culture internationally, including Spain's regional languages.

4.3 He described language as a long-term strategic asset and emphasised the role of cultural diplomacy in supporting democratic values and multilateral cooperation.

4.4 Víctor Ugarte highlighted continued global demand for Spanish language learning as a significant opportunity, while identifying engaging younger audiences and responding to developments in artificial intelligence as key challenges.

4.5 He concluded that cultural diplomacy is increasingly based on interaction, dialogue and shared values rather than simply promoting national culture overseas.

5. Discussion

5.1 Monica Harding MP invited participants to reflect on how cultural institutions are responding to the changing geopolitical environment.

5.2 The Earl of Clancarty asked speakers about the relationship between cultural institutes and government, particularly how publicly funded organisations maintain operational independence while contributing to national strategic objectives.

5.3 Poppy Ogier (Foreign Policy Centre) commended the British Council for its contribution to the United Kingdom's international engagement and cultural relations.

5.4 Anna Tryc-Bromley (Polish Cultural Institute) asked how participants viewed the implications of the British Council's forthcoming debt repayments and the potential impact on the organisation's future international role.

5.5 Participants discussed the changing nature of cultural diplomacy, agreeing that influence is increasingly built through dialogue, partnership and people-to-people connections rather than one-way communication.

5.6 Speakers agreed that language, education, culture and international exchange remain among the most effective and enduring tools of soft power.

6. Close

6.1 Monica Harding MP thanked the speakers and attendees for their contributions and noted the value of bringing together representatives from the British Council and a range of international cultural institutes to share perspectives on the future of cultural diplomacy.

6.2 The meeting closed at 11:20.