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## **FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE: SOFT POWER: A STRATEGY FOR UK SUCCESS?**

February 2025

### ***Sport as a UK Soft Power Asset***

#### **Introduction**

1. ***Sport as a UK Soft Power Asset*** forms a response to Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry into soft power. It supports the strategic case for sport as a means to enabling the UK Government's soft power strategy for success.
2. Sport as a UK Soft Power Asset is a briefing paper led by the University of Edinburgh Academy of Sport in partnership with ICR Research

#### **Purpose**

3. The paper sets out the compelling case for the use of sport as a UK Soft Power Council Asset. It explains how sport can enable the Foreign Secretary's 5 pillars of government. It responds to the FAC inquiry questions. We seek to amplify the use of sport as a soft power asset within the government's strategic planning.
4. A further purpose is to position the University of Edinburgh Academy of Sport (and strategic partners) as the go to place for evidence and strategic advice on sport and soft power including: the added value of sport to foreign policy, diplomacy and cultural relations.
5. We seek to add value to the remit and membership of the UK Soft Power Council.

#### **About Us**

6. The University of Edinburgh Academy of Sport is an International Think Tank serving the Global Sports Industry. We are members of the UK Soft Power Group, have advised governments on the use of sport in pursuit of international relations, diplomacy and cultural relations. We contributed to [UK Soft Power: The Building of a Strategic Framework](#). In February 2025 we led an international discussion at [The Global Soft Power Summit](#) on sport as soft power.
7. ICR Research is the UK's leading consultancy in public diplomacy, soft power, and international cultural relations.
8. This partnership collaborated on the production of the policy briefing on [Sport as Soft Power](#).

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## Background

9. The UK Government has formed a UK Soft Power Council with a specific remit. A number of strategic papers have been produced to inform the thinking of the Council including [Charm Offensive: Resetting the UK's soft power approach for a more dangerous and competitive world](#). It will adopt a strategic soft power policy framework grounded in progressive realism. An approach that recognises a hard-headed realism about what Britain is now and not what it was. An approach that offers a new geo-political partnership. An approach that needs to accommodate a reduction in international aid expenditure<sup>2</sup>.
10. The UK Sporting ecosystem is complex. To maximise influence, persuasion and the winning of friends, the UK already has many tools at its disposal, but it could make more of its sporting assets and options.
11. Boosting Economic Growth: Between 2010 and 2022, the sports sector grew by 32.2%, outpacing the growth of the economy more broadly (21.5%).<sup>53</sup> Sports leaders expect the sports sector to grow a further 7.3% in the next 3-5 years with double-digit growth expected in women's sport, an area in which the UK has assets.
12. Sport has long served as a conduit for soft power, allowing nations to project cultural values and foster international goodwill without the coercive mechanisms associated with hard power. Sport's role in soft power is more pertinent than ever, given the current geopolitical landscape. The term "soft power" itself, though debated in its efficacy, remains a crucial rhetorical tool for encapsulating non-military influence efforts.
13. Although the measurement of soft power and the measurement of sport as a soft power asset remains work in progress those organisations that have looked to produce soft power rankings have acknowledged that the UK remains firmly within the top tier of UK soft power countries.
14. There are a number of policy drivers that should recognise the added value of sport including: attraction, national brand, promoting national culture, promoting co-operation and international engagement, regional influence, diaspora engagement, geopolitical influence, domestic engagement, building networks, strengthening outreach and supporting the domestic economy.
15. Nye's orthodox conception of soft power had three sources which were culture, political values and foreign policy. Recent studies have expanded the list of significant sources of soft power to include, for example, digital engagement, higher education and science and technology innovation as further factors influencing a nation's soft power capability and sentiment expressed by others towards a nation.

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<sup>2</sup> Institute for Government (2025). Cutting international aid to pay for defence is Starmer's first spending review trade-off. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/cutting-aid-defence-starmer> [ Accessed 28 February 2025].

16. 1.87 billion people worldwide regularly follow the Premier League, which is broadcast into 189 UN member states.<sup>15</sup> This global attention drives positive perceptions of the UK. The Premier League tops the British Icon Index, and 97% of its viewers say that it makes them think better of the UK. An asset engaging across populations beyond those interested in football, and an unrivalled appeal among young people.
17. If sport is anything it is a pillar of connectivity. UK sport has untapped, uncoordinated scale and reach – city to city, region to region and country to country. Modalities of delivery through sport differ but they can be used to deliver specific outcomes. There is also a diaspora that connects to the United Kingdom through sport but also a sports diaspora that has significant international presence.
18. As a pillar of connectivity sport has the capability to further enable brand perceptions which can be leveraged by nations for their own benefit. Long term-relationship building in an increasingly competitive world is an important success factor.
19. FCDO have maintained a sustained effort, particularly through the Commonwealth's unique sporting framework which connects 2.5 billion people through shared athletic traditions. The Commonwealth Games, grassroots development programmes, and sport-based initiatives across member nations demonstrate the distinctive power of these historical connections.
20. Through the Commonwealth Secretariat, sport has enabled advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while strengthening diplomatic, cultural and commercial ties across this vital network. UK alignment could make the UK's commitment to sport in development explicit, and enhance the legitimacy and appeal of initiatives, particularly in areas such as health, education, poverty and environmental sustainability.
21. The digital dimension of UK sport significantly amplifies its soft power reach and impact. From the Premier League's sophisticated global streaming platforms to cutting-edge esports initiatives, Britain's sporting institutions are pioneering digital innovation. This technological leadership enables unprecedented engagement with global audiences, particularly younger demographics, while showcasing British expertise in sports technology and data analytics. The digital transformation of sport provides new channels for cultural diplomacy and creates opportunities for British technology exports, further strengthening the UK's position as a leader in both sporting excellence and digital innovation.
22. British Universities were also in the top 3 assets reminding us of, the almost daily role of sport in our universities both within and beyond the UK<sup>3</sup>.

## **Learning from Other Countries.**

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<sup>3</sup> Yonder (2023) <https://yonderconsulting.com/the-premier-league-tops-the-british-icon-index/> (accessed 1 December 2024).

23. Countries are using foreign policy tools, such as trade agreements, investment treaties, and diplomatic relations, to promote their sports-related exports and attract foreign investment to their sports industries. Such investments can have implications for foreign policy and diplomatic ties between countries. The UK can both contribute to agreed international priorities but also learn from how other nations have utilized sport in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives,
24. **France:** France's Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAP) use of the sport comes in many forms including: the hosting of major sporting events, support for French candidacies, indirect and direct French sports aid, support for the international development of French sport companies, the hosting of conferences, the forging of mutual bilateral relationships through sport, the preservation and promotion of the French language, the use of sports ambassadors to formally and informally convey messaging and France's vision and expertise for accessible, inclusive and sustainable sport to foreign authorities, the world of sport and the general public. (MEAEP), has used French sports expertise to strengthen sports institutions, including the deployment to Africa of international technical experts (ITE) in sport.<sup>4</sup>
25. **Australia:** Australia is on the third re-iteration of its sports diplomacy strategy. [Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2032](#). *It contains nine focused outcomes enabled through sport including* elevating sport as a tool of national power; focusing on efforts in the Indo-Pacific; project modern Australia; advancing gender equality and disability equity; strengthening regional resilience through development programmes; boosting economic growth; strengthening Australian leadership in sport, globally; and strengthening integrity frameworks in international sport. This kind of strategic thinking has helped deliver better alignment between Government and independent actors and has enabled the sports sector to understand specifically where they are best placed to support national interests including mutual international co-operation.
26. *The terms of reference for the Australian [Sports Diplomacy Strategy Group \(SCDG\)](#) includes providing* geostrategic and economic advice, highlighting opportunities and risks in international sport, including upcoming events in Australia and offshore, operational matters, and developing ways in which the government and sport sector can work together to advance shared priorities.
27. **China:** China's stadium diplomacy has supported infrastructure development and influence in Africa, Asia and South America. Stadium build is a proven tool in China's global image strategy.
28. **USA:** The Trump Administration announcement that it would be eliminating more than 90% of the US Agency for International Development's Foreign Aid contracts and \$60bn in overall US assistance around the world has significantly impacted upon the USA's capacity to advance international aid and assistance through

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<sup>4</sup> French experts have been placed in regional institutions or sports Ministries in Senegal (two experts), Gabon, Rwanda, Tanzania and Cameroon.

sport<sup>5</sup>. Since its inception USAID worked to tackle tyranny, poverty, and disease – by providing humanitarian assistance in times of need and advancing the development of our partners around the globe. In 2022 USAID announced that it would fund eight projects that utilize sport as a tool for youth development and violence prevention in Jamaica. Former USAID Administrator Samantha Power uses sports diplomacy to connect with youth and communities worldwide.

29. **Norway:** The Norwegian Minister of International Development has long since argued that the Norway Cup which brings the youth of the world to Norway for one of the biggest youth sports festivals in the world is one of Norway's best soft power assets. Sport helping to produce internationalism and co-operation between Norway and for example Brazil, Kenya, and Palestine.

30. **Wales:** When the Welsh men's football team participated in the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the Welsh Government hosted a series of international events via the Welsh Government's Overseas offices, enhanced its marketing campaign in key markets include the United States, Qatar and parts of Europe, and introduced a number of Welsh World Cup Ambassadors who worked to raise Welsh profile internationally. These activities helped increase traffic to the wales.com website by 600% during the World Cup, improved perceptions of Wales and led to strengthened international networks, including at a Ministerial level, in a range of fields including business, science and the arts.

### **An Introduction to Sport's Contribution to the Foreign Secretary's Five Pillars**

31. Amid current geopolitical challenges, the strategic use of sport can foster international cooperation, enhance national prestige, and contribute to global stability. By adopting a nuanced and integrated approach, policymakers can harness the full potential of sport to advance foreign policy objectives in an increasingly complex world.

32. **A Britain reconnected to defend the UK's security:** Sport plays a vital role in protecting the UK's security by strengthening international relationships and building trust between nations. Through sporting diplomacy and major events, the UK develops valuable networks that enhance intelligence sharing and security cooperation. Team GB's success on the global stage, combined with the Premier League's worldwide reach, gives the UK significant soft power that can be leveraged to advance security partnerships and strategic interests.

33. **A Britain reconnected to champion the UK's prosperity:** Through sport, Britain amplifies its economic influence and creates new commercial opportunities worldwide. The UK's sporting ecosystem, from Premier League football to Formula 1, to the Jockey Club, to golf generates substantial export earnings and attracts significant inward investment. Major sporting events and partnerships open doors for British businesses, while sports technology and innovation drive growth in key sectors, positioning the UK as a global leader in the sporting economy.

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<sup>5</sup> The Guardian (2025) "Trump plans to cut more than 90% of USAid foreign aid contracts" "27 February 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/26/trump-usaid-cuts> [Accessed 28 February 2025].

34. Ernst and Young's impact evaluation of the soft power, trade and influence from the City of London's hosting of major sporting events (MSE's) points out that MSE's have the potential to deliver £4 billion in soft power, trade and investment impacts over the next decade.<sup>6 7</sup>

35. ***A Britain reconnected for climate action:*** Sport has a unique ability to demonstrate leadership in environmental stewardship and promote climate action through its global reach. The UK's sporting sector is pioneering sustainable practices, from net-zero stadiums to eco-friendly events, setting new industry standards worldwide. By embedding environmental responsibility across all levels of sport, from grassroots to elite competition, Britain reinforces its commitment to addressing the climate crisis while inspiring international partners to follow suit.

36. ***A Britain reconnected for international development:*** Sport serves as a powerful catalyst for international development, fostering social inclusion and economic growth in developing nations. Through targeted sports programmes, coaching initiatives and facility development, Britain helps build community resilience and creates pathways for youth development. The UK's sporting expertise and resources, when shared through international partnerships, support capacity building and sustainable development objectives whilst strengthening diplomatic ties with emerging nations.

37. ***A Britain reconnected for diplomacy, to re-establish the UK as a trusted, reliable and influential partner:*** Sport serves as a cornerstone of Britain's diplomatic influence, offering unique opportunities to build trust and forge connections where traditional diplomacy may falter. Through sporting events, cultural exchanges, and shared athletic endeavours, the UK cultivates meaningful relationships with nations across the globe. Britain's sporting heritage and values-based approach to competition reinforces its reputation as a trusted international partner, while providing neutral ground for diplomatic engagement and strategic relationship building.

38. Sport as a platform for international relations, political goodwill and global cooperation across public, private and third sector organisations, within and between cities, regions, communities and countries, remains an underutilized tool for enabling and sustaining diplomatic wealth.

### **Optimising Soft Power Through Sport**

39. There is more to optimizing sport as a soft power asset than the hosting of major sporting events – important as they are.

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<sup>6</sup> Ernst & Young (2021). The impact of major sport events: Study of soft power, trade and investment impacts. <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/assets/about-us/working-with-the-community/the-impact-of-major-sports-events-2021.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> The success of the events being described in terms of enabling: wide reach, overseas visitor attractions, local community engagement, improved perceptions of the UK, high profile locations and the opportunity to show case world class sport.



40. The UK's new Soft Power Council's (SPC) remit is to (i) advise the UK government on a new soft power strategy; (ii) advise on soft power campaigns globally and (iii) drive a systematic approach to the global foreign policy, cultural and sporting calendars. The SPC has 26 members, some of whom are directly involved in sport.
41. Early priorities for the SPC should include work to: (i) address the specific fragmentation in institutional arrangements for sport as a key element of the UK's soft power; and (ii) Develop a standardised measurement frameworks to evaluate the effectiveness of sports diplomacy/soft power efforts.
42. *A potential coordination gap exists between the UK's soft power assets and strategic priorities which requires immediate attention. To maximise sport as a UK soft power asset, we recommend establishing a dedicated Sports Diplomacy Working Group within the framework of the UK Soft Power Council, drawing inspiration from Australia's Sports Diplomacy Strategy Group.*
43. This group would implement a structured "Trusted Partner Initiative" specifically for sport, integrating sporting relationships with broader strategic and economic objectives. By adopting this approach, sport would move beyond fragmented, ad hoc initiatives to become part of a systematic, evidence-based strategy that aligns cultural, diplomatic, and economic influence with national interests. This would address the historical challenges of institutional fragmentation, lack of strategic direction, and ineffective performance measurement that have hampered previous coordination efforts. With proper implementation, sport can serve as a model domain for the UK's renewed soft power strategy, demonstrating how targeted engagement, clear objectives, and regular policy review can transform a conceptual asset into a practical tool of statecraft that enhances the UK's position as a trusted, reliable, and influential global partner.
44. Sport should not be a side project for but rather a valuable evidenced soft power asset. A tool that can quietly work away on a daily basis underneath the radar fostering dialogue, negotiation, exchange, co-operation and collaboration but which requires vision, funding, commitment at the highest level.

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