

March 2025

## **Dr Reynolds and Dr Ranta evidence for Foreign Affairs Committee Commons Select Committee, Call for Evidence: Soft power: a strategy for UK success?**

0.1 The launch of the UK Soft Power Council is an opportunity to review the UK's approach to soft power. We fully agree with the Foreign Secretary that the launch will allow us to '[re-imagine Britain's role on the world stage, reinvigorate alliances and forge new partnerships.](#)'

0.2 However, the membership of the Council, along with much of the discussion that has led to the launch, has focused on the role of British culture, sports, and media. One important element of British soft power that was notably absent is British food and drink. This is not the first time that the role of food and drink has been absent from discussion. The recent report by the UK Soft Power Group (co-convened by the British Foreign Policy Group and the British Council) titled '[The Future of UK Soft Power: Building a Strategic Framework](#)' (2023) does not mention food or drink at all.

0.3 The exclusion of food and drink from the launch and composition of the Council is surprising and may reflect an outdated perception of British food and drink culture. Beyond its vibrancy and innovative practices, the UK's food and drink sector is the largest manufacturing sector in the country. Excluding fisheries, it employs approximately 4.4 million people, accounting for 14% of the total workforce ([gov.uk, 2023](#)), and contributes £147.8 billion or 6.5% to national Gross Value Added ([gov.uk, 2022](#)).

0.4 Below we make the case for the inclusion of food and drink as a key element in British soft power, and for the inclusion of the food and drink sector in the Council's membership. Developing UK food soft power will nourish the soul of British food culture and enable the UK to become a leading exporter of high quality, sustainable food and drink.

0.5 We provide several recommendations:

**a. Recognise the importance of food and drink to British soft power.**

**b. Include representatives from both food and drink in the UK Soft Power Council.**

**c. Link soft power strategy to support a wider coherent domestic and trade policy.**

This includes the upcoming new national food strategy, Land Use Framework, Net Zero targets, and cross-government health mission in 2025 ([gov.uk 2025a](#), [2025b](#), [2024](#)). These policies can then reinforce future soft power narratives.

**d. Embed food diplomacy as part of British cultural diplomacy toolkits throughout HM Government operations.** This includes into the operational workings of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office: including priority serving of quality UK food and drink at events and throughout HMG canteens and operations. This would be coherent with ongoing HMG policy for effective public procurement ([gov.uk 2022](#), [Parsons and Barling 2022](#))

March 2025

e. **Develop synergies between existing caches of UK soft power.** This includes developing links between quality UK food production, and the Crown Estates (its portfolio including UK agriculture and common land). With the strong soft power brand of the Crown providing a launch point itself for wider links to soft power synergies.

0.6 we are:

Dr Christian Reynolds, a Reader at the Center for Food Policy, City St Georges, University of London. His main research areas are food loss and waste, and affordable, healthy, sustainable diets. He has led and supported rapid reviews of evidence for the Food Standards Agency and Defra.

Dr Ronald Ranta, an academic and former chef, chair of the board of trustees for Fitzjohns Food Bank, and Co-founder of the Alliance for Dignified Food Support. His main research areas are food insecurity, the promotion of healthy and sustainable diets, and the relationship between food and nationalism.

0.7 We answer drawing on our ongoing research on food, soft power, diplomacy, global trade, and consumer perceptions:

Reynolds, C., 2009. Tipping the Scales: Examining the power of food in international politics. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*

Reynolds, C., 2012. The soft power of food: a diplomacy of hamburgers and sushi?. *Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1(2)

Garg, D.H., Spiker, M.L., Clark, J.K., Reynolds, C. and Otten, J.J., 2022. Food systems governance should be preceded by food systems diplomacy. *Nature Food*, 3(9), pp.667-670.

Ranta, R., 2019 Dissonance on the Brexit Menu: What does Britain Want to Eat?, *Political Quarterly*, 90(4): 654-663.

Ranta, R. and Mulrooney, H., 2021 Pandemics, food (in)security, and leaving the EU: what does the Covid-19 pandemic tell us about food insecurity and Brexit, *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 3(1): 100125.

Ranta, R. and Ichijo, A., 2022. Chapter Five: National Food in the International Context I—Gastrodiplomacy. In *Food, National Identity and Nationalism: From Everyday to Global Politics* (pp. 131-152). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Ranta, R. and Ichijo, A., 2022. *Food, national identity and nationalism: From everyday to global politics*. Springer Nature.

March 2025

0.8 Funding statement: Dr Reynolds is funded by UKRI through Healthy soil, Healthy food, Healthy people (H3) project (Project Reference: BB/V004719/1), Co-Centre for Sustainable Food Systems (Project Reference: BB/Y012909/1) and Joined up Landscapes (Project Reference: TBA); NIHR through NIHR133927; Horizon Europe through RELISH (Reframing European gastronomy Legacy through Innovation, Sustainability and Heritage).

## 1. Why is soft power important? How might this concept be measured?

1.1 Soft power is crucial as it enhances the UK's global influence through cultural appeal, diplomacy, and values. UK food and drink (hereafter UK food) can play a more positive role in diplomacy and wider economic growth through soft power and the brand "[Global Britain](#)", as well as additional sub-national brand-identities such as Scottish, Welsh, NI and English etc.

1.2 Food soft power is a soft power strategy that has been undertaken successfully by other governments including those in Thailand and the Nordic countries etc. ([Parliament magazine 2024](#)).

Food soft power is deployed through the production, export, and consumption of UK food and drink culture, and physical UK food and drink products.

1.3 There are multiple transmission routes for food soft power: State to State, through civil servants and elected officials; Businesses to Business, through employees; and Person to Person. In each of these, positive interactions with UK food and/or food culture lead to the formation of a positive outlook about UK products and culture, which lead to behavioural change.

1.4 Measurable impacts include

**Direct:** 1) increased exports of UK goods and services as well as increased domestic production and jobs. 2) enhanced domestic tourism, leading to increased travel within the UK, benefiting local and regional economies, and fostering a deeper connection to national identities.

**Indirect:** 1) improved international recognition of UK policies and standards, 2) improved trust, and 3) the influence on global (culinary) trends.

## 2. What tangible benefits does soft power provide the UK's international relationships?

2.1 Soft power fosters positive international relationships, making trade negotiations smoother and more favourable. Trade, standards and regulation negotiations are multi-faceted. Soft power can provide cultural context to smooth out negotiations. Soft power supports the rules-based international order by promoting British values and standards

March 2025

globally. Soft power also can lead to stronger leverage at diplomatic negotiations, meaning that the UK can negotiate better trade deals based on wider food system outcomes such as health, sustainability and social impacts ([Garg et al 2022](#)).

2.2 The UK is a leader in many food-policy related areas, including net-zero and climate-smart production, food waste reduction, school food, public procurement, food environment modification and advertising restrictions, and food safety and animal welfare standards. Other countries have adopted UK trading standards and have implemented versions of UK food policies domestically. This policy leadership (associated soft power reputation) allows the UK to improve other nations' food systems. The UK's wider food-policy reputation allows trade negotiations (negotiating regulatory alignments) that are based on health, social, and environmental drivers rather than just economic outcomes ([Garg et al 2022](#)). This mechanism of soft power is undervalued.

### **3. What should the objective of soft power be, for example, to achieve economic growth for the UK overseas, bolster its influence or other?**

3.1 Below we discuss the immediate (3.2-3.3) and longer-term future (3.4-3.7) objectives as related to food soft power. Overall objectives include achieving economic growth, bolstering influence, and promoting UK values, standards and policies.

3.2 HM government's current economic strategy (and current food and drink strategy) are growth-based ([Sustain 2024](#)). Domestic demand for food and drink is static (with policies in place to increase domestic consumption of UK food and drink ([gov.uk 2024](#))). Soft power can be harnessed to expand the export markets that want to purchase UK food.

3.3 The current value of exported food, feed and drink is £24.4 billion ([gov.uk 2024](#)). Current exports are bifurcated into high-value, high-end food products (such as Whisky (£5.8 billion export value ([gov.uk 2024](#))) as well as Wine (£0.5 billion), Cheese (£0.81 billion), Beef and veal (£0.49 billion), Salmon (£0.66 billion), Lamb (£0.54 billion)); and staple products and commodities such as Breakfast cereals (£0.56 billion), Wheat (£0.28 billion), and Poultry meat (£0.19 billion). Many products have existing global recognition and caches of soft power related to their UK production.

3.4 There is an opportunity for longer-term soft power objectives to 1) support UK exports of sustainable food (stimulate markets, interest and knowledge); and 2) use food soft power in innovative ways in strategic forums to achieve positive global outcomes e.g. as part of climate negotiations.

3.5 HM government is currently developing and implementing multiple ambitious cross-government strategies and frameworks, including a new national food strategy, the Land

March 2025

Use Framework, Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMs), Net Zero Strategy, and a cross-government Health Mission in 2025 ([gov.uk 2025a](#), [2025b](#), [2024](#)). Likewise, the HM Government has invested [£75m into alternative proteins](#) development. This positions the UK as a ‘first mover’ towards at scale sustainable production enabling a sustainable UK food culture.

3.6 The above policies will transform the UK food system, increasing sustainable, net-zero, regenerative, and nature-based food production. This can be developed into a narrative of the UK being a “less but better”, resilient, and sustainable food producer. This new narrative compliments existing UK food soft power narratives of high-quality, safety, culture, taste, diversity, inclusion, and innovation. Together these represent a very strong soft power narrative for “Brand Britain”, that can be used to price UK production as premium products. We note that is a similar strategy to that successfully used by New Nordic Cuisine ([Parliament magazine 2024](#)).

3.7 This increased recognition of UK as a sustainable food producer with a sustainable food culture further enables the UK to use soft power in innovative ways in strategic forums, such as climate negotiations. The UK can use its reputation and policy base to push for wider change and stronger standards that will benefit the UK as a first mover.

#### **4. What are the UK’s soft power strengths? How is the UK perceived overseas? In what ways does this perception differ regionally or by country?**

4.1. Perceptions of UK food vary considerably. European markets recognise the quality of UK cheeses, seafood, and meats. Other regions may have outdated views of UK food and food culture. “British” food has previously been seen as stodgy, old and traditional. There is fragmentation of UK vs English, Scottish etc food cultures leading to confusion.

4.2 Currently the UK has one of the most vibrant and innovative food cultures globally. Current UK food culture is supported by a strong digital and print food-media (£4 billion spent domestically annually ([Adams et al 2011](#))). The UK is home to 197 Michelin starred restaurants, with 10 3-star restaurants ([Michelin Guide, 2025](#)).

4.3 As discussed in 3.3 and 3.6 there are multiple specific products that could be further developed as part of a UK food soft power strategy. These includes new alternative proteins and sustainably produced “traditional” animal products such as salmon, beef and lamb.

4.4 The above strengths could be further enhanced with a coherent food diplomacy approach, creating a positive feedback mechanism (see 7.1-7.6).

March 2025

## **5. How do FCDO arms-length bodies, including the British Council, BBC World Service and British International Investment, contribute towards the UK's soft power strengths?**

5.1 These arms-length bodies contribute by promoting British culture, education, and media globally, and shaping the narrative and perceptions around them.

5.2 The BBC World Service's Food Chain program and British Council's cultural initiatives are good examples of food soft power development.

5.3 Value for money can be assessed by their impact on enhancing the UK's global image and influence.

## **6. What role does soft power play in the UK's role as a leading actor in conflict resolution?**

No comment

## **7. How effective is the FCDO in leading HMG's soft power approach across Government, and overseas? Where can these efforts be improved? What contribution should the Soft Power Council make? And How does HMG demonstrate commitment to supporting British soft power sectors abroad?**

7.1 The FCDO's effectiveness can be improved by integrating food as a key element of soft power strategy. The Soft Power Council should focus on a coherent strategy that includes food, culture, and sustainable practices. This includes having representatives from both food and drink in the UK Soft Power Council.

7.2 As stated in 3.4 to 3.6, the UK's future soft power strategy needs to support wider cross departmental strategies (food, net-zero health etc), and vice versa.

7.3 We propose that FCDO embed food diplomacy as part of British cultural diplomacy toolkits throughout HM Government operations. This includes into the operational workings of the FCDO: such as priority serving of quality UK food at events, and throughout HM Government canteens and operations. This would be coherent with ongoing HM Government policy for effective public procurement ([gov.uk 2022](#), [Parsons and Barling 2022](#))

7.4 Soft power has limited mentions in other government department documents. We recommend cross-department working to ensure there is an integrated approach. This would mean FCDO collaboration with DEFRA, DHSC, DESNZ, DSIT, DBT etc. To co-develop the soft power agenda alongside other cross government agendas (see 3.4).

March 2025

7.5 Further commitment can be shown through coordinated efforts across departments, promoting British food in trade negotiations and international events, as well as highlighting British food culture and sustainable practices in embassies and trade missions (see 8.2-8.5).

7.6 UK food has existing caches of soft power and a strong positive reputation (see 3.3 and 4.2). We recommend developing synergies between food and other soft power sources, including media, literature, sport, and the Crown. The Crown Estates (its portfolio including UK agriculture and common land) is already pioneering sustainable food production and land management in the UK. Linking the strong soft power brand of the Crown would be a launch point for wider links to soft power synergies.

### **8. How might the FCDO engage with the media and the private sector to strengthen its soft power offering?**

8.1 The FCDO can enhance its soft power by celebrating UK food through existing media (television, online platforms, and print media), supporting global food initiatives, and leveraging social media influencers.

8.2 HM government can organise trade and research missions to promote exports (see 3.3, 3.6), collaborate with businesses that promote UK food and culture globally, and provide grants or sponsorship for international events and trade shows.

8.3 Support culinary education programs that emphasise UK cuisine and food standards, both domestically and internationally. Facilitate culinary exchanges where chefs and food experts from the UK and other countries can share knowledge and techniques.

8.4 Establish training programs for buyers' desks, supermarket managerial employees, and supply chain teams to ensure that they are knowledgeable about UK food products and their unique selling points.

8.5 Further develop policy training for civil servants outside the UK, enabling them to understand UK standards and policy innovations so that they can align their own countries with UK standards and practices (see 2.2).

### **9. How does soft power interact with and complement the UK's foreign policy? In what ways does soft power support the UK's foreign policy? Are there challenges in this relationship?**

9.1 Soft power enhances the UK's foreign policy by improving its global image and influence, making diplomatic efforts more effective. However, challenges arise in ensuring a coherent strategy that aligns soft power with broader foreign policy goals.

9.2 Currently, food soft power is underutilised in negotiations ([Garg et al 2022](#)). While there are negotiations on UK food, they are not leveraged to support a holistic negotiation style.

March 2025

Understanding how food can provide wider system benefits is crucial. Often, food is seen as less important, rather than an outcome in its own right.

## **10 How does the UK counter the soft power influence and narrative of other major powers including China, India, Russia and Turkey?**

10.1 The UK can counter the soft power influence of major powers like China, India, Russia, and Turkey by promoting its gastronomy.

10.2 Leveraging British-Indian and British-Chinese culinary exchanges, the UK highlights high standards and sustainable practices in food production. UK food culture, influenced by global cuisines, has established narratives that can be built upon with new stories of sustainability, high standards and welfare (see 3.4-3.7).

10.3 The diverse and inclusive nature of UK food culture (including Asian, African, Caribbean influences), enriched by diaspora communities, fosters two-way culinary innovation. The HM Government can harness these communication routes to highlight the positives of UK food, attracting global interest and tourism.

## **11 What role do regional and international organisations play in bolstering the UK's soft power offer? How might the UK build partnerships and alliances with these organisations to achieve its soft power goals?**

11.1 Regional and international organisations play a crucial role in bolstering the UK's soft power by facilitating the transfer of ideas, products, and cultural values. These organisations help enhance the UK's global image and influence by promoting British culture, food, and sustainable practices.

11.2 Building partnerships with entities like the EU, Mercosur, and international culinary associations can significantly promote British food and culture on a global scale.

11.3 To achieve its soft power goals, the UK can establish strategic alliances with these organisations, leveraging their networks and platforms to showcase British innovations and high standards (see 3.4-3.7). Collaborating on joint initiatives, participating in international events, and engaging in cultural exchanges can further strengthen these partnerships.