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United Kingdom
National Commission
for UNESCO

UNESCO at 80

Briefing: Westminster Hall Debate
Tuesday 18th November 2025

“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”

UNESCO Constitution, London, 1945

Overview

In November 2025, UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) marks its 80th anniversary.

Established as a specialised agency of the United Nations in London in the wake of the Second World War, UNESCO harnesses the power of education, culture, science, communication and information to advance global peace building, sustainable development, intercultural dialogue, and the eradication of poverty. Its founding mission, as stated in its Constitution (Article 1), is to:

“contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture [...] without distinction of race, sex, language or religion”.

UNESCO fulfills this global mandate through normative and programmatic functions including setting international standards through Conventions and Recommendations, and helping to implement these standards at the intergovernmental and national level through technical programmes and projects. The UK has played an instrumental role in shaping UNESCO over the past 80 and is a critical contributor to many of its global programmes and activities.

Quick Facts - UNESCO at 80

- **Founded:** 16 November 1945, in London (44 countries attended the founding conference).
- **Membership:** 194 member states (as of 2025), and 12 associated members. The UK is a founding member.
- **Mandate:** Promote peace, justice, and human rights through international collaboration in education, science, culture, and communication.
- **Key activities:** Setting international standards in education, science, culture and communication; coordinating global programmes and policy frameworks such as SDG 4 on Education, the Ethics of AI, and the Decade of Ocean Science; and maintaining an international network of UNESCO designated sites.
- **Leadership:** Director-General Khaled El-Enany (since 15 November 2025). First Director-General was British biologist Julian Huxley in 1946.
- **UN relations:** UNESCO is part of the UN family and works to advance the broader United Nations agenda, including advancing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (it is the lead UN agency for SDG4 on Education). 2025 also marks the [UN’s 80th anniversary](#).

At a glance

With 194 Member States, UNESCO coordinates one of the most wide-ranging international programmes in the United Nations system.

Its work is guided by a [Medium-Term Strategy \(C/4\)](#) and implemented through a biennial [Programme and Budget \(C/5\)](#), which together set out the Organisation's priorities across education, science, culture, and communication.

The overview below summarises (but doesn't fully capture) the breadth of UNESCO's work, often with UK expertise and communities driving the agendas, from setting international standards to managing global networks that protect heritage, advance science, and promote access to education and information.

1

Education: Leads global efforts to improve and harmonise education systems worldwide.

- Coordinates [Sustainable Development Goal 4](#) – Quality Education, promoting lifelong learning and inclusion.
- Drives [Education for Sustainable Development](#), the [UN Greening Education Partnership](#), and [Global Citizenship and Peace Education](#), ensuring learners gain the knowledge and values to tackle climate change and build peaceful societies.
- Oversees the [Global Convention on Higher Education Qualifications](#) to recognise academic degrees internationally, and supports fair recognition of qualifications for refugees and displaced persons who may lack full documentation.
- Connects over [12,000 UNESCO Associated Schools](#) and more than [350 Learning Cities](#) that share innovation and best practice.

2

Science: Strengthens international scientific cooperation and ethical governance.

- Coordinates the [Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission](#), including [global tsunami-warning systems](#) and the [UN Decade of Ocean Science \(2021–2030\)](#).
- Leads the [Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme](#) to advance global water science and sustainable water management, including securing clean drinking water and preventing floods.
- Develops ethical frameworks for emerging technologies through the Recommendations on the [Ethics of Artificial Intelligence](#) (2021) and [Neurotechnology](#) (2025).
- Oversees networks of [Biosphere Reserves](#), [Global Geoparks](#), and scientific centres advancing [biodiversity](#), [geodiversity](#) and sustainability research.

3

Culture: Safeguards cultural and natural heritage and promotes creativity.

- Administers the [World Heritage Convention \(1972\)](#), safeguarding 1,248 sites of Outstanding Universal Value across 170 state parties.
- Oversees the [2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) (recently [ratified](#) in 2024 by the UK) and the [2005 Convention](#) on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.
- Implements the [2001 Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage](#), preserving submerged archaeological sites such as shipwrecks and ancient ports.
- Leads global efforts to combat illicit trafficking of cultural property through the [1970 Convention](#) and cooperation with law enforcement and museums worldwide.
- Upholds the [1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict](#), supported by the Blue Shield Network—the international body coordinating cultural protection in crisis zones.
- Supports over [400 UNESCO Creative Cities](#) and a wide range of culture-in-crisis, heritage restoration, and post-disaster recovery programmes worldwide.
- Administers the [Memory of the World Programme](#), a global initiative to safeguard the world's documentary heritage against collective amnesia, the ravages of war, decay and deterioration.

4

Communication & Information: Promotes freedom of expression and access to information

- Leads global action to strengthen free, independent and pluralistic media, coordinating the [International Programme for the Development of Communication \(IPDC\)](#), which supports journalist training, media literacy, and press freedom initiatives in over 140 countries.
- Advances journalist safety and the [UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists](#) and the Issue of Impunity, providing policy guidance and practical training through regional networks.
- Coordinates [World Press Freedom Day](#) and manages the [Global Media Defence Fund](#), to which the UK is a leading donor, providing legal aid and safety support to journalists under threat.
- Promotes information integrity online, ethical use of digital technologies, and greater public resilience to disinformation.
- Expands digital inclusion and multilingual access to knowledge, including open educational resources and universal internet connectivity through its [“Internet Universality”](#) framework.

The UK's UN Agency

UNESCO was born directly from the lessons of the Second World War, and from the unique circumstances of wartime London, a city under bombardment that had become home to many governments-in-exile.

In 1942, amid the Blitz and the presence of many governments-in-exile in London, the UK convened the **Conference of Allied Ministers of Education (CAME)** under Education Minister Rab Butler MP and British Council Chair Sir Malcolm Robertson.



Meeting in London from November 1942, these Allied ministers recognised that lasting peace would depend not only on military victory alone, but on using education, science, and culture to rebuild trust and understanding among nations.

This wartime collaboration laid the foundation for a new organisation dedicated to intellectual and moral solidarity. Less than a month after the founding of the United Nations, the UK hosted the **Conference for the Establishment of an Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation** at the Institute of Civil Engineers in London from 1–16 November 1945 (pictured above). Representatives of 44 countries met to draft and adopt the Constitution of what became the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). See [UNESCO 1945: birth of an ideal](#) for more information, and you can see Ellen Wilkinson MP declaring it's creation in a video [here](#).

“ Today, the peoples of the world are ‘islands shouting at each other over seas of misunderstanding’. They do not understand each other’s history, each other’s ways of living, each other’s way of thinking. The better they understand each other, the more they will realise how much they have in common and why and how they differ, and the less prone they will be to take up arms against each other. ‘Know thyself’, said the old proverb. ‘Know your neighbour’, we say today. And the whole world is our neighbour”.

Prime Minister Clement Attlee, Conference for the Establishment of UNESCO, November 1945.

“ Britain stood godmother to our infant Organization. She offered us, for its cradle, her capital, a city preserved in the tragic days of the war by the awe-inspiring endurance of a gallant people. Every birth is a portent. UNESCO’s birth, and the manner of it, bids us to persevere.”

Dr Jaime Torrest Bodet, Director General of UNESCO, speaking at the first meeting of the United Kingdom National Commission for UNESCO, London. 1949

On **16 November 1945**, UNESCO’s Constitution was adopted in London, the same city that had hosted the Allied governments-in-exile only three years earlier. The United Kingdom ratified the Constitution on **8 February 1946**, and it entered into force on **4 November 1946**.

At UNESCO’s first General Conference later that year, Julian Huxley, a British scientist and humanist, was elected its first Director-General, reflecting the leading role of UK thinkers and policymakers in shaping the Organisation’s ideals. In 1946, Julian Huxley wrote an influential (but never adopted) paper on UNESCO, its purpose and underpinning philosophy - available [here](#).

The founding of UNESCO was a cross-party British achievement: conceived under a Conservative minister during the wartime coalition and realised under a Labour government in 1945. London’s role as the birthplace of UNESCO symbolised the UK’s conviction that peace must be built not only through politics and defence, but through the free exchange of knowledge, ideas and culture. That belief continues to define the UK’s engagement with UNESCO eighty years later.



Ellen Wilkinson (1891–1947) addressing a peace rally in Trafalgar Square, London.

“We are met at the end of the greatest war in history, against the background of two continents with their attendant islands, across which the fires of war have raged. Even now the embers still glow, and here and there the flames still flicker. All of us here—all the nations that we represent—have taken some part in this great struggle. All have ranged themselves under the flag of freedom and against aggression and oppression. Many of us have drunk together from a common cup of sorrow and sacrifice. Now we are met together; workers in education, in scientific research and in the varied fields of culture. We represent those who teach, those who discover, those who write, those who express their inspiration in music and art. We have a high responsibility, for entrusted to us is the task of creating some part—and not the least important part—of that structure of the United Nations on which rest our hopes for the future of mankind. It is for us to clear the channels through which may flow from nation to nation the streams of knowledge and thought, of truth and beauty which are the foundations of true civilization.”

Ellen Wilkinson MP, President of the first Conference in 1945 (and UK Minister of Education). See full quote [here](#) (p.8)

UNESCO in the UK Today

Over the past 80 years, UNESCO has built a significant presence within the United Kingdom, bringing tangible benefits to communities across the four nations of the UK.

The UK is home to a diverse portfolio of UNESCO designations, places and networks that embody UNESCO's global mission at the local level. As of 2025, there are over 60 UNESCO-designated sites and cities in the UK (including British Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies).

- **World Heritage Sites:** The UK has [35 UNESCO World Heritage Sites](#) (33 cultural and natural sites in the UK and its territories) – from Stonehenge and the Tower of London to the Giant's Causeway, Edinburgh's Old and New Towns, the Castles of Gwynedd, and the Dorset/Devon Jurassic Coast.
- **Global Geoparks:** The UK now has [10 Global Geoparks](#), such as the English Riviera Geopark in Torbay, the North Pennines AONB Geopark, GeoMôn on Anglesey, and the cross-border Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark (NI/IRL). Each geopark celebrates geological heritage and works with local communities on education and sustainable tourism.
- **Biosphere Reserves:** The UK has [7 UNESCO Biosphere Reserves](#) under the MAB Programme, including North Devon, Dyfi (Wales), Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, Wester Ross, Brighton & Lewes Downs, and the Isle of Man.
- **Creative Cities:** The UK is active in UNESCO's Creative Cities Network with [14 Creative Cities](#) - examples include Edinburgh (Literature), Glasgow (Music), Liverpool (Music) and Dundee (Design), and Bradford (Film). These designations leverage local cultural industries, from literature festivals to music scenes, as engines of urban regeneration, international collaboration and tourism.
- **Learning Cities:** [10 UK cities](#) (including Bristol, Swansea, Wolverhampton, Glasgow and others) are part of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities, committed to promoting lifelong learning for all.
- **UNESCO Chairs/UNITWIN Networks:** The UK hosts [34 UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN networks](#) in areas such as bioethics, gender equality, disaster risk reduction and artificial intelligence governance. This programme fosters international cooperation and knowledge sharing between higher education institutions around the world in addressing the world's most pressing challenges.

- The UK contributes to UNESCO's global science networks through the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, [led by the National Oceanography Centre](#) in Southampton, and the [IHP-UK Committee at the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology](#) in Wallingford. The UNESCO Category 2 [Centre on Water Law, Policy and Science](#) at the University of Dundee advances international water law and policy, while the UNESCO Ecohydrology Demonstration Site at [Eddleston Water](#) supports global research on freshwater ecosystems.

The Impact of the Network:

- **Reach into Communities:** Collectively, UNESCO designations [cover a substantial portion](#) of the UK's geography and populace. UNESCO sites account for roughly 15% of the UK's land area and about 9–10 million residents. Analysis by the UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) found that UNESCO sites are present (fully or partially) in around 170 parliamentary constituencies across the UK.
- **Economic and Social Impact:** UNESCO designations are powerful drivers of sustainable development across the UK. A [UKNC study found](#) that UNESCO status helps sites attract funding, tourism, and partnerships, adding over £151 million in extra revenue each year across 76 sites. Beyond economics, these places strengthen local identity and pride, support education and volunteering, and foster international collaboration, from the Jurassic Coast's global partnerships to Liverpool's ties with other UNESCO Music Cities. Together, they serve as custodians of cultural and natural heritage and catalysts for cultural, environmental, social, and economic renewal.
- **Soft Power and Global Reach:** UNESCO plays a vital role in amplifying the UK's soft power. Each UNESCO designation, whether a World Heritage Site, Biosphere Reserve, Global Geopark, Creative City, or UNESCO Chair, acts as part of a global network (covering 10 million km²) that showcases British expertise, creativity, and values. These networks project the UK's leadership in heritage, sustainability, science, and education, while fostering trust, reciprocity, and long-term partnerships between communities around the world.
- In an era defined by collaboration and shared global challenges, UNESCO and its vast networks offers a model of soft power built on partnership rather than projection. UK sites and institutions exchange knowledge and innovation with peers worldwide - from Fountains Abbey's [partnership](#) with Uganda's Rwenzori Mountains National Park, where teams share landscape and water management practices, to Hadrian's Wall's transnational collaboration with Germany's Limes and China's Great Wall on heritage interpretation and conservation.
- UNESCO designations thus serve as one of the UK's most effective and values-driven instruments of influence, rooted in local places, powered by international exchange, and built on mutual respect. They illustrate that in a time of complex global competition, the UK's enduring strength lies not only in what it can show the world, but in the partnerships it builds with it.

The UK National Commission for UNESCO and UK Permanent Delegation to UNESCO

The [UK National Commission for UNESCO \(UKNC\)](#), established in 1946, is the UK Government's official independent advisory body to UNESCO and the primary channel through which the UK engages with its programmes and networks.

While the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) is the lead department for the UK's relationship with UNESCO, the Organisation's broad remit across education, science, culture, and communication means that delivery is inherently cross-governmental, involving DCMS, DfE, DEFRA, DSIT, the Devolved Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and a wide network of UK experts, institutions, and communities.

Working closely with the UK Government(s), and the UK Ambassador and Permanent Delegate to UNESCO, [Anna Nsubuga](#), the UKNC ensures that the UK's expertise, institutions, and communities play an active role across UNESCO's global agenda. It also provides independent policy advice to government on UNESCO-related matters and supports the implementation of UNESCO conventions, including the 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, helping to build national capacity and connect the UK's living heritage with global practice.

The UKNC helps organisations secure and manage UNESCO designations, from new Biosphere Reserves to UNESCO Chairs, and strengthens collaboration across the UK's 60-plus designations. It also delivers major cross-government programmes that demonstrate how UNESCO networks support national priorities:

- [Local to Global \(L2G\)](#): Funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, this programme connects UNESCO sites across the UK to build skills, foresight capacity, and regional collaboration. Its second phase (2025–26) moves from resilience to adaptability, developing regional clusters of UNESCO sites working together on shared challenges such as climate change and sustainable tourism.
- [Climate Change & UNESCO Heritage \(CCUH\)](#): A £1.8 million HM Treasury Shared Outcomes Fund project co-led with DCMS, CCUH unites experts, agencies, and data to address climate impacts on heritage. Working with pilot sites in North Devon, Fforest Fawr, and Hadrian's Wall, the project has co-designed new digital tools and adaptation models now shared nationally and internationally, positioning the UK as a leader in heritage climate resilience.
- **Living Heritage** - following the UK's ratification last year of the 2003 Convention for

the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, communities across the UK will soon be able to nominate their favourite traditions to be included within an inventories of our living heritage, via a platform hosted by UKNC.

In addition, the UKNC coordinates the [UK Man and the Biosphere Committee](#), supports the World Heritage and [Global Geoparks national networks](#), and manages UK input to UNESCO's intergovernmental science programmes, through the National Oceanography Centre (IOC) and the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (IHP-UK). It facilitates collaboration among more than 30 UK UNESCO Chairs and 160 UNESCO Associated Schools, ensuring education, science, and culture remain central to the UK's global engagement.

For more information about the full range and impact of UNESCO in the UK and internationally, please contact the UK National Commission for UNESCO:

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Published in November 2025