

## Report: New Königswinter Future Lab 2026

16 April 2026, Landesvertretung von Nordrhein-Westfalen,  
Berlin



*Federal Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul and Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper MP with Young Königswinter Alumni  
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### *Topics:*

*People to people, civil exchange, knowledge exchange,  
Digital transformation and security,  
and Wider economic modernisation*

# New Königswinter Future Lab

Berlin, 16 April 2026

Saal Rheinland, Vertretung des Landes NRW beim Bund, Hiroshimastraße 12-16,  
10785 Berlin

## Programme

8.45 Arrival

9.00 Welcome

**NATHANAEL LIMINSKI MdL**, Minister for Federal, European, International Affairs and Media of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia

**ANNE RUTH HERKES**, State Secretary ret., Chair, Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft

**Opening of the New Königswinter Future Lab**

**JOHANN WADEPHUL**, FEDERAL FOREIGN MINISTER  
**RT HON YVETTE COOPER MP**, FOREIGN SECRETARY

moderated by **JOHN KAMPFNER**, Vice Chair, Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft

10.00 Group Discussions on

1. People to people, civic exchange, knowledge exchange

How do we develop people to people exchanges in the following groups:

- Schools, Students, Young people
- Arts, creative industries and culture
- Academia, research and science
- Civic communities and city and regional partnerships

2. Digital transformation and security:

What can we do together to enhance both countries' digital transformations, cybersecurity and online hygiene?

- Role of AI, bots, fake news disinformation
- Skills transformation
- Cybersecurity for the private sector, institutions and citizens
- Social media regulation and the wider questions around the use of social media and mobile apps in people's daily lives

### 3. Wider economic modernisation:

How can both countries ensure that they and Europe do not fall behind in the global race for competitiveness?

- Germany and the UK as leaders on net zero. Your ideas and perspectives
- How can Germany and the UK unlock the economic potential of the green transition while ensuring a just transformation for workers?
- How can both countries strengthen supply chain resilience for critical raw materials and technologies in light of global competition?
- How can Germany and the UK foster innovation ecosystems that enable start-ups and SMEs to benefit from bilateral cooperation?

11.00 Reports from the Groups

12.00 Executive Summary by JOHN KAMPNER

12.10 Start of Reception

13.00 Finish

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On 16 April 2026, the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft convened the New Königswinter Future Lab in Berlin, an event designed specifically for the next generation of UK-German bridge-builders. Bringing together young professionals and emerging voices from politics, business, civil society and academia on both sides of the Channel, the Future Lab offered a dedicated space for the generation that will shape the



*Dr. Johann Wadepful, © Lukas Schramm*

bilateral relationship in the decades to come. Held at the NRW State Representation in Berlin and supported

by the Federal Foreign Office and bp, the day was structured around three core working groups: people-to-people exchange, digital transformation and security, and wider economic modernisation.

What made the event particularly remarkable was the signal sent by both governments from the very outset. The formal opening was delivered jointly by Federal Foreign Minister Johann Wadepful and Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper MP – a clear statement that the views and ideas of this younger generation matter at the highest political level, and that the Königswinter Conferences are recognised as the forum for the bilateral relationship. Minister Wadepful spoke directly to the young participants, making no secret of why their presence was meaningful: they are the ones who will give life to the partnership in the years to come, shaping how both countries work together through their ideas, their networks and their engagement – whether in finance, diplomacy, tech or civil society.

His remarks set out the broader context into which this generation is stepping. Germany and the United Kingdom are facing the same monumental challenges: an eroding international order, Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, a transforming transatlantic relationship, and an accelerating technological revolution driven by AI. Against this backdrop, the Kensington Treaty provides the bilateral partnership with a new structured framework, outlining 17 priority projects – spanning the economic and political levels as well as civil society – aimed at delivering tangible benefits for citizens of both countries. But Wadepful was equally clear about the limits of formal agreements: treaties do not create partnerships – people do.



*Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, © Lukas Schramm*

The sentiment was echoed by Yvette Cooper's speech. The Foreign Secretary spoke warmly about her personal experiences on a school exchange in Germany and stressed the importance of the bilateral relationship vis à vis the current geopolitical and technological challenges, saying how turbulence had become the new normal and both of our countries will be stronger if we stand together rather than alone. Both the Trinty House Agreements and the Kensington Treaty are important steps to drive forward bilateral cooperation, as well as the reset in the EU-UK

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relationship. They set out an ambitious roadmap for the future, and she welcomed the opportunity to discuss this with young people, who form both the future of Königswinter and the future of the German-British relationship.

It was the conviction that the relationship is shaped by people rather than treaties that gave the Future Lab its particular energy. Following the Q&A, moderated by John Kampfner, Vice Chair of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft, participants split into three working groups and spent the morning developing concrete ideas and recommendations. The results of those discussions are set out below.

## **Group 1: People to people, civil exchange, knowledge exchange**

### **Strengthening UK–Germany Cultural and Educational Exchange**

#### **From Mobility to Mutuality**

The recent re-signing of Erasmus has been welcomed, particularly within the education sector. It has also brought back long-standing frustrations among schools and practitioners, alongside a deeper issue. The UK's approach to international exchange is still often shaped by a domestic mindset rather than a fully outward-looking one.

This matters in the context of UK–Germany relations and the ambitions set out in the Kensington Treaty. The treaty places clear emphasis on people-to-people links, cultural understanding and sustained collaboration. Delivering that in practice will depend on how exchange is structured at local and regional level, not just national programmes.



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#### **Moving Beyond Asymmetry**

Cultural exchange between the UK and Germany is not always balanced. Germany often shows strong interest in UK exchange opportunities (schools receive overwhelmingly more applications from German students than UK coming to Germany) culture, particularly in music and creative industries, but that interest is not always matched in reverse.

Rather than trying to force symmetry, there is a case for working with this reality. Cultural engagement can still be effective if it creates meaningful points of connection. Areas like electronic music, digital culture and urban arts offer natural entry points, but they need to be built around collaboration rather than passive consumption.

#### **Education, Access and Recognition of Skills**

Educational exchange remains central but there are barriers that limit its impact.

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Access is one of the most obvious. Programmes such as Erasmus can become skewed towards those who already have the means and confidence to take part. That risks reinforcing inequality rather than widening opportunity.

Exchanges don't always have to be in person. There is scope to explore the potential of digital and hybrid formats, particularly within schools, to establish a first contact (that can lead to an in person exchange) or build on an existing one. This might make participating in

exchange programmes more accessible, and overcome hesitancy among some groups.

- There is also a structural issue around recognition of skills and qualifications. If exchange is to have long-term value, there needs to be mutual acknowledgement of qualifications across both countries:
- Teaching qualifications should be recognised so educators can work in both systems without unnecessary barriers
- Degrees should be genuinely transferable and understood by employers and institutions in each country
- Vocational pathways should align more closely so technical skills can move across borders

Without this, mobility remains limited and often short term. With it, exchange becomes a credible route into employment and professional development.

### Town Twinning and Regional Delivery

Town twinning remains one of the most practical ways to build sustained relationships, but it often lacks visibility and consistent support.

There are working examples that could be built on. Manchester's Andy Burnham began a partnership with the Rhine-Ruhr area, which has included cultural exchange, business links and civic cooperation.

Across Greater Manchester, activity exists but is often fragmented:

- School partnerships and exchanges with German counterparts
- University collaborations with cities such as Munich and Hamburg
- Cultural organisations working with German partners on exhibitions, residencies and performances

This work in other areas, where not backed by council or government engagement, is often driven by individuals or short-term funding rather than a coordinated regional approach.

There is an opportunity to build a stronger model with Greater Manchester as an example by mapping existing links, supporting local institutions and creating a clearer, shared offer for German partners. Town twinning may feel outdated, but when it is active it provides continuity that national programmes often lack.

### **Cultural Platforms and Access to Content**

Cultural exchange is not only about physical mobility. It is also about access to each other's cultural output.

At present, access is uneven. UK platforms such as BBC iPlayer are not readily available in Germany, and similar barriers exist in the opposite direction. This limits everyday exposure to culture, particularly for younger audiences.



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If people-to-people exchange is to deepen, there is a strong case for making cultural platforms more accessible across borders. This could include:

- Expanding access to public service broadcasting content
- Supporting subtitled or localised distribution of cultural programming
- Creating shared digital spaces for cultural collaboration

Without this, engagement remains occasional rather than part of daily cultural life.

### **Cultural Programming and Public Engagement**

Large cultural events can play a role, but they need to be handled carefully. Germany's experience during the 2006 World Cup showed how culture and national identity can be presented in an open and engaging way.

There is a risk of relying on surface-level branding exercises that do not lead to lasting connections (see, 'Cool Britannia'). Cultural programming should be grounded in real partnerships and local participation.

There is also a case for more proactive investment from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in bringing British cultural talent to Germany. This could include:

- Supporting tours, exhibitions and performances by UK artists
- Funding residencies and collaborations with German institutions
- Creating sustained cultural seasons rather than one-off events

This kind of visible, consistent presence would help build familiarity and interest over time.

## Local Capacity and Delivery

Delivery remains a constraint, particularly in the UK. Local authorities are under financial pressure, especially in areas such as social care. This limits their ability to prioritise international work.

If the ambitions of the Kensington Treaty are to be realised, there needs to be:

- Practical guidance on what effective exchange looks like at local level
- Mechanisms for sharing best practice
- Support for regions to coordinate activity rather than working in isolation

A clear framework would help move from ambition to delivery.



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## Tourism, Perception and Engagement

Tourism also plays a role in shaping perceptions. Germany is often promoted in broad terms, but this does not always translate into deeper engagement. City or regional promotional activities would work better (focus on Berlin as city of culture, Cologne as city of friendship - city in the world with the least loneliness, Karenval etc).

There is scope to present a more contemporary and regionally diverse picture of German culture, and to link

tourism more closely with education and cultural exchange. This can create a pathway from initial interest to longer-term involvement.

## Funding and Sustainability

Funding remains a consistent challenge. Cultural and educational exchange is often treated as discretionary, which makes it vulnerable.

There is potential to involve business more directly, particularly where there are links to skills and innovation. At the same time, access needs to be widened so opportunities are not limited to those who are already well connected.

## Conclusion

The Kensington Treaty sets out a clear ambition to strengthen ties between the UK and Germany. Delivering this will depend on sustained effort across education, culture and regional cooperation.

That includes making mobility meaningful through recognition of qualifications, improving access to cultural content, investing in visible cultural presence and strengthening local delivery.

The shift that is needed is from one-off exchange to something more embedded. This means building systems that allow people to move, work and engage across borders with fewer barriers, and creating relationships that last beyond individual programmes.

## Group 2: Digital transformation and security

The group was split into separate topics, discussion the role of AI, fake news and disinformation, skills transformation, social media and cybersecurity.

### Role of AI, bots, fake news, and disinformation

- Resilience is the top priority: hybrid threats are evolving rapidly, and no country can navigate these challenges alone.
- The misuse of technology, including AI, bots, fake news, and disinformation, requires stronger governance.
- Failed social media regulation has left democracies more exposed to manipulation and hostile influence.
- Attacks against elections raise urgent questions about our shared responses and preparedness.
- As technology becomes more automated, we also need to consider the industrial base that underpins it.
- The UK Parliament's AI Justice Unit is a useful example, but this agenda still has to compete for political space.
- The exchange of information and best practice between both countries needs to improve so that we can react faster.
- The Kensington Treaty could help demonstrate the shared challenges both countries face and provide a framework to tackle technological threats together.
- The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs has noted that we already have a shared strategy to tackle these challenges together.
- New developments at the European level are moving quickly, and both countries should coordinate their responses more closely.



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### Skill transformation

- Skills are central to resilience: we need more professionals who can deal with complex digital systems, cybersecurity, and data infrastructure.
- Germany needs to improve technological literacy across government.
- Digital hygiene must include adult education, not just youth-focused interventions.
- D-Stack and similar initiatives show that local authorities need support to move data securely and efficiently from one system to another.
- We need professionals who can work with the code, systems, and infrastructure already available.
- Important documents are still on paper, which slows digital transformation and weakens resilience.

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- German procurement law makes it difficult to fund specific skills consistently.
- Many of Berlin's problems are solvable with ordinary software that already exists, but public authorities are often unable to buy and deploy it.
- We should better understand what the Bundesländer expect at state level and how procurement law shapes what can actually be delivered.
- Local authorities in the UK often appear to be more forward-leaning, which could offer useful lessons for Germany.

### Social media regulation and the wider questions around the use of social media and mobile apps in people's daily lives

- Social media regulation remains a major unresolved issue.
- We need to learn from failed past regulations and think more carefully about what effective governance should look like.
- The Digital Services Act is an important part of the European response.
- There is growing debate about restricting teenagers' access to social media, including discussions around an age threshold of 16, with Australia being watched closely.
- Digital hygiene includes helping people understand how to use social media and mobile apps responsibly in everyday life.
- Governments also need to reflect on how they communicate, especially when public communication increasingly happens through personal social media channels.
- We should promote better etiquette and shared norms for responsible personal use of social media.
- We need more research and public information on how social media affects health and wellbeing, similar to how the harms of smoking and gambling have been studied and communicated.
- There is a wider toxic discussion around digital affairs, including questions about platform power, dependency, and the political consequences of digital joint ventures



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### Cybersecurity for the private sector, institutions, and citizens

- Cyber resilience must cover governments, private companies, public institutions, and citizens alike.
- Governments cannot stay on top of all technological change alone, so the question is how governments can rely on private companies without losing control.
- Firms must take greater responsibility for sovereign technology and critical infrastructure.
- On the hardware side, there is a shared challenge: data centres often turn to the cheapest options, which can create long-term dependencies and risks.
- There is a broader resilience question around dependence on US technology: how much strategic dependence are we willing to accept?
- We may not be able to keep pace with the US alone, but Europe's collective purchasing power is a major asset.



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- Europe already has many of the capabilities needed to address these issues faster; we should not remain dependent on actors such as Elon Musk.
- Trust in critical services is essential: how can we be sure that services such as Starlink will remain available and not be withdrawn unexpectedly?
- Both countries should improve reporting and information-sharing on cybersecurity threats.
- Germany's decentralised system

can be a strength: if one area is attacked, not the whole country goes down.

- We should ask how to increase the share of GDP available for cybersecurity spending.
- There is also a question about the health of the national tech industry: what are each country's strengths, and how can they be developed further?
- How can we reduce dependency on American providers and compete with Chinese prices while still maintaining secure, sovereign technology?
- If we want a real seat at the table internationally, we need to bring credible technological capacity and capability.

### Cross-Cutting points

- Governance is key across all of these issues.
- The interaction and exchange between both countries needs to be improved and increased.
- Both countries face shared technological and geopolitical challenges and should tackle them together.
- Resilience should be the common frame connecting digital transformation, cybersecurity, skills, and online hygiene.

### Group 3: Wider economic modernisation

Overview: the groups split into teams of 3 or 4, most containing a mix of businesspeople from all sectors and company sizes, economic experts, civil servants. Each small team was asked to come up with one or two key ideas on how to improve German/UK economic competitiveness.

Unsurprisingly, there were no silver bullets. There are no policy solutions that are not already known - and mostly being acted upon. But several groups commented that politicians were failing in several ways:

- More work to communicate the VALUES that the UK and Germany share, and how policy flows from these joint values.
- More COMMUNICATION overall. Be clearer about strategies at the start, optimistic about gains, realistic about trade-offs.
- Too little BRAVERY in tackling politically tough sells. Free movement of people and net zero are the clearest examples: both bring significant economic competitive advantage, but also a) not

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equally to all groups, and b) not always immediately. Politicians need to be honest with voters about this – but still pursue the brave policies.

Comments from the groups can be mostly put into five clusters: raw materials and supply chains, people, money, security, and the knowledge economy.

## Raw materials (including energy) and supply chains



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Both Germany and UK have gaps at the top and bottom of their policy approaches – strategy at the top, detailed implementation at the bottom. UK steel strategy mentioned as “MIA”, and Japan as an exemplar of a good dependency reduction strategy. Trade documentation (especially in the UK) was mentioned several times as a major problem.

Take advantage of the current crisis – use insecurity to push pivot away from USA and China as default suppliers. Collaborate on energy infrastructure and

procurement (possible UK/Germany wins e.g. more joint purchasing of LNG?) and critical raw materials, “Made in Europe” vs. “Made with Europe” to strengthen EU+UK/-CH partnerships

## People

The ‘human’ raw material is just as important – and also in short supply.

Think holistically about how to get and keep people into our combined labour markets. Factors mentioned:

- Housing. Politicians underestimate the economic drag caused by inefficient housing markets.
- Qualifications. Still more work to be done on international recognition of qualifications.
- Tuition fees. Can the UK offer cheaper tuition to EU students than for rest of world?
- Shorter-term relationships. If immigration is politically impossible, how to boost fixed-term e.g. expat for a certain number of years, internships etc.
- Mental health: note that the issue of poor mental health / anxiety was mentioned by several groups (not always expected in groups focusing on the economy.)

It was noted that these non-economic areas and simplifications of admin burdens have a significant impact on economic growth but are often underestimated in their effect.

## Money

Companies understand that public finances are extremely squeezed, and are (mostly) not asking for direct support, but rather reduction in burdens etc. (Exception – recycling, where initial capital is often needed. Long discussion followed on this point.)

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A few corporate voices noted that the private sector is, implicitly or explicitly, realizing the necessity of accepting more redundancy (in the economic sense, not laying off workers) in their business models. Diversified supply chains, larger reserve stocks etc.

Mention of the possibilities in blended finance – joint UK/German pots of money, designed for easy accessibility. Both for Global South development, but also at home.

### Security

Inevitably, given current geopolitical climate, people are aware that security underpins all competitiveness.

Strong link between decarbonization and the defence sector – e.g. future fuels for tanks, sustainable aviation fuel, drone batteries. Innovation here will have huge positive spill-overs into the non-defence sector.



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### The Knowledge Economy

How to share, and trade, Intellectual Property, is a big question between advanced economies like Germany and the UK. Yet it gets less attention than trade in goods. But the framework is poor, and needs revision.

A plea to complete the Single Market in Services (which takes bravery and communication from politicians, see above.)

One specific way in which IP can support relationships – make iPlayer and ARD/ZDF Mediathek available to each other! (It is, after all, publicly-funded I.P. ...) – future Lighthouse Project?

No strong conclusions on the development and exploitation of AI, but a feeling that more should be possible in the UK/Germany space here.

A general recommendation was to simplify and reduce trade-barriers and regulation where possible and to introduce regulatory interoperability (standards); and to learn from each other when it comes to delivering on strategies, reduce dependencies and strengthen partnerships; improve long-term strategies and risk management.

### Summary

It is perhaps encouraging that people think the right policies are being followed? But not clearly enough, bravely enough, fast enough.

Key example: the Draghi report. Just do it. All of it.

Plenty more scope out there for transfer of best practice too, e.g. NRW's cross-border strategy on the circular economy with Belgium and the Netherlands.