



THE UK & THE COMMONWEALTH

WHERE ARE WE AT & WHERE CAN WE GO?



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Introduction

The UK & the Commonwealth: Where are we at & where can we go?

By Edward Elliott [@TheBFPG](#) [@Ed1Elliott](#)

- With the UK's imminent departure from the European Union, our foreign policy requires fresh and innovative thinking. This should start with an evaluation of the assets we have and the goals we aim to achieve through our foreign policy. The Commonwealth of Nations is one of these assets, but it is one that many view as having struggled to emerge successfully from its 20th century imperial legacy, leaving questions around its relevance and effectiveness.
- This paper aims to provide a balanced and politically neutral overview of the current role of the Commonwealth and why it matters to the UK. From this, it should be possible to understand future opportunities and limitations and ultimately determine to what extent the Commonwealth should be a priority for post-Brexit Global Britain, and what its role could be.
- The benefits of the Commonwealth to the UK are wide ranging. Factors such as the Commonwealth Trade Advantage (where effectively trade is easier and more successful between Commonwealth countries when adjusting for other factors) and the growth potential of some Commonwealth nations make it an appealing group of nations with which to develop trading relations. Equally, the shared principles enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter allow for the UK to find a louder voice with which to project some of the values that the UK represents.
- But the value of these benefits is often victim to inflation and exaggeration, and realism can be lacking when future possibilities for the Commonwealth are discussed. This poor quality of discussion does little to help make the case for current achievements, nor does it help assess or address the obstacles the Commonwealth faces. So this paper does not aim to make the case for the Commonwealth as a substitute for other areas of UK foreign policy, but rather to evaluate the value of the Commonwealth to the UK and then assess how much of a priority the Commonwealth should be for UK foreign policy efforts.

The British Foreign Policy Group is an independent not for profit organisation established to improve the quality of national engagement on UK foreign policy, and generate new thinking around how the UK can pursue our common national interests from our international engagements. The group takes no institutional position and all views expressed are those of the author. Established in Autumn 2016, the British Foreign Policy Group engages people across the UK and our Overseas Territories through events, accessible, reliable information and digital outreach.

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Why does the Commonwealth matter to the UK?

UK public opinion regarding the Commonwealth might at first appear, like Brexit, to be a distinctly divisive aspect of UK foreign policy. The Commonwealth's historical and imperial links make it hard for many in the UK to see it as an effective and modern vehicle for UK foreign policy in the 21st century, the most recent evident example being the understandable [criticism](#) towards the use of [the term Empire 2.0](#) for describing future UK-Commonwealth relations and opportunities.

But, when the BFPG commissioned polling to determine support for the UK's presence and role in major international organisations and institutions, the Commonwealth came second only to the UN. Not only was there [70% support for the Commonwealth in the UK](#), but this support was equal amongst Remain and Leave voters. This was not the case for any of the other international institutions, organisations and agreements where those who voted to leave the EU were more likely to want to withdraw. This is important because it suggests the Commonwealth provides a foreign policy focus that is valued by the UK

“ There is 70% support for the Commonwealth in the UK, with equal support from both Remain and Leave voters – this represents a possibility to focus on a foreign policy that could help unite the Brexit divide ”

Why might support for the Commonwealth be high at the moment?

Those surveyed were not asked what their reasons were, but potential reasons include the shared values between Commonwealth states and individuals, not least having English as a common language, and the belief in the principles set out in the [Commonwealth Charter](#). Equally, post-Brexit, many in the UK have looked beyond Europe for new areas of focus for our UK foreign policy, in particular trade, and the Commonwealth appears a natural choice for many.

Support for the Commonwealth might also stem from its perception as harmless in contrast to the way that an organisation such as the EU might be seen to be detrimental to the UK. Although public opinion has shifted significantly since 2010, the British public then thought the Commonwealth had [less value to the UK than the UN, NATO, or the EU](#).

public and could also help towards uniting the Brexit divide.

One of the problems with assessing the value of public opinion is that it is only reliable as a guide for policy if it is grounded in familiarity. Unfortunately, the gap between opinion and knowledge around the Commonwealth is stark. Research carried out in 2010 by the RCS showed that nearly [50%](#) of participants could not name any activities undertaken by the Commonwealth.

So whilst we can be confident of public support today, the lack of public knowledge means that we cannot be confident of the same support tomorrow, as the support does not align with any particular course of action or reform within the Commonwealth framework. This would require additional studies, or indeed, further education in the UK and afield on the work and workings of the Commonwealth, something this report aims to contribute towards.

UK Foreign Policy Priorities

Trade

Re-assessing our trade requirements after we have left the European Union has arguably been the most talked about imperative for our post-Brexit foreign policy. As a consequence, attention has turned to how the UK can increase trade with Commonwealth countries as part of 'Global Britain'. Several of these countries have expressed interest in Free Trade Agreements (FTA's), Australia being one of the more [vocal examples](#).

Trade growth with the Commonwealth is highly unlikely to replace potential loss in EU trade. Commonwealth countries are not currently major trade partners for the UK; in relative terms they made up only approximately [8.5% of UK's total trade in 2015](#). However, even if the Commonwealth is not the single most important piece to the UK's post-Brexit trade puzzle, there are several reasons for believing it may have much potential to offer.

Firstly, some large Commonwealth countries have growth potential, which would indicate that a long-term strategy that looks at increasing trade with this grouping of countries could prove fruitful for the UK. Secondly, the

[UK is the largest EU goods export destination for numerous Commonwealth countries](#) (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and others), and second or third largest for many more. This means that post-Brexit the UK is unlikely to stop being a significantly important market for these exports and there should be scope for trade deals. The third reason for optimism around future Commonwealth trade is the Commonwealth Trade Advantage. When controlling for other factors that affect trade flows, studies show that ["when both bilateral partners are Commonwealth members, they tend to trade, on average, 20 per cent more and generate 10 per cent more foreign direct investment flows than otherwise"](#) as well as having 19% lower bilateral costs. Similarities between Commonwealth members, ranging from the use of English to similar legal systems, all contribute to an environment that facilitates trade between members. Just as trade between EU member states is facilitated by geographical proximity, intra-Commonwealth trade is facilitated by a number of factors that together create the Commonwealth Trade Advantage.

When the UK looks to strike free trade agreements, comments made publicly and

privately by governments such as the Australians and Canadians show a willingness to make these deals quickly. This optimism and positivity is undeniably helpful for the UK, but the scale of the task for the UK makes it unlikely that trade with the Commonwealth will be a short or even mid-term success for the UK.

First of all, trade deals often take a long time to negotiate, even when there is goodwill, but in addition the UK's trade negotiation capacity is likely to be stretched post-Brexit. These considerations, alongside the fact that many resources around trade are inevitably being focused around securing a trade deal with the EU, mean that the UK should not get carried away in its expectations for short-term economic gains from our relationship with the Commonwealth.

Alternatives to Free Trade Agreements to boost UK-Commonwealth trade

Given the huge geographic and economic differences between the Commonwealth there is a case to be made, [as indeed was made by Chris Bryant MP during a recent Foreign Affairs Committee Evidence Session](#), to identify priority Commonwealth countries. These would be countries that "really matter to our economic growth, where we think we can make significant changes over the next few years, where our values system is more shared". Rather than pushing for a broader multilateral approach, UK could focus on developing a few key bilateral trading relationships with Commonwealth members, particularly around trade. Commonwealth countries could also focus on targeted aspects of trade liberalisation that benefit all involved, while avoiding some of the challenges of all-encompassing FTA's. One such way could be trade facilitation, the ["simplification, modernisation and harmonisation of export and import processes"](#), or put simply, reducing 'red tape' for imports and exports. While government to government action such as FTAs have their value, there are also other channels worth developing. One of the great strengths of the Commonwealth is that it is in large part about people to people relationships. This is where the role of UK regions and cities could become crucial. As part of a bigger trend that the BFGP is witnessing through our National Engagement series, regions and cities are becoming more internationally active, from international trade to cultural diplomacy.

“ Rather than pushing for a broader multilateral approach, UK could focus on developing a few key bilateral relationships with Commonwealth members, particularly around trade. ”

It is true that factors such as common language, similar legal systems and geographical proximity all feature in our trade choices – but so do people themselves. And it is here that diasporas play such a key role. Different parts of the UK have different priorities, influenced significantly in places by the different diaspora communities. Polling commissioned by the RCS showed that 93% of businesses in the Midlands prioritise building closer ties with India, 20% more than the number for UK businesses as a whole. These differences were also present in the polling the BFGP commissioned last year, for example with people in the South East being 15% more likely to want to prioritise UK relations with Australia than people in the North East. Through exploiting this propensity to trade and develop relationships at a smaller scale, the UK could increase its international trade with the Commonwealth regardless of any free trade agreements.

Values

If many in the UK are now making the case for the Commonwealth on the basis of trade, the concept of 'shared values' has feasibly been the most prevalent argument of past years. Why does it matter to the UK that the Commonwealth has 'shared values'? Put simply, it helps provide a stronger voice to promote these values, which are aligned with those of the UK, and which we believe make the world a safer and more prosperous place. By amplifying the international voice for these values, the Commonwealth is arguably providing the UK with greater influence.



Northport, Malaysia

Image: Hafiz243

Most would agree with the Royal Commonwealth Society's comments that [“the UK has worked to establish itself as an advocate for principles such as Democracy, Human Rights, Freedom of Expression, Rule of Law, Sustainable Development, protecting the Environment, and Gender Equality”](#). The fact that all these principles are explicitly present in the Commonwealth Charter would indicate a strong alignment between the UK's foreign policy goals and the values the Commonwealth states have agreed to uphold.

However, there is the striking inconsistency between the values present in the Charter and the reality in many Commonwealth states. For example, the majority of people living in the Commonwealth live in a country where homosexuality is illegal. As of 2015, [40 out of the 53 Commonwealth](#) countries, accounting for 95% of the population of the Commonwealth, still criminalised same-sex relations. Whilst the work of the Commonwealth in addressing this issue and others like it within its member states is commendable, these and many other examples present significant challenges to any argument suggesting the Commonwealth is consistently a relevant vehicle for indirect promotion of UK values worldwide.

Defence

Institutional defence and security capabilities are unlikely to be a primary feature of the Commonwealth in the years to come, despite the Commonwealth Charter's assertion that [“international peace and security are essential to the progress of all”](#). This general phrase nonetheless hints at the role defence and security could realistically hold for the Commonwealth in the coming years. Indeed,

“The UK is the largest EU goods export destination for numerous Commonwealth countries and second or third for many more.”

CHOGM 2018 has set ‘cyber-security’ as one of the 4 key themes for this year's meeting. Cyber is just one security and defence issue, but the Commonwealth has scope to further build the necessary resilience and adequate security for the success and progress of its economic and diplomatic activities.

Given its broad range of interests, alliances, and geographical disparity the Commonwealth in its current format is in many ways not a natural platform for institutional defence co-operation. Current defence arrangements exist bilaterally between Commonwealth nations as opposed to agreements co-ordinated by the Commonwealth Secretariat. One such example is the Five Power Defence Arrangements – a regional security institution comprised of the UK, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand. Enhanced bilateral security relationships are a model for how Commonwealth defence co-operation could look in coming years.

There are also other aspects of the Commonwealth's current work, whether it be international trade or combating climate change, where there are inevitable security concerns. This could be with the security of supply chains or the effect of climate change on critical infrastructure and resources. It is perhaps through tackling these more niche areas, ones that [“aren't necessarily at the top of the agenda of regional organisations but still sufficiently important”](#), that the Commonwealth can successfully start talking about defence. The possibility of creating something along the lines of a [“Commonwealth Security Forum”](#), as suggested in a Commonwealth Exchange (now part of the RCS) report, to provide a platform for developing strategic defence relations is one worth considering.

If the Commonwealth addresses some of the challenges addressed in this report around trade, values, and influence, and can build a real credibility for successful impact in these areas, integrating defence and security elements into these forums and discussions will be a much easier task. Defence and security are unlikely to be the main priorities for the Commonwealth in the coming years, but the more successful the Commonwealth is in its economic and diplomatic pursuits, the greater the need for defence to form part of the conversation, and the easier that integration of defence into the fabric of the Commonwealth will be.



What global issues can the Commonwealth focus on to provide it with real purpose and impact?

Much of this piece has avoided comparisons, in particular with the EU, so as not to fuel unrealistic expectations, but also because the organisations are so distinct that comparisons have limited validity. But for the Commonwealth to be truly successful, it must also have flagship projects and themes where it is genuinely a world leader in comparison to other international organisations. As we have seen, despite its strengths and potential, it is not something that can replace a major trading bloc or a defence organisation like NATO. It is equally unlikely to challenge the UN around values. Yet there are multiple areas where the Commonwealth could hold a unique international role, three of which are highlighted here.

1. Youth

Youth engagement is already a key part of the Commonwealth fabric today. Of the 4 main forums taking place around CHOGM, one will be the Youth forum. 60% of the population of the Commonwealth is under 30, making it an obvious focal point. Just as importantly though, if the Commonwealth is to make a fully successful transition into a relevant 21st century organisation, it will need to take into account the voices of tomorrow. By involving and empowering young people from across the Commonwealth, the fresh and innovative thinking the Commonwealth needs to revitalise its identity will inevitably follow.



Image: Shutterstock

2. Sport

Across the Commonwealth, most people who are aware of any of the Commonwealth's activities [list the Commonwealth Games and sport as the only known activity](#). Unlike climate change and many other key international issues, it is a theme of huge positivity and public appeal. Most people across the world are involved in some way as participants or spectators in sport. Indeed this is something where the Olympics excel, but the Commonwealth brings a different angle and flavour. Beyond the positivity generated, shared sports such as squash and field hockey that are uniquely engrained in the fabric of many Commonwealth states provide a showcase of the traits our nations have in common. On the spectrum of hard and soft power, sport lies very far on the soft side and therefore is often derided as being less effective than other measures and seen as less of priority compared to areas such as trade or defence. Yet there is arguably no other arena that can generate worldwide positivity on the same scale as sport, and for that reason it could be extremely beneficial for sport to remain and enhance an integral part of the Commonwealth's strategy and goals.

3. Climate Change

With a large number of island states in the Commonwealth, representing some of the countries at greatest risk from climate change, there is a unique opportunity for the Commonwealth to be a significant global champion for tackling climate change.

Indeed, this has been explicitly chosen as one of the 4 priorities for CHOGM 2018.

The void left by the retreat of the United States from the international effort to tackle this issue is a big blow to the overall cause, but it is also an opportunity for the UK and the Commonwealth to take a greater leadership role. The Commonwealth has been busy on this front in recent years, with the creation of the Commonwealth Finance Access Hub, the work towards the Commonwealth Blue Charter, and most recently the Law and Climate Change Toolkit, all designed to lead from the front in terms of thought process and delivery around tackling climate change and its most disastrous consequences.

Despite this, most people across the UK and the rest of the world have probably not have heard of these initiatives and, ultimately, significant and sustainable change is impossible without real public engagement. The Commonwealth has the opportunity to take an even stronger leading role – that is, to create and promote its own initiatives outside of the shadow of the UN and to lead by example – in order to have a truly global impact.

Youth, sport, and climate change are three ambitious yet realistic examples but there are also others, from illegal wildlife trafficking or protection of the seas, which could be similarly effective. Fifty-three countries showing the world its potential achievements to bring them subsequently on board could well be more effective than focusing on first enlisting multi-national support beyond the Commonwealth.

Conclusion: Renovation & Realism

From governance to goals and objectives, most would agree that the Commonwealth requires some form of shift to become a relevant 21st century organisation and network. This shift will require the UK both to overcome the historical challenges it has always faced when taking a leading role in the Commonwealth and to preserve the role of the Commonwealth as a celebration of the values that unite its members. It is true that the UK was going to host and put significant resources into CHOGM before the decision on Brexit but, as part of determining what Global Britain will look like, and as part of re-evaluating the aims and outcomes of UK foreign policy, the timing of doing so for the Commonwealth is more important than ever.

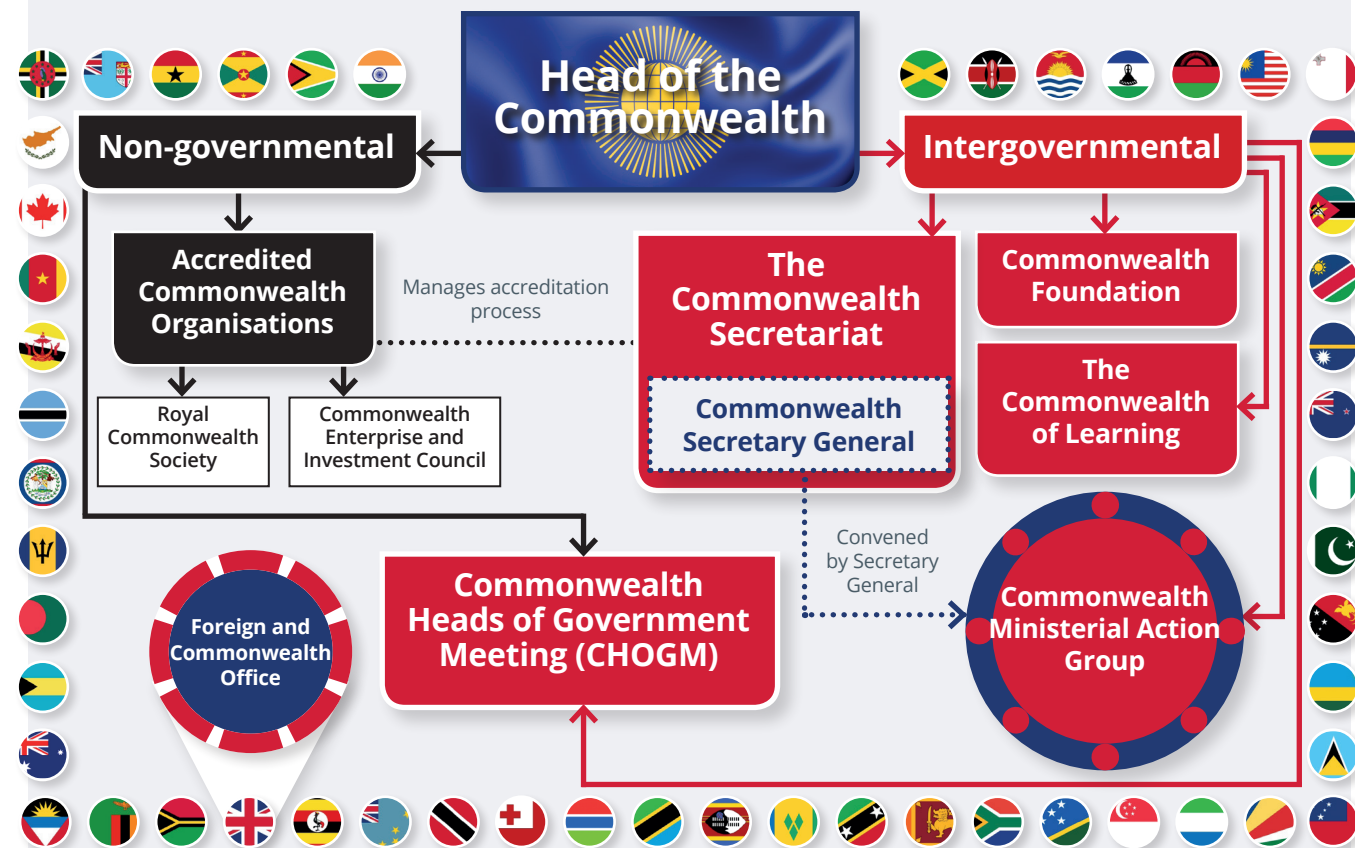
We in the UK need to accompany our thinking with realism, and it is clear that the government is doing just that. The UK is investing time and resources into the Commonwealth and delivering an excellent CHOGM but, as illustrated in late 2017 by the Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [the Commonwealth is not a current FCO priority](#).

This does not mean it is unimportant for the UK. Indeed, this paper shows the range of possibilities and areas of potential high impact and benefit to be gained. But, despite recent welcome boosts, the UK government still has limited resources for foreign policy, and whilst the UK should continue to work with and for the Commonwealth, it is hard to see it as a UK priority in the immediate post-Brexit years.

So whilst the UK can contribute hugely to the success of the Commonwealth, it is also going to need major support from elsewhere to renovate both image and effectiveness. This leadership could come from other major powers such as India or Australia and a boost from outside the UK is likely to be more effective. This leadership renovation could be symbolic – discussions for the Queen's successor as Head of the Commonwealth are already underway. The Commonwealth is not a solely British responsibility, and if the leadership and energy for the needed renovation were to be widespread across the Commonwealth, the significant positive impact it could have, both worldwide and to the UK, is undeniable.



Commonwealth Structure & Governance



Leadership

Head of the Commonwealth:
Queen Elizabeth II
Incumbent since 1952

This position is symbolic. There is no set term of office and the role is not hereditary.

The Commonwealth Secretary General: **Baroness Patricia Scotland**
Incumbent since April 2016

- Promotes and protects Commonwealth values
- Represents the Commonwealth publicly
- Manages the Commonwealth Secretariat

The Secretary-General is nominated by Commonwealth leaders and can serve a maximum of two four-year terms.

Chair-in-Office:
The Rt Hon Theresa May
Incumbent from start of CHOGM 2018

- Chair of CHOGM
- Voices Commonwealth positions at high-level international forums
- Two year role, maintained until next CHOGM.

Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group

- Deals with serious or persistent violations of Commonwealth values
- Has authority to suspend or recommend the expulsion of a member state.

The Group is convened by the Secretary General, and is made up of the Commonwealth's Chair-in-Office and a rotating group of foreign ministers from eight countries.

Intergovernmental

The Commonwealth Secretariat

- Main intergovernmental agency of the Commonwealth
- Facilitates cooperation between Commonwealth members
- Advises on policy development
- Provides assistance to countries implementing the decisions and policies of the Commonwealth
- Organises meetings, including CHOGM

The Secretary General is the Chief Executive and is assisted by deputy secretaries-general. There is a Board of Governors on which all member governments are represented.

The Commonwealth Foundation

- Intergovernmental agency responsible for civil society
- Provides resources, grants and access to platforms to encourage better engagement between civil society and institutions of governance

Membership is voluntary. Total membership currently stands at 45 countries.

The Board of Directors comprises of representatives of Commonwealth governments and High Commissioners, civil society representatives, and the Commonwealth Secretary-General. The Chair is a distinguished private citizen of a Commonwealth country.

The Commonwealth of Learning

Intergovernmental agency responsible for the promotion and development of distance learning.

Non-governmental

Accredited Commonwealth Organisations

A network of more than 80 independent, accredited organisations and charities working in specialist areas designed to advance the principles and policies of the Commonwealth.

Examples:

Royal Commonwealth Society
Promotes commonwealth values through its network of individuals and organisations, events, advocacy and research.

Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council

An organisation focused on promoting trade, investment and the role of the private sector across member countries. Organises the Commonwealth Business Forum.

UK Government engagement

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

- Partners with other Commonwealth Governments to drive forward reform of the Commonwealth Secretariat
- Oversees UK Preparations for CHOGM 2018
- Works with the Royal Household to support the role of the Queen as Head of the Commonwealth
- Assists the Commonwealth in engaging effectively with other International Organisations
- Educating the UK public on the role of the Commonwealth
- Promoting the Commonwealth as a partner for Whitehall departments.

Events

A key aspect of the Commonwealth's work involves hosting and convening events. Commonwealth accredited organisations can organise their own programme of events. There are, however a number of key events in the Commonwealth calendar. These are:



Commonwealth Games

Held every four years

An international multi-sport event involving athletes from Commonwealth Nations. The purpose of the event is to unite the Commonwealth's athletes, citizens and communities through the power of sport.

The sporting event was first held in 1930 with 400 athletes competing. The Games have grown significantly since, with more than 6,600 athletes and team officials from 70 nations and territories participating in the 2018 Gold Coast Games.

Commonwealth Games feature a unique selection of sports including a number of sports which are predominantly played in Commonwealth countries, such as lawn bowls and netball.

Unlike other major sporting events, the para-sport programme at the Commonwealth Games is fully integrated. The number of para events contested at the games is growing, with a record 38 para sports featuring in the 2018 Gold Coast Games.

The Commonwealth Games Federation – an accredited organisation of the Commonwealth – is responsible for the Commonwealth Games. They work closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Royal Commonwealth Society and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum to organise this event.



Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)

Held every two years

The main decision-making summit of the organisation gathering all heads of government from Commonwealth nations. Each meeting is held in a different member state and is chaired by that nation's respective leader who becomes the Commonwealth Chair-in-Office until the next meeting.

The aim of the summit is for Commonwealth nations to come together to reaffirm their common values, address shared global challenges and orchestrate common policies on contentious issues to secure a better future for its citizens.

CHOGM 2018 is being held in London with the theme, 'Towards a Common Future'.

Forums

In the run up to CHOGM, a number of forums are hosted bringing together experts to provide a platform for wider debate of some key issues and challenges facing the Commonwealth. These are:

Commonwealth Business Forum
Forum to discuss how to increase intra-Commonwealth trade and promote sustainable development.

Commonwealth People's Forum
A platform for civil society to engage with leaders and influence policy.

Commonwealth Youth Forum
An opportunity for the young people of the Commonwealth to build cross-cultural connections and agree youth-lead initiatives to influence decision makers.

Commonwealth Women's Forum
Forum to discuss how to accelerate gender equality and promote women's rights in the Commonwealth and beyond.



Commonwealth Day

Celebrated every year

A celebration of the Commonwealth of Nations held on the second Monday in March. The occasion is used as a platform to promote understanding of Commonwealth values globally.

The day is observed differently across the Commonwealth and is a public holiday for some nations.

Traditionally the event is marked by an Anglican service in Westminster Abbey, normally attended by Queen Elizabeth II as Head of the Commonwealth along with the Commonwealth Secretary-General and Commonwealth High Commissioners in London.