

Heritage Language Schools In Cambridge 2024/2025



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Introduction

In Cambridge, we have a well-developed network of community heritage language schools that are dedicated to the teaching and learning of some of the many minority languages spoken by children and their families.

This type of schools exists all around the country. Although some of the languages are organised in national or even international associations, and a few schools are supported or run entirely by embassies, generally they operate in isolation and are neither aware of other local schools for other home languages nor do they cooperate with them.

It is even unknown how many community schools there are in any place and at any time, and same as the schools have to find their own way, likewise not a lot is known about how they operate. The bulk of research that has been done in these schools typically investigates the linguistic development of bilingualism in children, teaching and learning methods or wider social concepts.

Thanks to our 12-year history, in Cambridge the situation is different. There are about 30 schools in Cambridge of which about 25 regularly meet and interact.

This situation made it possible to perform two surveys - one covering the academic year 2022/23 and one for 2024/25 - with the aim to learn about the situation of a group of heritage language schools in one locality and how they operate.

From these surveys, we get a glimpse into the deeper workings of community heritage language schools, their values, their managers, teachers and beneficiaries, their governance and funding, their internal and external impact.

Very much acknowledging that each of the schools is very individual and unique, we are now able to perceive them as a group with shared needs and common contributions to society.

I think this is very valuable.

My heartfelt thanks go to the 20 schools that participated in the 2024/25 survey:

Kalamna (Arabic), Bulgarian Sunday School St. Ivan Rilski, Cambridge Chinese School, Czech School Cambridge CIC, De Vaarboom (Dutch), Cambridge Finnish School, Les Petits Cameleons (French), German Saturday School Cambridge CIC, Greek School of St Athanasios Cambridge, Alumot (Hebrew), Hungarian School Cambridge, Shirasu Bunko (Japanese reading group), Cambridge Korean School, Reeshe Cambridge Persian School, Polish Saturday School, Cambridge Russian School, Slovak school Cambridge, Escuelita (Spanish), Cambridge Tamil School, Cambridge Ukrainian Language School

A longer, more detailed report has been submitted to the participating schools for their information.

Anke Friedrich

Cambridge, January 2026



Summary

- There are over 30 heritage language schools and groups for bilingual children in Cambridge
- All schools cover primary age, and some provide for from birth to school leaver age
- Most of the schools are run as Community Interest Companies but some are charities, CIOs and limited companies
- Most of the teaching takes place in the weekends, Saturday mornings in particular.
- The schools are located across Cambridge, mostly in the premises of state schools
- The schools range in size from 30 to more than 200 students

- More than 250 people teach in the schools
- The schools are run by volunteers

- The schools are mainly financed through parental contributions
- The main expenditure is for rent and teacher salaries

- Where applicable, the schools prepare their students for language exams
- The schools provide many benefits to their communities, and their activities go beyond the mere teaching of home languages

- The schools provide several benefits to the wider society (income to mainstream schools, teaching and exam support to mainstream schools, integration and skills building of women)
- Community schools in Cambridge are firmly located in the local context working in partnership with other organisations

- There are many aspects about heritage language schools that invite to do more research (business studies, education, economics, social sciences)



Description of the Schools

The Students

Who are the children taught in these community schools?

Each school operates its own admission policy. Quite often, the policy reflects the self-perception of the people running the school but also practical and pedagogical constrictions, for example with regards to the existing language skills of prospective students. Therefore, it is not unusual for managers and teachers to feel that they cannot cater for children with no or very limited knowledge of the language and whose parents will not or cannot support language development.

Still, more than 1/3 of the schools welcome every student either because of their values or possibly for financial reasons (four out of these eight schools are among the smallest).

Entry Criteria	Number of Schools
Nationality	1
Individual assessment	1
Child is accompanied by parent	1
Parent speaks the language, family support	5
Child understands the language, willingness	6, 2
Child speaks the language	2
None	8
No information	5

Tab: Admission Policy

Multiple answers were possible.

Survey and websearch. Data based on 22 schools

Age Group of Students	Number of Schools
Baby group (0 – 3 yoa)	10
Pre-school (3-4/5 yoa)	22
Primary school (KS1 & 2)	26
Lower secondary (KS3)	24
Upper secondary (KS4)	18
Sixth form (KS5)	8

Tab: Students' Ages

Multiple answers were possible. yoa = years of age

Data is based on the survey and a websearch; 26 schools

While all schools teach primary-age children, some of the schools also provide an offer for younger or older children and families, sometimes from birth all the way through to Sixth Form age and A level preparation.

Over the last few years at least five of the schools extended their offer to students of secondary school age. This is possibly due to some children who started with them young having reached secondary school age, allowing the schools to grow with them.

It is to be noted that besides the schools in this survey there are some baby and toddler groups which are run independently.



Legal Framework

Many of the schools start out as parental initiatives. As they mature, the managers need to decide on a legal framework for their school.

Historically, this would either have been setting up as a charity or a limited company. The first alternative to these two arose in 2005 with the introduction of CICs (Community Interest Company), and eight years later CIOs (Charitable Incorporated Organisation) became available. Both are excellent frameworks for the schools as they operate in the area between trading and charitable (i.e. education).

Legal Framework	Number of schools
Ltd Comp	3
CIC	8
CIO	2
Charity	5
unincorporated	8
foreign framework, closest to CIC	1

Tab: Legal Framework of Schools
Survey and websearch. Data from 27 schools.

Accordingly, the oldest schools are charities, and most of the younger ones are CIOs and CICs, with limited companies making up the remainder.

The survey did not ask about the reasons why a particular framework was chosen. The decision for charity might have been taken for reputational reasons or because a funding/supporting organisation required it. On the other hand, school founders may have gone for the Limited Company because they are familiar with the working, and either decision may have been taken out of ignorance of the existence of the alternatives.

When and Where

The most popular time for teaching is still Saturday mornings, followed by Sunday mornings and then Saturday afternoons only. Some teaching also takes place outside weekends. Most schools operate for only two or three hours a week, but some have extended offers throughout the day.

Saturday			Sunday	
am	12-2pm	2-4pm	am	pm
13	9	4	8	1

Tab: Teaching Times
Multiple answers were possible.
Survey and websearch. Data from 21 schools



Some participants reported that they teach some, or even most, lessons online.

The schools are located all across Cambridge.

Heritage Language Schools in Cambridge 2024/25



Venue	Number of Schools
Primary school	9
Secondary school	8
Language School	2
Church Hall	2
Community centre	4
Online lessons	At least 3 schools

The landlords are mainly mainstream schools, followed by community centres and other venues

Tab: Venues

Multiple answers were possible.
Survey and websearch. Data from 25 schools

Size of Schools

The schools vary in size, where the smallest teach 20 students upwards, while the biggest schools have more than 200 students. In the table below Community language schools were categorized into three groups including about the same number of schools.

Size of school	Student numbers	Number of Schools
Small school	up to 30	6
Medium school	up to 100	7
Big school	100 - > 200	8

Tab: Size of Schools

Based on the survey and websearch. Data from 21 schools. Some of the schools do not just operate in Cambridge/shire, but in other parts of the country as well and online. The figures above represent the schools' local, face-to-face operations.

Compared with the previous survey, student numbers in about half of the schools that replied to both surveys increased, and nearly as many stayed about the same size.

Between them, the schools in the survey teach more than 2,000 of Cambridge/shire's young people.

This is in line with the biggest mainstream schools in Cambridge. (There are at least another 5 schools and several toddler groups for which no numbers were available. The estimate is that across all of them about 2,500 children attend a group providing for community languages.)

One obvious reason for the different sizes of schools for heritage language children is the size of the communities they are coming from.

The Council holds data on the number of students in mainstream schools and their languages. This data is received from the Council each year through a Freedom of Information request. The precise nature of this data is discussed in more detail in another publication.

In this report, the language communities were categorised into three sizes:

- Small community: 10 to 75 children in mainstream schools
- Medium community: 100 to 220 children in mainstream schools
- Big community: 250 to >1,000 children in mainstream schools

For about half of the schools, their own sizes align with the size groups of their language community.

Remarkably, one school with a big community operates as a small school. This is probably because in some cases communities are big enough to support more than one school.

On the other end of the spectrum, hidden in this data due to the crude categorisation is the fact that one of the smallest schools draws triple as many children than appear in the council data! – In fact, some schools have reported very extended catchment areas, sometimes spreading all over East Anglia and there is also anecdotal evidence that a family moved to Cambridge because of the heritage language school available to them.

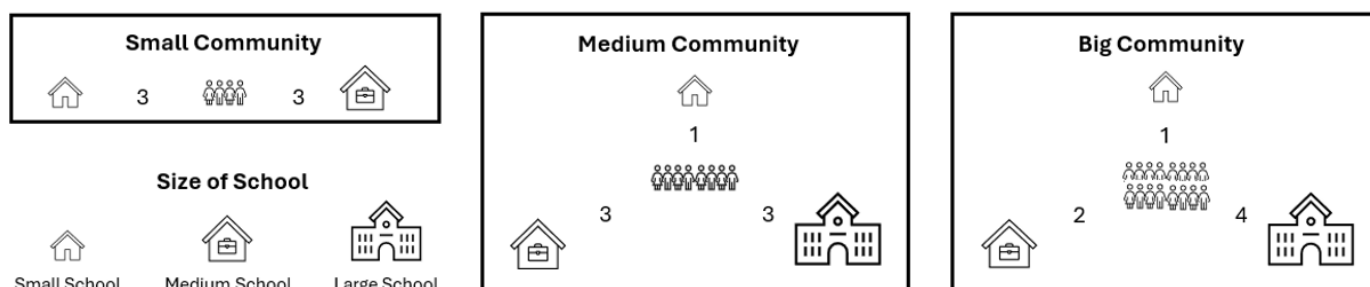


Fig: Comparison of Size of Communities and their Schools

As before, we have data for 20 schools in the survey.

Data on the sizes of the communities stem from a freedom of information request to the council and refer to the number of children in primary and secondary state schools for which their parents stated that they were familiar with a particular language. Boundaries of the categories are arbitrary and were chosen in order to create similar-sized groups.



The Teachers and Managers (Trustees, Directors, Headteachers)

Obviously, schools are also not only defined by the students but also the adults who run it, i.e. the managers and teachers. Community schools mostly rely on parents for their operation, i.e. parents of small children, many of them working in regular jobs as well.

Let's start with the teachers.

16 out of the 20 schools pay their teachers. The other schools either plan to pay the teachers when they can afford to do so, or it is part of their ethos **to run the school on a volunteering** basis alone.

In the academic year 2024/25, **more than 200 people worked as teachers** in the 20 participating schools. On top of this, **over the last 3 years, 15 people with the experience of having taught or while teaching in a supplementary school started teacher training** for the mainstream sector.

Nearly half of the schools also had teaching assistants (TAs) with a total number of 38 people dedicating their time to this role. In four of the schools TAs are paid.

While the hours that teachers and TAs work for the schools are relatively clear, what about the people who do the rest? **Governance and operations** of a school can take considerable amounts of time. This type of work includes admissions, scheduling, training and checking of teachers, payments going in and out, writing and submitting of reports, meetings etc. The workload varies each week and over the year and the managers are not able to put a number against the hours worked.

Within half of the schools – 10 out of 20 – all this work is done in the trustees' and directors' spare time and entirely on a voluntary basis.

The 10 schools that paid for non-teaching roles, spent funds on an administrator and a headteacher/director but more likely on specialised support from accountants/for payroll/ bursars and IT. However, in no case do the available funds cover the complete time spent by everyone involved in keeping the schools running, at an appropriate rate, i.e. each of the schools will still heavily rely on volunteering.

Role	Number of Schools
Admin	4
Finance	5
IT	2
Headteacher/Manager	4
Other	1

Tab: Additional Paid Roles (non-teaching)

Survey, data from 20 schools. Multiple selections were possible.

10 schools in total reported on one or two paid roles



Finances

Income

Generally, the schools are financed through parental fees.

Most schools teach each class two or three units of 45 or 60 minutes a day. To make payments – both income and expenditure – comparable, schools were asked to give amounts per teaching unit.

An analysis of the data did not show any correlation between the amount of fees charged to the parents and the size of the schools.

Most commonly the parental fee charged by schools is between £5 and £10 per teaching unit (10 schools out of 20 in the survey).

7 out of the 20 participants receive some kind of additional support which can be financial or pedagogical (teaching resources, curricula, training etc) from their home governments, UK based grant givers and language/cultural associations.

This allows one of the schools to be run completely free or charge to the parents, and may make some of the other schools less expensive than otherwise they would be.

Expenditure for Rooms

As the basis for paying for rooms vary widely, this question has been difficult to answer for some schools and only 17 instead of 20 schools were able to provide data for this analysis.

The average costs/room/hr paid in 2024/25 by the schools was £16, and the mode (amount occurring most often) was £20.

Costs per Room / hr	Number of schools
£8 to £10	3
£11 to £15	6
£16 to £20	5
£21 to £30	3

Tab: Costs of Rooms
Survey only. Based on data from 17 schools.

Expenditure for Teaching

One participant did not answer this question. One school does not have teachers, as all sessions are led by parents taking turns, and one school cannot pay teachers yet.

Payment for teachers varied widely and four schools used some additional flexibility in their pay structure. For example, the amount of payment depended on the number of students taught, was based on the teacher's experience or depended on how much the school can afford at any moment.

Most schools paid their teachers between £15 and £25 per teaching unit.

When using the lower rates for the four schools, the average of payments were £21. When using the higher pay, the average increased to £22.50.

Some schools pay their teaching assistants as well, which in all cases was at half the rate of the teachers' earnings.



There is no clear connection when comparing the payments to teachers with the sizes of the schools.

Most of the schools (17 out of 20) pay £12 - £25 per teaching unit.

In section “Income from Parental Fees” it was shown that schools of any size can be operated on parental fees between £5 and £10 and in this section that schools of any size can afford to pay their teachers between £12 and £25 per teaching unit. This suggests a general business model.

And indeed, a direct comparison of the amount of parental fees with the amount of payment to the shows that the majority of schools fulfil both conditions.



Fig: Comparison of Amount of Parental Fees and Teacher Payment

2024/25 data based on survey. The data of 17 participants, 5 of which with governmental support, were used in these charts.

A teaching unit would be either 45min or 1hr.

Some schools paid different rates depending on circumstances. In these cases, the lower rate was used.

Parental fees were rounded to the next full £.

This confirms a general model where schools of all sizes can be run on £5 to £10 parental fees, and payments to teachers of £12 to £25 per teaching unit.



Other Paid Roles and Additional Expenses

Apart from paying Teachers and TAs (or not) and for rooms, what else can schools afford?

10 of the schools also pay people for administrative or management functions. These schools are mainly incorporated, tend to be larger and take higher fees.

Role	Number of Schools
Admin	4
Finance	5
IT	2
Headteacher/Manager	4
Other	1

Tab: Additional Paid Roles

Survey, data from 20 schools.

Multiple selections were possible.

Other expenditures that school have are for teaching resources, training, celebrations, DBS checks, website, banking and IT costs.

Qualifications

Most of the schools do not primarily teach so their children can pass any language exams, yet where there is an opportunity to achieve a certification many students – parents – decide to take it.

The most common exam available are GCSEs (iGCSEs) offered by the English government, currently offered to 13 out of the 20 languages (schools) in the survey. As students take GCSEs mainly at their mainstream schools, only 7 of the 13 schools participating in the survey were able to give some further, patchy information, mostly on the fact that some students had taken the exam and - where known - had achieved very good results.

Three of the schools in the survey reported to have access to exams provided by their home countries. These exams were designed specifically for emigrant children and qualify them to join their respective home education system. Students in another school have access to ECL exams (European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages, available in Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovak and Spanish).

Community Orientation

Generally, the schools are very communities oriented. This becomes apparent in many areas such as financial decisions

- They try to keep the parental fees low
- They give sibling discounts (15/20 schools)
- The decision makers prioritise payment/good payment of teaching staff over paying other roles
- Most, or all of the time that parents spend on administrative and managerial tasks is unpaid. And these are many, many hours each week

and also by the other activities they offer. Non-language classes offered to the children included

- drama, folk dance, poetry reading
- music, musical instruments, singing
- speech and language aid for sound formation
- art, chess, coding, crafts, maths, robotics, story time, yoga
- national history and geography, religious education
- GCSE English and Science tutoring.

Schools celebrated traditional and national annual events such as

- New Year; Christmas; dragon boat festival; Easter; mid-autumn festival; Moon festival day; St Nicolas; traditional pancake day; and
- national holiday; day of the national language and literacy; day of the national alphabet and culture; international children's day

and also developed their own occasions such as

- annual event with drama, poetry and recitals; carnival; campfire; kite flying festival; fishing; sports day and end of term party

which sometimes they open to families who do not have children in the school.



Benefits to the Wider Society

These schools that are primarily founded and run by parents for their children and their communities provide a lot of benefits to the wider society.

Supply of Teachers to the Mainstream Sector

There is anecdotal evidence of community school teachers taking training and becoming UK qualified teachers in the mainstream sector. Indeed, teaching in community schools can be a springboard for foreign educated teachers while they improve their English, or for people with a different professional background who discover their interest in teaching and develop some first skills and experiences.

It was assumed that the schools are not always aware of the destinations of current or former teachers. Therefore, in order to get a meaningful number, the question in the survey asked how many teachers went into teacher training during the last 3 years.

A total of 16 people teaching in supplementary schools in Cambridge entered teacher training.

(Two participants didn't know and 10 answered either none or n/a. Some schools pointed out that some of their teachers are working in the mainstream sector already.)

On the background of the government struggling to fill training places, this is a significant achievement.

Integration of Women and Immigrant Populations

As may have become obvious, running a community school is not easy but requires advanced English language skills, intensive interaction with, and understanding of, businesses, banks, landlords, authorities and governmental bodies and the rapid development of new business skills in recruitment, advertising, budgeting, people management, governance and so on.

This managerial work is overwhelmingly done by smart women, as well as the teaching.

Qualifications

The UK offers GCSEs in 20 modern foreign languages, most of them heritage community languages. Where mainstream schools facilitate it, the children can take these GCSEs at their regular school and that way either earn an additional qualification, or use their home language to fulfill the foreign language requirement of the EBacc.

Thanks to the community schools the mainstream school will have little or no work with preparing the children for the exam. Furthermore, generally the children earn top-grades in their language exams which improves schools' standing in league tables such as for the EBacc and Progress8.



Foreign Language Skills within the Workforce

List of translation services in a UK Accident and Emergency unit

Language	Code	Language	Code	Language	Code	Language	Code
Arabic	001	Chinese	002	English	003	Polish	004
Bangla	005	French	006	German	007	Romanian	008
Bengali	009	Greek	010	Italian	011	Russian	012
Burmese	013	Hebrew	014	Japanese	015	Slovak	016
Cantonese	017	Hindi	018	Korean	019	Slovene	020
Cherokee	021	Indonesian	022	Latvian	023	Spanish	024
Chinese	025	Irish	026	Lithuanian	027	Swedish	028
Czech	029	Italian	030	Malay	031	Tamil	032
Dutch	033	Japanese	034	Malayalam	035	Telugu	036
English	037	Korean	038	Marathi	039	Thai	040
Esperanto	041	Latvian	042	Polish	043	Ukrainian	044
Finnish	045	Lithuanian	046	Romanian	047	Yiddish	048
French	049	Malay	050	Russian	051	Yoruba	052
German	053	Malayalam	054	Slovak	055		
Greek	056	Marathi	057	Slovene	058		
Hebrew	059	Polish	060	Spanish	061		
Hindi	062	Romanian	063	Swedish	064		
Indonesian	065	Russian	066	Tamil	067		
Irish	068	Slovak	069	Telugu	070		
Italian	071	Slovene	072	Thai	073		
Japanese	074	Spanish	075	Ukrainian	076		
Korean	077	Swedish	078	Yiddish	079		
Latvian	080	Tamil	081	Yoruba	082		
Lithuanian	083	Telugu	084				
Malay	085	Thai	086				
Malayalam	087	Ukrainian	088				
Marathi	089	Yiddish	089				
Polish	090	Yoruba	090				
Romanian	091						
Russian	092						
Slovak	093						
Slovene	094						
Spanish	095						
Swedish	096						
Tamil	097						
Telugu	098						
Thai	099						
Ukrainian	100						
Yiddish	101						
Yoruba	102						

Though precise data is lacking, but given the state of foreign language teaching and learning in the UK, it is safe to assume that former students of community schools together with first generation immigrants constitute a considerable percentage of the bilingual British workforce. These language skills are needed and used formally as well as informally, for example in the public sector, such as health care, education and law enforcement and business settings.

Generation of Rental Income for Mainstream Schools and Other Landlords

As the survey did not ask the schools about their total annual payment of rent, here is an estimate that gives a ballpark figure.

Assumptions:

- The schools teach 2 hrs each day they operate
- They operate 28 days per year
- Class size is 12 students.

- Avg rent £16/room/hr → £32/room/teaching day
- Teaching on 28 days/year
- 2,000 students/12 = 167 classe

£32 x 28 x 672 = £150.000 annual income to landlords, most of them mainstream schools



Embedded in the Local Context

Each of the schools has its own interactions and sometimes collaborations with local organisations and individuals such as landlords, grant givers, religious and cultural institutions and other charities and community groups.

Some mainstream schools use the community schools as an intermediary when looking for bilingual tutors or GCSE examiners, sometimes in direct contact, sometimes through Cambridge Bilingual Groups.

In Cambridge, the schools as a group benefit from the interest that Professor Yongcan Liu from CRICLE at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge is taking in them and his partnership with Dr Anke Friedrich of Cambridge Bilingual Groups. They organise an annual Leadership Forum and are paving collaborations with the Central Library and the local councils as well as representing them on national and academic level.

Open Ends for Research

Many of the topics touched upon in this report deserve deeper understanding and more research than what can be achieved by a simple survey.

Pedagogy

The Cambridge schools use very different pedagogical approaches. Some teach in a quite traditional frontal style, others use forest school elements or lots of creative approaches. Often the approach develops over time. It might be interesting to investigate drivers and barriers, and how different approaches are accepted by students and parents.

Teachers

The schools struggle with teacher recruitment, and this study above has shown that some teachers join the mainstream sector. A deeper understanding of where teachers are coming from, what support they get and where they go to might help with developing better recruitment strategies, understanding how best to support teachers in community schools and increase the numbers transitioning into the mainstream sector.

Managers

The schools are started and run mainly by highly motivated individuals who bring their existing skills and expertise and develop in other areas as needed. Learning from these managers about their personalities, skills and the support they require might be useful when trying to stimulate the foundation of the 'missing schools', i.e. schools for bilingual children from large local language communities.

Legal Framework

The schools work in different governance frameworks and with some or no support from their home countries. (There is anecdotal evidence that schools that were founded as limited companies are closed down when the founder/owner leaves while community-run schools tend to be handed from one management team to the next.) How do these and other factors contribute to their stability and does the chosen framework impact other areas?



Impact of Cambridge Bilingual Groups

The schools in Cambridge are well connected through Cambridge Bilingual Groups. This local network is unique within the UK. Compared to schools in other parts of the country, does this have any impact?

Role of Language Associations

National language associations offer some support to their affiliated community schools. Which associations are out there? What is their offer? What is the impact and how do schools perceive them?

Role of Embassies

The interest that the embassies from the home countries take into community schools ranges from ignorance to support or even control. What is the impact and how do schools perceive the role of the embassies?

Qualifications/Certification of Language Skills

There is no overview of the Qualifications for, and Certifications of, languages skills available to bilingual children in the UK.

A directory listing the languages, exams, age eligibility etc would be very useful.

A solution for certification of languages with currently no exams available – or no exams at younger ages – would be very welcomed by the language communities.

Economy

Each day workers who learned a home language as a child apply these languages in their professional lives. There has been some earlier research on this. Updated research would be a powerful tool to support the unacknowledged work that community schools do.



Publications by Anke Friedrich

If you are interested in my thoughts on heritage language education and schools in general and within Cambridge, please visit the Cambridge Bilingual Groups website.

<https://cambilingroups.org/cambridge-experience/>

State of the schools in Cambridge 2022/23 (The 2022/23 survey)

The Cambridge Heritage Language Schools Introduce Themselves (The 2022/23 survey)

Why do community schools exist for some languages, but not for others?

Case Study Cambridge Bilingual Groups

Anyone can support community schools

Modern Foreign Languages GCSEs and speakers of heritage languages

GCSE results of bilingual children