



Portsmouth's City of Languages Strategy

Paper prepared by Tanya Riordan, Elizabeth Lord, Karen Thomas and Paul Joyce.

Rationale for a city strategy

The Portsmouth Languages Strategy is an opportunity to set out guiding principles through which to approach language diversity as a cultural asset and a strategic resource that can play a key role in our city's sustainable development, and to outline a cost-effective mechanism for delivery that is based primarily on harnessing existing resources and partnerships. The strategy will seek to celebrate a society where cultural diversity and language skills ensure community cohesion, promoting tolerance and mutual respect amongst our different population groups. Our communities should be proud to speak and learn languages and to understand each other's cultural heritages. There should be no hierarchy or difference in value placed on different languages.

➤ **Our vision for languages**

The strategy sets out to value all languages spoken in our city and to promote the benefits of multilingualism. This can be achieved by working for change with our schools, community groups and other educational bodies. We wish to show how being able to communicate in more than one language can be an advantage not just for the individual but for society as a whole.

The strategy aims to bring people from our public sectors such as education, healthcare, social care and the police together to share ideas and to make sure we are all doing the best we can to learn about and respect different languages and cultures and hence to promote and celebrate multilingualism.

The strategy endorses the belief that all children should have the opportunity to learn at least one foreign language in school, starting in primary through to post 16 education and into adulthood and to be able to use their own languages in the classroom, where appropriate, as a tool for learning across the curriculum.

➤ **The international perspective:**

The strategy aims to promote Portsmouth as a globally connected city that fosters international collaboration in education, business, culture and community engagement. The diversity of languages presents opportunities for recruitment for local study and employment and demonstrates the inclusivity of refugees and asylum-seekers from around the world.

Portsmouth is a port city and has direct links to France, the Channel Islands and Spain, making us easily open to exploration of other cultures and adventures.

The University of Portsmouth welcomes 5,000 international students from 150 countries. It has regional offices in 78 countries and academic partnerships across Europe, America, Asia, the Middle East and Australia developing strong collaborations for research, teaching and recruitment.

Portsmouth schools have 23.5% of pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) i.e. 6,500 young people who can speak at least one other language in addition to English in their home or in their community with currently 143 languages other than English and BSL spoken/used by

pupils in our schools. The ten most common languages spoken in our schools are currently: Bengali, Polish, Romanian, Kurdish, Malayalam, Arabic, Yoruba, Chinese, Portuguese, Urdu, Farsi and Spanish.

➤ **Economic, Enterprise and Business Links**

Portsmouth, one of two key cities in the Solent economy, has a population of 214,700 with 86 jobs per 100 residents. The city has recently added 4,000 new jobs, in aerospace, defence, maritime, digital media and engineering. Although overall growth has been slow compared to similar cities, the creative sector has expanded rapidly at 10% per year since 2010. Forecasts suggest continued slow employment growth (2.5% from 2017–2036). To address this, Portsmouth City Council (PCC) has published bold plans to boost job creation and economic performance.

The languages strategy highlights the importance of language skills in strengthening productivity and employability by enabling individuals to access a broader range of roles and sectors. Learning languages enhances workforce flexibility, supports career progression and improves job prospects by opening opportunities across organisations, regions and communities. Multilingual skills contribute to innovation and organisational effectiveness by facilitating collaboration, workforce mobility and social integration, helping businesses and institutions make better use of talent.

To achieve this, Portsmouth already has a strong and well-evidenced model of good practice in recognising and accrediting home, heritage and community languages (HHCL). Each year, every student eligible to take a GCSE in their HHCL is enabled to do so through systematic support from the city's Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS). Outcomes are exceptionally strong: 100% of entries achieve a grade 4 or above, with over 90% attaining high grades (7–9). This success is underpinned by a clear, well-coordinated process in which schools notify EMAS of eligible students, and EMAS deploys its Bilingual Language Assistants (BLAs) to schools on three structured visits: first to assess language proficiency, second to provide targeted speaking practice, and third to administer the examination. In addition, dedicated resources have been developed to support both students and parents in preparing for the GCSE, ensuring clarity, confidence and consistency in preparation. Together, these measures ensure that linguistic skills already present in the community are systematically supported, highly valued and translated into recognised qualifications.

While there is strong evidence of effective practice in supporting HHCLs, Portsmouth faces ongoing challenges in language attainment. In 2024, 58% of pupils across the city's state secondary schools were entered for a language GCSE, 10 percentage points above the national average, yet only 48% achieved a grade 4 or above, 20 percentage points below the national figure. This gap between participation and attainment underlines the need for a focused strategic approach to improving the quality, consistency and impact of language education, ensuring that high levels of entry are matched by improved outcomes.

➤ **Our cultural understanding**

Through our strategy we wish to recognise, promote and to celebrate the different cultures and heritages in our society. Portsmouth has many Community Groups where people come together to share their cultures, languages and traditions. The strategy's intention is to raise awareness of these groups and to strengthen and support them. Our communities should be able to share their culture without fear or discrimination. By celebrating cultural diversity, we can raise awareness and in that way work towards supporting respect and equality.

Aims for our Strategy in Portsmouth

- ▶ To celebrate all the languages spoken and studied in our schools and communities
- ▶ To inspire everyone, whatever their age, to love and learn languages, both formally and informally
- ▶ To facilitate sharing the experience, skills and expertise of teachers (from nursery to higher education), the Solent Language Network, Portsmouth City of Languages, members of Portsmouth City Council's Education department and the staff and students at the University of Portsmouth
- ▶ To build relationships with all organisations and employers across Portsmouth and beyond, who value languages and language learning
- ▶ To create and maintain a source of information and resources, housed on the Portsmouth Education Partnership (PEP) website, to act as a point of reference relating to language learning
- ▶ To engage parents in supporting their children's language learning and understanding the value and importance of language learning, including for employability
- ▶ To offer continuing professional development to teachers through events and awareness-raising and to create opportunities for cultural capital across the city.

Strategic Priorities and Actions

Priority 1 **Heritage:** Engage with language diversity to support communities to protect and celebrate their cultural heritage

Actions

for Priority 1 **Partner with Local Cultural Organisations**

Collaborate with community groups, cultural centres, or language advocacy organisations to co-host events or workshops.

Celebrate Multilingualism Events

Organise school or university-wide events like Celebrating Languages and Cultures Week or Celebrating Diversity Day to showcase students' languages and cultures.

Create Oral History Projects

Encourage communities to collect and share stories from multilingual families, preserving linguistic heritage through storytelling.

Strategic outcomes for Priority 1

A Portsmouth City of Languages Steering Committee is established and operational, providing strategic leadership to coordinate and to promote multilingual and cultural events and embed them within institutional calendars to ensure sustainability. Engagement is broadened to include educational establishments, community organisations, families and cultural partners, enabling shared expertise and the active showcasing of languages and cultures. Languages are increasingly recognised as central to identity, pride and belonging, with public spaces, particularly libraries, used effectively to display multilingual stories, heritage materials and community narratives.

Priority 2 **Skills:** Harness language skills to strengthen workforce productivity and widen access to high-quality employment opportunities across Portsmouth.

Actions

for Priority 2 **Multilingual Public Services**

Increase visibility of multiple languages in public signage, transport and services to normalise multilingualism.

Global Portsmouth Campaign

Promote Portsmouth as a multilingual, globally connected city through media, events and branding.

Language Exchange Networks

Facilitate regular meetups where residents can practise languages with international students or immigrants.

Strategic outcomes for Priority 2

Language skills are increasingly visible, valued and actively used across Portsmouth, contributing to improved workforce productivity and wider access to high-quality employment opportunities. Multilingual public services, signage and transport normalise multilingualism in everyday civic life, while the *Portsmouth 100* and *City of Culture* campaigns strengthen the city's identity as an inclusive, multilingual and globally connected place to live, study and work.

Priority 3 **Access:** Ensure strategic language provision that tackles linguistic inequality, raises confidence and improves equitable access to services.

Actions

For Priority 3 **Service Usage Analysis**

Map which public services (e.g. healthcare, housing, education) have the highest demand for language support.

Community Consultation

Engage with local communities to understand barriers to accessing services due to language.

Language Access Policies

Develop clear guidelines for when and how language support should be provided across services, including interpreting, translation and multilingual signage.

Strategic outcomes for Priority 3

Strategic language provision across Portsmouth reduces linguistic inequality, raises confidence and enables equitable access to public services. Language needs are systematically identified through service usage analysis, community consultation and robust data-collection mechanisms that track the uptake of interpreting and translation services and assess needs across all groups. Clear, consistently applied language access policies ensure appropriate provision of interpreting, translation, multilingual signage and strengthened ESOL provision across services. Supplementary schools that teach HHCLs are supported and recognised as key partners in building language confidence and engagement, ensuring that residents can navigate services effectively, develop English proficiency where needed and participate fully in civic life.

We would like to thank Yaron Matras in his guidance in formulating this strategy for Portsmouth based on the one written for Manchester.

Matras, Y., & Robertson, A. (2017). Urban Multilingualism and the Civic University: A Dynamic, Non-Linear Model of Participatory Research. *Social Inclusion*, 5(4), 5-13. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i4.1137>

Matras, Y., Tipton, R., & Viktor Leggio, D. (2018). *A City Language Strategy for Manchester*. Manchester City Council Executive Member for Skills, Culture and Leisure.

Matras Y. *Speech and the City: Multilingualism, Decoloniality and the Civic University*. Cambridge University Press; 2024.