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Celebrating Every Voice: Inside the Cities of Languages Movement

An interview with the people behind a powerful, grassroots movement founded in 2020

The 'Cities of Languages' initiative represents a powerful, grassroots movement that promotes plurilingualism, elevates heritage languages and celebrates the urban linguistic diversity as a major educational, economic and cultural asset. Initially launched in Newcastle in 2020 under the Our Newcastle Our World framework, and expanding during the Covid-19 pandemic with the creation of the Express yourself regional festival, the movement has grown to include multiple UK cities.

Its initial programming included a focus on supporting schools and teachers, boosting modern foreign languages uptake at all levels and actively promoting home, heritage and community languages. By acting as a connecting hub for resources, training and international links, the project aimed to widen access to cross-cultural opportunities, further education and career choices.

In this interview **Declan Baharini**, **Steven Fawkes**, **Sarah Edgar** and **Vicky Gough** share the origins, rapid evolution and the sustained impact of the Cities of Languages initiative, demonstrating how grassroots action can transform language education and celebrate multilingualism from the ground up.

What are the origins of the City of Languages initiative, and what was the rationale behind its launch?

Declan: The journey began in Newcastle back in 2018 when we embarked upon a citywide initiative to evaluate internationalism and explore how our city could become even more globally connected.

Our initial foundation was built on a very broad coalition. The original stakeholders included local authorities, regional universities, the voluntary and community sector, and various language experts. We conducted a comprehensive, year long consultation with these stakeholders in the city alongside the British Council, an integral partner right from the outset. Through this process, we derived a collaborative framework entitled Our Newcastle, Our World.

When we shifted to a youth focus during the second stage of consultation, we actively involved schools, teachers, key language advocates, such as Steven who represented the Association for Language Learning (ALL) and, crucially, the children and young

people themselves who would be the ultimate beneficiaries of the initiative.

At its outset, Newcastle City of Languages established a vision to empower children and young people from 0-30 as confident, inclusive, and globally connected citizens by embedding language learning and intercultural awareness into the fabric of the city. Then, a second round of consultations refined our focus into three highly interconnected strands: languages; international connections and intercultural awareness. We saw in Newcastle how these elements are entirely interdependent and feed into one another. The 'Newcastle City of Languages' was born directly from this. Following a major stakeholder event in November 2019 to map out our actionable details and address provisions gaps, we officially launched the initiative in January 2020.

Steven: From the outset, the consultation process yielded remarkably positive feedback from children concerning language learning. It was hugely encouraging, especially given the dominant national narrative that young people are disengaged with languages. Feedback gathered by Declan directly contradicted this assumption; the sentiment that so strongly emerged from young people we worked with was that they genuinely wanted to learn and speak other languages but they frequently lacked the structural opportunity to do so, particularly when it came to their home languages.

Declan: The broader rationale was also deeply influenced by the prevailing socio-political climate surrounding Brexit. We were witnessing a rise in divisive rhetoric and anti-social behaviours and our partners were fiercely determined to tell the counter-narrative. We wanted to visibly demonstrate that Newcastle is an inherently welcoming, multicultural and outward-looking city with very positive existing education, business and community international links.

The initiative launched immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. How did the Festival of Languages evolve from its online origins to a massive regional event?

Declan: We launched Newcastle City of Languages in January 2020, and almost immediately afterward, the pandemic struck, which completely disrupted our initial physical plans for continuing professional development and school programming. However, it paradoxically acted as a catalyst. Schools were forced to quickly adapt to online delivery, which opened up entirely new and unexpected channels for digital collaboration.

Steven: The idea for a dedicated festival actually grew out of a casual online conversation between Declan and myself during the first lockdown. Declan expressed a wish to do something positive to engage students and provide language content in the face of a lack of language teaching through high quality, inspiring language and cultural activities. Drawing on my memory of language education, I shared a story about the 'Festival of Languages' movement from the 1980s, which had operated on an alternating regional and national cycle. Historically, those in-person festivals took up to two years to organise due to extensive paperwork and administration. When Declan mentioned she had a remaining budget that needed to be used productively before March, she asked if we could pull off an entirely online version in just a few months!

Thanks to the deep roots of our networks, we were able to mobilise our communities. Partners like the British Council contributed webinars, and local volunteers stepped forward to run diverse sessions, ranging from Bengali workshops to Indian dancing. In that first digital pilot, we achieved an astonishing turnout of several thousand participants.

Declan: The feedback survey was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, with teachers clearly asking for more. Because the lockdown restrictions persisted into the following year, we ran the second festival entirely online over the course of a full month, and doubled our participation. Over the next four years, the festival expanded from a short online intervention into a comprehensive three-month celebration, including online events, in-person activities, creative multilingual projects, competitions and pre-recorded classroom activities and resources. This extension was a direct response to teacher feedback; educators needed a wider window to integrate the events into their packed schedules.

As the scale grew, we adapted structurally. By 2024 and 2025, the festival had become too large to sustain purely through volunteers, prompting us to secure regional funding via our Mayoral Strategic Authority. This financial support allowed us to bring in communication specialists, commission dedicated activities to fill curriculum and content gaps and manage a festival that, in 2025, was larger than our first four years combined and broke all records in 2026, with 116,669 children and young people participating from 464 schools.

What are the main components and activities that make up the Festival today?

Declan: The contemporary festival is built on five core strands that cater to an age range that spans from early years up to 18:

- Immersive in-person events: We purposefully host as many events as possible on regional university campuses, in schools and civic spaces. These intensive, immersive experiences allow students to interact directly with diverse language and cultural communities. 3,265 pupils engaged with these this year

> "We wanted to visibly demonstrate that Newcastle is an inherently welcoming, multicultural and outward-looking city."



Image © Victoria Eniola

Yoruba language and culture workshop

- Online events: Languages and careers webinars, as well as online sessions around different languages and cultures with teaching resources - over 30,000 pupils accessed these in 2026

- Creative multilingual projects: We offer large-scale creative initiatives that run across the full three months and can be embraced in any language, such as our *Calligrams* project, the *Mother Tongue Other Tongue* initiative and a festival song available in multiple translations. This year featured five projects involving over 26,000 children and young people.

- Competitions: We have scaled up from a single competition to three major competitions, 2 in the North East only and 1 UK-wide.

- On-demand classroom activities: Formerly known as pre-recorded sessions, these flexible packages provide teacher guidance and resources, such as our "World Cup French" rap sessions or "Food on Film" series curated by a Southeast Asian producer who collaborates with the project. These are hugely popular because teachers can access them whenever they want; this year alone, 14 distinct classroom packages engaged over 47,000 learners.

How exactly do you incorporate Home, Heritage, and Community Languages (HHCL) into the festival?
Steven: For the past four years, collaborative partners have run a targeted project to support Home, Heritage, and Community Languages. We recognised a severe systemic gap across the UK supplementary schools, Heritage Language teachers were isolated and often unrecognised. While the partners had no funding either, we could use our platforms to create dedicated web spaces and webinars. Our guiding philosophy is simple: we are all language teachers! Whether working in French, German, Yoruba, or Sylheti, we share the same pedagogical challenges; encouraging target language use, developing literacy, introducing grammar, etc.

Declan: Grassroots initiatives allow us to be radically inclusive. We work closely with our 55 partner organisations to deliver activities that celebrate linguistic diversity. As well as individual language specific activities, we also have an increasingly wide range of multilingual activities, which enable teachers to support the involvement of all children and all languages.

This features heavily in our creative projects. For instance, in the *Mother Tongue Other Tongue* project, children frequently collaborate with their parents to write in their home languages, building an important bridge between home and school. The emotional impact of these activities cannot be underestimated. Teachers consistently comment that when a child's home language is spotlighted in a classroom activity, it gives that student an invaluable opportunity to shine and share their identity with their peers.

Sarah: Contextualising this learning is particularly important, Newcastle's schools reflect an increasingly diverse and globally connected community: around 40% of school-aged children come from global majority backgrounds, and more than 30% are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL). For many young people, the Festival of Languages provides an opportunity to see their languages, cultures and identities recognised and celebrated within their school community. For others, it offers valuable exposure to different languages, perspectives and cultures, helping to develop intercultural understanding, empathy and global awareness.

This relevance is reflected in the engagement of schools across the city. More than 80% of Newcastle schools take part in the Festival, demonstrating a shared commitment to celebrating linguistic diversity, raising aspirations and preparing children and young people to thrive in a multicultural and multilingual society. The festival provides schools



Mother Tongue Other Tongue writing project

with a meaningful way to embed global learning, promote inclusion, and recognise the rich cultural and linguistic assets that exist within their own classrooms.

London officially joined the movement as a City of Languages in 2025. What practical advice do you have for other cities looking to establish similar initiatives?
Vicky: The London City of Languages grew out of an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) session on modern languages, which led to the creation of a termly cross-city meeting where different regions could share strategies. When a primary teacher in London expressed the desire to scale the concept to the capital, we formed a core volunteer team.

For cities looking to replicate this, my primary piece of advice is to build a diverse, multidisciplinary team. Do not rely solely on practising classroom teachers; teachers are willing but time-poor and cannot shoulder heavy administrative burdens. A wider committee that includes systemic multipliers, such as individuals who oversee languages across large Multi-Academy Trusts (MATS) can seamlessly broadcast messages to dozens of schools simultaneously.

Secondly, manage your scale and do not over-promise. London is structurally massive and complex so we had to accept that a small group of volunteers cannot do everything at once.

Thirdly, engage your major stakeholders from day one. We immediately hosted a stakeholder forum bringing together cultural institutes, embassies, universities, MAT trusts, and supplementary schools to secure explicit buy-in.

Finally, leverage low-barrier, high-joy activities to build momentum. We successfully copied a strategy from Sheffield City of Languages and launched a student logo design competition. We received over 400 entries, and by physically visiting the winning schools to present certificates in assembly, we converted those institutions into ongoing, enthusiastic advocates. We have since replicated this with poster competitions, festival badging for existing events, and language taster courses for adults. Don't be afraid to ask for favours; people fundamentally want to help.

Steven: When educators ask me how to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles or worry about 'what-ifs', I tell them to just start. There is no official national governing body or complex application process to become a City of Languages. You simply choose to call yourselves one and begin doing the work! Even a small project creates immediate joy. Language teachers face an incredibly harsh national climate; giving them a positive, celebratory experience is an instant win.

How do such citywide movements act as a form of bottom-up policymaking to advocate for the validation of languages?
Steven: Grassroots movements can inspire policymaking by showing what can be done, proving its efficacy, and generating groundswell support; this forces leaders to notice.

Government Departments are given lots of priorities, and we must face the fact that Languages may not be one of them. Waiting for top-down structural reform is a long game, and our learners deserve better now!

Vicky: If we just sat back and waited for the state to grant formal GCSE qualifications for every community language spoken in our schools, nothing would ever happen. Grassroots action creates immediate, alternative frameworks for recognition and celebration.

Declan: The gaps are not limited to heritage languages; it extends to the mainstream too. Due to severe high-stakes grading, restrictive assessment criteria, and school performance league tables, headteachers are actively withdrawing language provisions. Senior leaders frequently steer students away from subjects like German or Spanish, claiming it is "easier" to secure top grades in other subjects. In Newcastle, we are down to just one single state school offering German. This is absolute economic and educational insanity, considering that German is the number one language requested by UK businesses, and our local regional accent is naturally suited to its pronunciation. We have been tracking GCSE and A Level entries in Newcastle since 2018 and there are positive results, with GCSEs consistent and A level language entries increasing - bucking the national trend.

"Grassroots action creates immediate, alternative frameworks for recognition and celebration."

By operating at arm's length from strict local authority remits, our grassroots status gives us the political manoeuvrability to bypass these rigid barriers. We can pilot alternative models, such as the "Languages for All" higher education partnership pioneered by Royal Holloway, to connect secondary students directly with university language centres to maintain their studies.

What scope is there for schools to become actively involved year-round?
Declan: The scope is immense and continuous. We convene termly primary hubs and a broader North East secondary network where teachers gather regularly to share pedagogical expertise and collaborate with external specialists. We also maintain highly active digital Padlets packed with year-round CPD materials, lesson plans, and project resources.

Sarah: The high participation rate in our region relies heavily on active, localised conduits. By getting directly into schools, I can act as a bridge connecting schools with the Festival and Newcastle-based activities. Once a few schools sign up, word-of-mouth recommendations between teachers and headteachers gain pace and schools sign up early to ensure that they do not miss out on future opportunities.

What is the ultimate future vision for the Cities of Languages movement?
Steven: The ultimate beauty of this movement is its radical culture of sharing. All of our logistics, metrics, entry forms, and structural paperwork are completely open-source. Any individual school or passionate teacher can download our templates tomorrow and use them as the foundational blueprint to launch a new City of Languages in their own borough. We want to see this organic, grassroots network expand across every major unrepresented city in the UK.

Declan: To ensure longevity and systemic scale, grassroots movements should seek to strictly measure, record, and report their quantitative impact. While our work is deeply rooted in fostering joy and promoting languages, cultures, inclusion and tolerance, we must back that up with rigorous data. This year, our strategic tracking proved an astonishing 864% increase in student participation since our inception, culminating in 116,669 engaged learners this year. We ensure this success leaves a permanent legacy by curating digital anthologies, photo books, Festival films and multilingual video performances accessible to all, and robust evaluation and impact reports. When you present irrefutable evidence of success directly to your local MPs, regional mayors, schools and delivery partners, you shift the conversation from an optional "fun activity" to an undeniable civic necessity.

As I prepare for my retirement, I am confident that my successor and our core team will push the movement even further. Our ultimate vision is for the movement to go nationwide in cities and regions-the more who join in, the better. We must continue to be bold, be honest about what doesn't work, and drive the grassroots revolution until national policy finally catches up to meet us halfway. ■



Asian Creative Journeys workshop Kathapulti Puppets

Sarah Edgar is an Education Consultant at Newcastle City Council . She plays a key role in shaping the Express Yourself: North East Festival of Languages, working closely with Festival Coordinator Declan Baharini and a wide network of schools, cultural organisations and international partners. Sarah supports schools across the city to engage with the festival with over 82% of the schools in Newcastle taking part this year.

Declan Baharini is Chief Executive Officer of International Newcastle, responsible for delivering the Our Newcastle Our World initiative, including Newcastle City of Languages, International Connections for schools and Internationalism in the City workstrands. She has been the Coordinator of Express Yourself: North East Festival of Languages since its inception, delivering 6 Festivals since 2021.

Steven Fawkes has been advocating for Language learning for decades. He is a volunteer for the Association for Language Learning, of which he is currently also Co-President. He is Chair of ALLNorth-East, a writer, speaker and webinar host. His work has been recognised by the French Government who awarded him the rank of Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques, and by FIPLV who awarded their International Award in 2024.