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Wise in 5: Language Learning in Schools

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

This briefing was published in October 2024. It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

PolicyWISE creates neutral and constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge. We support and nurture a common culture of developing and sharing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.



	Current (or recent) strategy for promoting language learning	Government-backed national centre or organisation for languages	Government-backed mentoring scheme	Languages (re) introduced into the primary curriculum	Review of exam grading
England		+		2014	+
Northern Ireland					■
Republic of Ireland	+	+		2025	
Scotland	+	+	+	2013	
Wales	+		+	2022	
Key		+ Yes		■ Yes, but not published	

Wise in 5: Language Learning in Schools

The Language Learning ‘Crisis’

School curricula in [England](#), [Northern Ireland](#), [the Republic of Ireland](#), [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#) all, in different ways, talk of the many benefits of language learning for individuals and societies. However, the number of learners studying languages to secondary certification age¹ in the UK in recent years has shown a pattern of general decline.

Researchers have warned that we are in the ‘[fourth decade of this crisis](#)’. A series of annual ‘Language Trends’ reports, published by the British Council (starting in 2002 for [England](#), 2015 for [Wales](#), 2019 for [Northern Ireland](#) and from 2025 in Scotland), highlight the severity of the issue. Trends of decline have already been reported elsewhere in [Scotland](#). While the uptake of languages is higher at the end of compulsory education in the Republic of Ireland, there remain concerns around learners’ [lack of language skills](#) and the [proportion](#) of learners who continue with language learning after this stage—concerns shared across the nations of the UK.

The reports above show that exact learner trends do vary from nation to nation, and language to language. Qualifications in French, German and Spanish have traditionally been the most common offered in schools. French, and in particular German, have experienced the worst decline, while Spanish and ‘other languages’ (these vary from nation to nation, as outlined in this briefing, but are often grouped together in reporting on learner numbers) have seen some growth.

However, the term ‘crisis’ has played a central role in the messaging around language learning in the UK and [Anglophone countries](#) in recent years, and any positive trends have not been sufficient to reverse a situation described as ‘[bleak](#)’ by researchers. [The British Academy](#) describes the current situation as ‘an inadequate, longstanding and worsening supply of the language skills needed by the UK to meet the needs of society, the economy, business and future research’.

The language learning decline has been linked to many factors including low learner motivation; societal attitudes; insufficient statutory provision; inconsistent government guidance and policies; curriculum squeeze; limited teaching hours; difficult exams and harsh marking; the impact of

‘global English’; inequalities in learner access to language learning; language options in schools; teacher recruitment and retention; and more recently, the repercussions of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic (see the reports above).

Defining ‘language learning’

The term ‘language learning’, in this briefing paper, is used to refer to the curriculum area and/or school subject traditionally called Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) or Modern Languages (ML). Current terminology varies across contexts—including Foreign Languages (FL), International Languages (IL), MFL and ML—often encompassing different languages.

Recent efforts are being made to move away from the use of these terms across research, policy and practice to use the more [inclusive](#) term, [Languages](#).

‘Language learning’ in this briefing does not refer to the indigenous languages or languages that assume official status or recognition in the UK and Ireland: such as English, Irish and Welsh amongst other languages. Nevertheless, the bilingual and multilingual make-up of these nations, which also include [many other languages](#), are a significant factor influencing the provision, policies and social context related to language learning in each nation.



[The number of learners studying languages in the UK and Ireland in recent decades has declined.](#)

¹ See PolicyWISE’s [Mind Your Policy Language](#) for an overview of the education systems and structures across the nations.

Policy solutions to the language learning decline

A hallmark of education policy in the UK and Ireland over recent years is that Languages is not a compulsory subject throughout statutory education, unlike in some neighbouring European countries. However, in light of the decline in learner numbers and language skills, all five nations have attempted to encourage language learning through alternative policies and support.

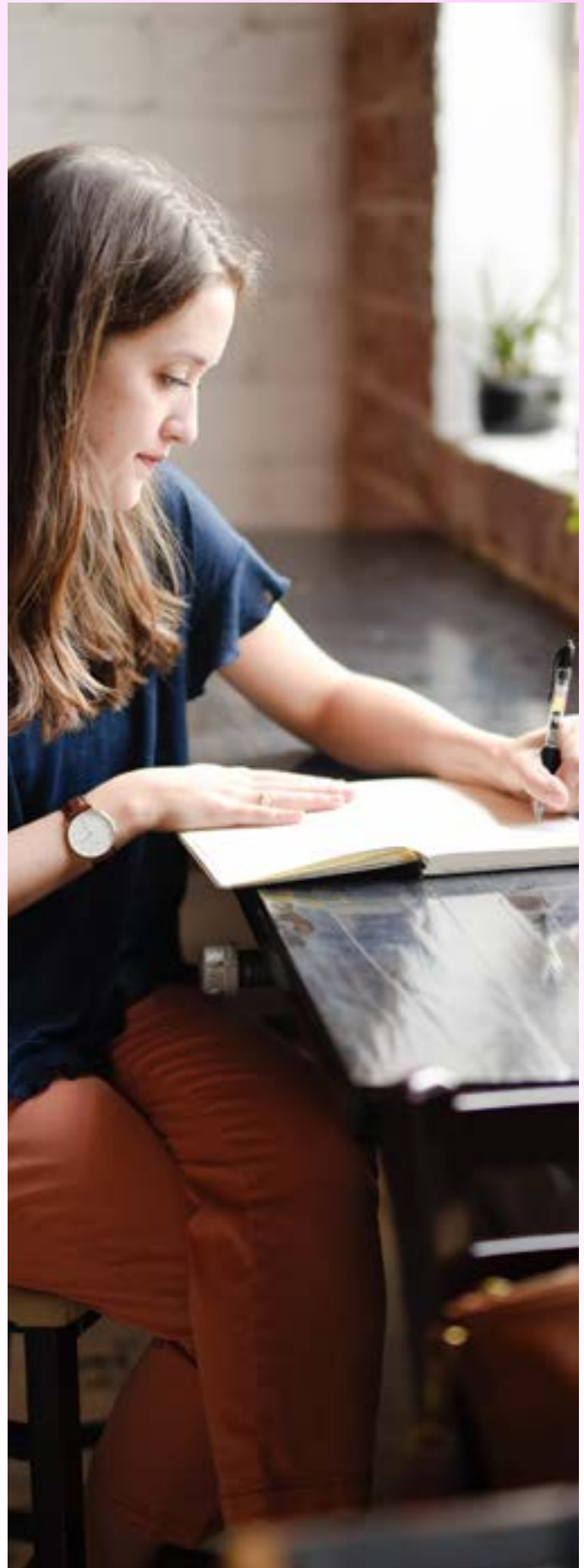
As each jurisdiction is responsible for its own education policies, and all have distinct linguistic and political landscapes, strategies for addressing the language learning decline have varied significantly, including systemic changes and reviews; funded interventions; pedagogical developments; and a diversification of the languages offered. Therefore, direct comparison of language provision and curricula across this context is not always possible due to different education systems, terminology and interpretations of 'Languages', as well as a multitude of supporting policies.

There are nevertheless similarities and differences in how policy efforts and resources have been directed across the nations. Since 2012, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales have published language strategies, most of which share the same **'ethos and ambition'**, while many national and regional centres and interventions have been established, and dissolved, during this time.

A 2019 **policy briefing** on Language Education Policy in the UK highlighted differences in provision and assessment across the nations, identifying issues with resourcing, transition, equality of opportunity and support.

In their foreword to the book **Languages After Brexit**, Baroness Coussins and Harding-Esch (Co-Chair and Secretariat of the APPG on Modern Languages at Westminster) described what has been the 'approach to language skills and needs' as 'piece-meal, short-term and self-defeating', explaining that 'the trouble with languages is that they belong everywhere a bit but nowhere holistically or strategically'.

The British Academy has recently called for a pan-UK strategy to support language learning, involving 'urgent, concerted and coordinated action at all levels from primary schools through to university and beyond'. This has resulted in the establishment of the **Languages Gateway** website, which intends to be a 'one-stop shop for all things languages in the UK'.



Nation by Nation

Scotland

The Scottish Government's languages strategy, [Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach](#) has been in place since 2013 and is at the centre of language learning policy in Scotland. Between 2013–2023, the Scottish Government provided local authorities with [£36.8 million](#) to implement the strategy.

Within the Scottish Government's [Curriculum for Excellence](#), introduced in 2010 with an update in 2019, Languages is one of the eight Curriculum Areas. Within the Languages Area, it is stated that this includes: 'literacy and English, literacy and Gàidhlig, Gaelic (Learners), modern languages and classical languages'.

Through the 1+2 Approach, teaching a modern language 'should' occur from P1 (age 4/5) until the end of S3 (age 14/15). There is no 'hierarchy of languages' within this approach, but the first additional language needs to be a language available as a National Qualification (namely, Cantonese, French, Gaelic (Learners), German, Italian, Mandarin, Spanish or Urdu). Learners 'should' learn another additional language or languages (L3) from P5 (age 8/9) and at some point at secondary education, during the Broad General Education (until the end of S3). The L3 can be any language, which includes British Sign Language, Latin, Scots or community languages.

According to the [1+2 Languages Policy: Findings from the 2023 Survey of Local Authorities report](#), 'nearly all primary and secondary schools now deliver language learning from P1 and through the Broad General Education'. However, researchers point out that provision for languages remains 'patchy' and so the impact of the 1+2 Approach 'is widely seen as underwhelming'.

[SCILT, Scotland's National Centre for Languages](#), receives grant funding from the Scottish Government and supports 'a wealth of language learning and diversity across Scotland's schools and communities'.

Since 2023, SCILT has run a national mentoring programme called [Language Explorers Scotland](#) to help raise awareness of the benefits of language learning. In 2024/25 the programme will run in partnership with 8 Scottish universities and the Open University.

Northern Ireland

The [Northern Ireland Curriculum](#) has been in place since 2007, and positions language learning as compulsory at Key Stage 3 (age 11–14) but there is no statutory requirement on time nor for a language to be taught in every year of the key stage. Modern Languages is considered an Area of Learning with learners required to study at least one official language of the EU. The [Language Trends Northern Ireland 2023](#) report states that Northern Ireland 'has the shortest time for compulsory language learning of any country in the continent of Europe'.

In 2012, the Department of Education published a Northern Ireland Languages Strategy [Languages for the Future](#) but the 'strategy failed to attract investment needed to implement reform'.

The Primary Modern Languages Programme ran from 2007–2015 to support language provision and learning in primary schools. [54% of primary schools](#) in Northern Ireland took part but funding came to an end in 2015.

The [Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research \(NICILT\)](#) is based at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and received funding from the Department of Education [until 2023](#). NICILT offers a range of services to support learners and teachers of modern languages and continues as part of QUB's Centre for Language Education Research.

In 2020, the Department of Education commissioned the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to carry out a [Review of Grading in Modern Languages at GCSE and A Level](#) but the results have not been published. In 2021, the CCEA set up a Modern Languages Programme Board (MLPB) with representatives from different sectors 'to advise on matters relating to curriculum support and to qualifications in the development of Modern Languages' in the primary and post-primary sectors.

Modern Languages featured as a priority curriculum area in the [Department of Education Business Plan 2022/23](#), meaning additional resources and support would be available. In September 2023 the ETI (Education and Training Inspectorate) published a related report on strategies that foster positive attitudes to learning languages and lead to uptake at Key Stage 4 (age 14–16). Modern language learning does not feature specifically in the subsequent [Department of Education Corporate Plan 2023–28](#).

England

In England, the [National Curriculum](#) came into effect in 2014, with statutory provision for ancient or modern foreign languages at Key Stage 2 (age 7–11) during primary school education although reports show that [provision](#) still varies. MFL learning is compulsory for learners at Key Stage 3 (age 11–14), but only an ‘entitlement area’ at Key Stage 4 (age 14–16). In July 2024, the UK Government launched a [Curriculum and Assessment Review](#) in England, which is expected to be published in 2025.

It was hoped that the introduction of the [English Baccalaureate](#) (EBacc) in 2010 as a ‘[performance measure](#)’ would help encourage language learning at Key Stage 4 but targets have not been met with a [DfE annual report](#) stating that the ‘main barrier to the EBacc ambition is languages take up’.

In 2016, the [Teaching Schools Council](#) published a review of MFL teaching practice in KS3 and KS4. The National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy (NCELP) (2018–2023) was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) in order to ‘[put into practice the recommendations](#)’ of this review.

The DfE put out a call to tender in 2022 for a Language Hubs programme, and the [National Consortium for Languages Education \(NCLE\)](#) was established in 2023 to ‘[re-energise language learning in state-maintained primary and secondary schools in England](#)’. As part of the NCLE, the [GIMAGINE](#) programme promotes and supports the learning of German in the UK, which is funded by the DfE and Germany’s Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt).

The DfE has been funding the [Mandarin Excellence Programme \(MEP\)](#) since 2016 to support learners in England to learn Mandarin Chinese from Year 7 (age 11–12), and the [Latin Excellence Programme](#), funded by the DfE from 2022, supports the teaching of Latin at Key Stages 3 and 4.

GCSE (age 14–16) and A Level (age 16–18) qualifications are also available in certain learners’ home, heritage and community languages (HHCL). There has been an increase in [HHCL entries](#) at GCSE. Learners will also be able to gain a [GCSE in British Sign Language](#) (BSL) in future. In 2019, Ofqual announced that there would be an [adjustment to grading standards](#) in French and German GCSEs following claims that they were more severely graded than other subjects. Since then, GCSEs in England for French, German and Spanish have been reformed and will be first assessed in 2026, but these examination reforms have been ‘[constructively criticised](#)’. There are no plans to adopt these reforms for languages apart from French, German and Spanish at GCSE.

Wales

The Welsh Government’s [Global Futures Plan](#) has been at the heart of attempts to ‘improve and promote international languages in Wales’ over the last decade. The Global Futures Plan was first launched in 2015, and renewed in 2020 and again in 2022. It followed the dissolution of CILT Cymru, Wales’ National Centre for Languages, which had existed since 2002.

The vision of the plan is for Wales to become a ‘truly multilingual nation’ by supporting international languages provision. Global Futures is delivered and supported by a Steering Group comprising of sector stakeholders and a number of strategic partners.

The new [Curriculum for Wales](#), which has been rolled out since 2022, has reconceptualised the learning and teaching of languages in Wales, proposing a ‘multilingual and plurilingual approach’ under the [Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning and Experience](#) (LLC Area). This approach incorporates a greater alignment of teaching Welsh, English and International Languages. The term MFL has also been changed to International Languages to encompass a broader range of languages including British Sign Language, community languages, classical languages and modern languages. The curriculum includes an expectation that the LLC Area will be covered at all stages of compulsory education.

Recent research suggests that teachers across Welsh, English and International Languages are, to an extent, collaborating within the LLC Area, but there are ‘[major challenges yet to be addressed before the Curriculum for Wales’ plurilingual vision can become a reality](#)’.

Reforms have also been agreed for [International Languages](#) (French, German and Spanish) GCSE qualifications (age 14–16) in Wales, due to be first taught from 2025, and first awarded from 2027, against the backdrop of wider [qualifications reforms](#). As part of such reforms, the new [Skills Suite](#) means that awarding bodies can, in future, offer an international language unit within Skills for Life and Skills for Work, as well as British Sign Language for Skills for Life.

Several high-profile language promotion initiatives have been running in Wales to support language learning, including [Routes into Languages Cymru](#) (established in 2008) and [MFL Mentoring](#) (established in 2015), both of which receive funding through the Global Futures Plan.

Republic of Ireland

There is some **'ambiguity'** regarding the status of Modern Foreign Languages in post-primary education in Ireland. Technically, the Junior Cycle (age 12/13–15/16) **framework** only requires students to study English, Mathematics and Irish alongside 'a number of other subjects'. In practice, many schools make learning an additional language **compulsory**. Around **80% of children** study a language in their secondary school Junior Cycle, (and approximately **76%** go on to study a language during Senior Cycle (age 15–18)).

As part of the new **Primary Curriculum Framework** launched in 2023, it is proposed that one hour a week will be allocated to learning a third language to learners in Third to Sixth Class (age 8–12). The new specifications are expected to be introduced in 2025, but primary schools have already been invited to take part in a **'Say Yes to Languages' Primary Sampler Module**, which supports schools to introduce a modern foreign language or Irish Sign Language.

The **Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education** runs from 2017–2026 with the vision 'that Ireland's education system will promote a society where the ability to learn and use at least one foreign language is taken for granted.' The strategy has been supported and implemented with the help of the **Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI)** unit, whose remit has been to diversify, enhance and expand the teaching of foreign languages in second-level schools throughout Ireland since 2000.

As part of the Languages Connect strategy and the work of PPLI there has been a specific goal to diversify the languages offered in schools, or as part of school certification/short courses, in order to help **counter language 'hierarchies'**. New languages introduced include Lithuanian, Japanese, Polish and Russian among others.

A number of Higher Education degree programmes in Ireland require students to have a third language (in addition to English and Irish) as part of their entry requirements, providing **incentive** for learners to continue with language learning at Senior Cycle.

The Open University

The Open University currently supports primary school teachers in Scotland and Wales with professional learning opportunities through **the TELT (Teachers Learning to Teach Languages)** programme. This programme allows teachers to learn a language—French, German, Mandarin Chinese or Spanish—alongside learning about and implementing primary language pedagogies with their own learners. TELT was developed in partnership with **SCILT, Scotland's National Centre for Languages**, as part of the Scottish Government's 1+2 Approach and was expanded to Wales through funding from the Welsh Government's Global Futures Plan.

IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society

The **National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE)**, funded by the Department for Education, is led by IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, in collaboration with the British Council and the Goethe-Institut.

Funded by the Department for Education, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society leads the delivery of the **Mandarin Excellence Programme (MEP)**, in partnership with the British Council.



Wise up – 5 policy points to take away

Five key points from what we have learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations.

1. All nations have invested time and resource into addressing the language learning decline, sharing a consensus that language learning is valuable to individuals and society. However, government policies have not focused on all the known factors linked to the decline.
2. Policy solutions have been varied across nations, regions and time. These include a combination of national strategies and systemic or curricular changes, as well as the implementation of extra-curricular promotion and support mechanisms. Research on the national strategies of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales indicate varying degrees of success of initiatives to date.
3. A lack of UK-wide or consistent strategy for language learning support and promotion has raised criticism, but this would also pose a challenge in the devolved context of education and language policy.
4. There is a general trend towards a more multilingual approach or a diversification of languages, but this is not explicit or the same everywhere, and where it has been apparent in policy, there has been a lack of professional learning and support to put it into practice.
5. There is significant scope for cross-nation learning to help inform solutions to the challenge, with consideration for contextual differences. Comparative analysis could consider not only national differences, but also comparisons across education systems, linguistic landscapes, age/education stage and languages available. This would be supported by bringing together key stakeholders across the nations in a forum for collaboration and discussion.



This briefing was led by [Dr Eira Jepson](#), The Open University and [Dr Elin Arfon](#), IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society with support from the PolicyWISE team. With thanks to colleagues across the UK and Ireland for their feedback.



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1. **Space:** We create and maintain neutral but constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to **develop relationships, respect and knowledge.**
2. **Sharing:** We develop and support a common culture of sharing and developing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.
3. **Solutions:** We help governments focus on evidence-informed policy solutions for citizens and communities across the nations, informed by comparative and collaborative research and methods.

The Open University has been awarded £1m in funding from Dangoor Education to establish and run PolicyWISE. The funding has supported the launch of PolicyWISE in 2023 and our development over the following four years.



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Wise in 5

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