



## Review of Education in the Gaeltacht

### 1. Introduction

This document outlines a proposal by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to review educational provision in the Gaeltacht in order to clarify its policy in relation to education in Gaeltacht schools. The proposal sets out the background to, the rationale and terms of reference for the review.

### 2. Background

#### *The Education Act, 1998*

*The Education Act, 1998* recognises the particular responsibility of the education system in general and of Gaeltacht schools with regard to supporting the Irish language as the community language in Gaeltacht areas. That additional responsibility in relation to schools is specified in *Section 9(h)* of the Act which states that one of the responsibilities of schools in Gaeltacht areas is to “contribute to the maintenance of Irish as the primary community language.”

The responsibility of institutions providing educational support is specified in *Section 6(j)* of the same Act, which states that it is the responsibility of “every person concerned in the implementation of this Act..... to contribute to the maintenance of Irish as the primary community language in Gaeltacht areas.”

#### *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language*

Increasing the number of Irish speakers with proficiency in the language and the number of people who use the language in their daily lives are Government priorities. The future of the Irish language as a living language is dependent on the desire and motivation of our children and young people to speak and use the language daily. The continuance of Gaeltacht areas as vibrant Irish speaking communities is critical in this regard.

The *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* reaffirms the Government’s commitment towards the regeneration and survival of the Gaeltacht as a viable Irish-speaking community. The Strategy sets a clear expectation that education in Gaeltacht areas is central to the national effort to sustain Gaeltacht communities. It highlights that Gaeltacht schools can play a critical role in fostering Irish language competence and usage to ensure the survival and sustainability of Gaeltacht communities.

In particular, the 20-Year Strategy prioritises actions to support the provision of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht areas and schools as follows:

- A key element of the Government’s Irish language policy is to attend to and make specific provision for the language in the Gaeltacht in light of research that highlights

that a critical point has been reached with regard to the survival of Irish as a community and household language in the Gaeltacht

- The Government acknowledges the specific challenges and opportunities associated with accommodating the needs of pupils with diverse linguistic abilities in Gaeltacht schools
- All Gaeltacht students will continue to have the opportunity to receive their education through the medium of Irish. The DES in consultation with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG)<sup>1</sup> will examine and implement suitable arrangements for such provision in the varying circumstances of each Gaeltacht area;
- Pre-school and non-formal learning are important dimensions of Irish language revitalisation. Irish language pre-school (naíonra) education will continue to be supported. All the research in this area has shown that it is easiest to acquire a new language in the earliest years. Pre-school facilities will be facilitated to offer an Irish language dimension and create a language-friendly environment for children.
- Appropriate structural arrangements will be made, in the context of any review of Vocational Education Committee (VEC)<sup>2</sup> structures nationally, for the provision of all-Irish second-level education throughout the State, including in the Gaeltacht, and to ensure that all staff in Irish-medium schools are capable of carrying out their daily business through Irish and that an integrated approach is taken to the provision of back-up, support and advisory services to Irish-medium schools so that such services are provided in Irish where possible;
- It will continue to be national policy to promote immersion education through Irish in all subjects other than English in Gaeltacht schools.
- A review of immersion education provision at post-primary level in the Gaeltacht will be carried out;
- Provision will be made for intensive summer/evening courses in Irish for post-primary students in the Gaeltacht who need additional support;
- Schemes operated by the DAHG which support the education system in the Gaeltacht (such as supports for Irish language assistants and other supports in Gaeltacht schools, as well as the system of home visits for linguistic purposes) will be strengthened in consultation with the Department of Education and Skills.

#### *Challenges concerning Irish medium education in Gaeltacht schools*

The issues involved in considering such provision are complex and indeed are well documented (Appendix A):

- Irish speakers in Gaeltacht communities are often sparsely distributed. In recent times for economic reasons, Irish speakers have moved from their communities to seek work in urban areas and this is coupled with inward migration of non-Irish speakers and children who have English or Irish as their first language.

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<sup>1</sup>Formerly, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs as cited in the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language*

<sup>2</sup> Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have recently replaced Vocational Education Committees (VECs)

- Many schools in Gaeltacht areas, particularly at primary level, are small. Over two thirds of Gaeltacht primary schools are 1-3 teacher schools and 79% of schools are one to four teacher schools, which is significantly higher than the proportion of small schools in the state nationally. The average enrolment of the 132 primary schools in the Gaeltacht is 77. Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta argue that the smallest schools are situated in the Gaeltacht areas where Irish is more widely spoken and that these schools have the highest proportion of pupils whose first language is Irish.
- The size of post-primary schools in Gaeltacht areas varies greatly; for example, the enrolment in Gaeltacht island schools is very small (i.e. 4 and 26) while the enrolment in schools in some Gaeltacht service towns may be between 450-500. The average enrolment of the 26 post-primary schools in the Gaeltacht is 207<sup>3</sup>.
- The student population attending Gaeltacht schools is not homogeneous; some children come from families where Irish is spoken frequently, others come from homes where Irish is not the main language of communication while others come to school with little or no experience of spoken Irish.
- This linguistic diversity in Gaeltacht schools presents a considerable challenge to the development of clearly defined policy options at a national level and for Gaeltacht schools. This linguistic diversity impacts on the ability of the school and of those parents who are Irish-speaking to foster a strong usage of Irish within school and in the home and community, particularly where Irish speakers are in a minority of the community. 104 of the 135 primary schools in Gaeltacht areas report that they teach through Irish. 19 of the 26 post-primary schools report that they teach through Irish<sup>4</sup>.
- There is evidence that the standards of oral competence in Irish among students in the Gaeltacht areas has dropped significantly (Harris et al, 2006; Mac Donnacha et al (COGG, 2005). The Harris report found that there had been a significant drop between 1985 and 2002 in standards of oral Irish among pupils in Gaeltacht primary schools. The survey (Mac Donnacha et al, 2005) commissioned by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) in 2004 found that a quarter of all pupils in Gaeltacht schools completed their primary schooling with only a fair mastery of the language and that approximately 10% of pupils left primary school with little mastery of Irish. The survey found that almost one fifth of Leaving Certificate students in post-primary Gaeltacht schools had fair levels of fluency and that another 10% had little or no Irish. Even in the Gaeltacht areas where Irish is spoken regularly, 7% of students in Leaving Certificate had low levels of fluency in Irish. Research (Ó Giollagáin, Ó Curnáin & Péterváry, to be published shortly) on the acquisition of Irish among Irish language speakers also shows that young speakers are failing to acquire native-like competence in the language.
- There is evidence that pupils use more English than Irish as the normal language of communication in most of the Gaeltacht primary schools even in the Gaeltacht regions where the use of Irish is most widespread (Mac Donnacha et al, 2005)
- Native speaking pupils increasingly constitute a minority of the overall enrolment of an increasing number of Gaeltacht primary schools. The 2010 National Assessments of Irish-medium schools (Gilleece et al, Educational Research Centre, 2012) found that just a fifth of second class pupils and a quarter of sixth class pupils spoke Irish as the first language at home. Another study (Ní Shéaghdha: COGG, 2010) found that only 60% of pupils (less than 1000 pupils) attending schools in the Irish speaking

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<sup>3</sup> Based on annual returns by schools to the DES for 2011/2012 school year

<sup>4</sup> Based on annual returns by schools to the DES for 2011/2012 school year

Gaeltacht communities in Donegal, Galway and Kerry where Irish is most widespread as the language of the community<sup>5</sup> are reported to speak Irish as their first language<sup>6</sup>. There is also significant variation between these strongest Gaeltacht areas in terms of the extent to which Irish is the first language of the pupils enrolled in primary schools. While over two thirds of pupils attending primary schools in the strongest Gaeltacht districts in Galway speak Irish as their first language, little over a quarter of pupils in such schools in the Kerry Gaeltacht speak Irish as their first language.

- There is also the issue of parental choice. In the case of Gaelscoileanna situated outside the Gaeltacht, parents make a conscious decision to have their child educated through Irish as there normally is a choice of schools in the locality. Gaeltacht schools are often situated in isolated rural areas and parents do not have the same level of choice of alternative schools.

### **3. Progress on the Implementation of the Education Actions set out in the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030**

The Department of Education and Skills has made significant progress in implementing educational actions in the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language* that relate to curriculum, assessment and teacher education. The implementation of these actions is occurring in tandem with the implementation of the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011), developments in initial teacher education, and the reform of the junior cycle in post-primary schools.

**The main actions are identified in the table below:**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is developing a new integrated primary language curriculum to build on <i>Aistear</i><sup>7</sup> that will provide learning outcomes to support the teaching and learning of Irish and English for pupils attending Irish medium schools.</li> <li>• An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), which is funded by the Department, has greatly improved the range of educational resources and materials for teaching through Irish. The co-location of COGG with the NCCA, as announced in November 2012, will enhance COGG's capacity in this work by enabling the development of curricula by the NCCA and materials in Irish by COGG to take place in a closely coordinated manner.</li> <li>• As part of the new junior cycle, a revised curriculum for Irish is under development by the NCCA and will be available in September 2014. In addition, the Minister for Education and Skills has asked the NCCA to provide a specialised short course in Irish at junior cycle for use in Irish-medium schools. The Minister has also asked the NCCA to advise on how the needs of students in Irish-medium schools can be met through any reforms to the syllabus/specification for Irish at senior cycle.</li> <li>• For the first time, standardised tests in Irish were available and used in Irish-medium</li> </ul> |
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<sup>5</sup>These schools are in Gaeltacht districts where over 67% of the community are daily speakers of Irish according to research carried out by Ó Giollaigáin et al in 2007, *Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht: Principal Findings and Recommendations*, Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

<sup>6</sup>As reported by principals of schools surveyed in research carried out by Ní Shéaghdha (2010) *Taighde ar Dhea-Chleachtais Bhunscoile i dtaca le Saibhriú/Sealbhú agus Sóisialú Teanga do Dhaltai arb í an Ghaeilge a gCéad Teanga*, An Chomhairle Um Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta

<sup>7</sup>*Aistear* is the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009 for all children from birth to 6 years.

primary schools in June 2012. There are plans to make similar tests available for use in post-primary Irish-medium schools at the end of second year.

- A range of teacher education measures are in place to support Irish-medium education. The Professional Development Service for Teachers continues to provide support for teachers in Irish-medium primary and post-primary schools. In addition, COGG provides support to providers for the provision of courses specific to the needs of teachers in Irish-medium schools. The post-graduate diploma for teaching through Irish in NUIG continues to ensure that there is a supply of teachers for post-primary Irish-medium schools. Existing teachers in primary and post-primary schools also have opportunities to advance their competence to function in Irish-medium education contexts through participation in relevant post-graduate programmes at master's level. The Department is collaborating with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland in a north south initiative that provides for the promotion of blended learning activities for teachers in Irish-medium schools, including Gaeltacht schools, and the sharing of examples of best practice and resources in relation to literacy and numeracy.
- The Department is planning for the introduction of additional measures related to teacher education that will strengthen provision for Irish-medium education. These include the provision of a mixture of onsite and online options for continuing professional development.

#### 4. Rationale for Review

The Department of Education and Skills needs to review its policy in relation to educational provision in Gaeltacht schools to ensure that it is consistent with the needs of Gaeltacht communities and the provisions of the *Education Act, 1998*, to support the objectives of the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* and other official policies; and to enable good forward planning of educational provision in Gaeltacht areas. The sociolinguistic and educational issues relating to such provision are complex and require detailed analysis before any policy decisions or initiatives can be considered. Given the variation in the use of Irish as the daily language of communication between and within Gaeltacht communities and the varying linguistic profile of the pupils/students within and between schools, it would appear that a 'one size fits all' approach may not be appropriate to meet the needs of the local Gaeltacht communities and the learners in schools.

The Minister has accepted a recommendation from Department officials that a detailed analysis be carried out. The intention of the Department to carry out such an analysis was announced by the Secretary General in his address at Comhdháil Oideachais Gaelscoileanna agus Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta on 23 November, 2012.

The review is also occurring in a context where each Gaeltacht community will be expected to prepare a language plan and clarify its status as a Gaeltacht area in accordance with the *Gaeltacht Act 2012*<sup>8</sup>. One of the criteria for recognition as a Gaeltacht Language Planning Area relates to the extent to which there is provision for Irish-medium instruction in schools in the community in accordance with the policy of the Department of Education and Skills.

The status of the Irish language in Gaeltacht schools and communities is also becoming increasingly fragile. For example, the number of primary pupils in the strongest Gaeltacht areas whose first language is Irish is under 1000 (Ní Shéaghdha 2010).

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<sup>8</sup> The length of time for these Gaeltacht Act (2012) processes to become complete is extensive. It is envisaged that community organisations will have a period of up to six months to apply to be designated as either a Gaeltacht Language Planning Area, GaeltachtServiceTown or an Irish Language Network, two years to develop language plans and seven years to implement them.

It is important therefore that the Department clarifies its policy in relation to Irish medium provision to facilitate Gaeltacht communities in their planning processes.

## 5. Terms of Reference of Review

The purpose of this review is to identify options for the delivery of education in primary and post-primary schools of various linguistic profiles and to clarify the policy and expectations of the Department of Education and Skills with regard to teaching through Irish in such schools. The review will also examine the co-ordination of early childhood services through Irish in Gaeltacht areas and its impact on the primary school sector. The review takes cognisance of information that is already available from sources within and outside the Department as well as new information that will be gathered in relation to existing practice in schools.

The review will:

- review the national and international research to provide advice on various language centred educational models most suited to the Gaeltacht context, and in particular those Gaeltacht communities where a significant number of native Irish speakers still reside;
- establish the current position with regards to pre-school provision within each of the Gaeltacht areas in terms of numbers and location of settings, the practices and policies in place in relation to native Irish speakers and learners of Irish, the medium of instruction /language routines (Irish, English, bilingual), the language profile of the communities in which the settings are located and the language background and competence of early-childhood practitioners;
- establish the current position with regards to primary and post-primary schooling within each of the Gaeltacht areas in terms of numbers and location of schools, school size (number of teachers/pupils-students), the medium of instruction (Irish, English, bilingual), the language profile of the communities in which the schools are located, the language background and Irish language competence of teachers, and in the case of post-primary schools, the structure of the Irish medium instruction (whole-school, *áonad* or *sruth*);
- analyse supply and demand for pre-school, primary and post-primary schooling through Irish and signpost future provision;
- draw upon existing relevant sources of research, data and information as far as possible so as to enable the review to be conducted expeditiously;
- identify planning and development options at system level and in-school planning, management, linguistic and pedagogical options at school level, to support the teaching of the curriculum through Irish in primary and post-primary schools of varying linguistic profiles. Such options will take cognisance of:
  - (i) the status of the Irish language in the school community
  - (ii) available resources /facilities
  - (iii) policy and practice with regard to provision for instruction in the minority language in similar sociolinguistic contexts internationally, despite the difficulty of identifying a setting comparable to the status of the Irish language in Ireland
  - (iv) existing practice in relation to teaching through Irish in Gaeltacht schools

- (v) the potential of information and communications technology (ICT) to support Irish medium provision in these schools, particularly in light of existing cross-border cooperative exemplars on the use of technology in classrooms
  - (vi) the support services that are available for schools and the extent to which these services are available through Irish for Gaeltacht schools;
- examine the co-ordination of early childhood services through Irish and its impact on the primary school system;
  - identify support measures for teachers' practice (over and above recently announced measures) that would be required to improve teaching through Irish in Gaeltacht schools;
  - consult with the High Level Group for Education established under the *20-Year Strategy for Irish* concerning the terms of reference and draft report findings and with relevant stakeholder bodies concerning potential policy measures and solutions to address the challenges facing education through Irish in the Gaeltacht.

## 6. Review Tasks

The review will involve:

- an initial trawl of data/research in relevant sources (e.g. DES, State Examination Commission (SEC), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Educational Research Centre (ERC), An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DENI) to determine the extent of the data/research available to inform the review.
  - Lead responsibility: Inspectorate in collaboration with Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit (QCAP) and DAHG
  - Timescale: August-November, 2013
- a mapping of existing data from DES databases for primary and post-primary schools and where relevant inspection reports on school facilities, catchment areas, extent/prevalence of Irish-medium/English-medium educational provision and population statistics in 2011 census data.
  - Lead responsibility: Evaluation, Support and Research Unit, Inspectorate in collaboration with Planning and Building Unit, Statistics Section, and Forward Planning Section.
  - Timescale: Quarter 4, 2013
- a mapping of existing data from DAHG/Údarás na Gaeltachta databases and other sources (POBAL, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, relevant Child-Care committees) for pre-school provision in Gaeltacht areas and to verify that the most recent data is available.
  - Lead responsibility: DAHG/Údarás na Gaeltachta
  - Timescale: Quarter 4, 2013
- undertake a survey of the main stakeholders regarding possible policy measures and solutions to address the challenges that relate to pre-school educational provision in the Gaeltacht
  - Lead responsibility: DAHG/Údarás na Gaeltachta
  - Timescale: Quarter 1, 2014

- a review of relevant literature, national policies, and practice elsewhere in sociolinguistic contexts similar to the Gaeltacht areas (despite the difficulties in identifying such sociolinguistic contexts), with regard to provision for minority languages in the educational system and instruction through a minority language in pre-school centres, primary and post-primary schools. This review to be extended as required to research education provision into various immersion models and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) outside the areas in which the target language is spoken.
  - Lead responsibility: COGG
  - Timescale: Quarter 4 2013
- an online survey of stakeholders regarding possible policy measures and solutions to address the challenges to the provision of education in the Gaeltacht at primary and post-primary levels.
  - Lead responsibility: COGG to co-ordinate
  - Timescale: Quarter 1 2014
- a number of case studies on Irish-medium practice in primary and post-primary schools of varying linguistic profiles with a view to identifying effective practice with regard to provision for Irish medium education (the focus of this work will require further consideration in light of the earlier research and analysis). The case studies will provide opportunities to consult through the use of focus groups and special interest groups with relevant stakeholders associated with Gaeltacht education, for example, practitioners, parents, principal teachers, school boards of management, language planning personnel etc.
  - Lead responsibility: Inspectorate
  - Timescale: Quarter 1, 2014
- the development of policy options for educational provision in Gaeltacht schools
  - Lead responsibility: DES Working Group for Irish
  - Timescale: Quarter 2, 2014

## **7. Review Report**

The final review report will track the various policy options available to the Department with regard to future educational provision in Gaeltacht schools.



## Appendix

### References

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