DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Policy Proposals for Educational Provision in Gaeltacht Areas

MAY 2015
A message from Minister Jan O’Sullivan, TD, Minister for Education and Skills

As Minister for Education and Skills, I value the linguistic and cultural importance of the Gaeltacht. I know that high quality Irish-medium education is a key factor in supporting the use of the language in Gaeltacht areas.

I also know that Gaeltacht schools play a critical role in supporting the Irish language in Gaeltacht areas. But they face many challenges including the very wide linguistic diversity of their students, the decline in the number of children being reared through Irish, the increasing use of English in Gaeltacht communities and the pressure to move to English-medium instruction.

Over the last year, my Department has developed a range of proposals to support schools and Gaeltacht communities in addressing these challenges. I am pleased to present these policy proposals in this document. The proposals are designed to enhance the capacity of Gaeltacht schools to provide Irish-medium education. They also will help to promote the use of Irish within school communities and in the wider Gaeltacht community.

My Department has cooperated with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, with bodies such as An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscoláide (COGG) and with independent researchers to develop the proposals. The proposals have been shaped by the experience of Gaeltacht schools that have been studied in a number of major research studies.

But I want to hear the views of Gaeltacht schools and Gaeltacht communities about the ideas that they have as to how education in the Gaeltacht can be improved. I also want to hear from Gaeltacht organisations and the many people in Ireland that I know are interested in the future of Gaeltachtai as Irish-speaking areas.

Your responses to the policy proposals are important. I want to get the policy approaches right for Gaeltacht schools and I want to hear the views of Gaeltacht communities, organisations and individuals on this important issue. Your ideas will help to shape and improve the Department’s policy on Gaeltacht education which will be published by Government later this year.

I invite you to read and discuss the proposals with your family, your school community or your local community and to participate in on line survey on www.education.ie or e-mail your ideas and comments to Moltai_oideachasgaeltacha@education.gov.ie or if you prefer, write to: Moltaí Polasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit, Department of Education and Skills, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1.

Jan O Sullivan, TD
Minister for Education and Skills
May 2015
1. Introduction

The Gaeltacht is of significant linguistic and cultural importance. As the heartland of Ireland’s native speakers of Irish and as an Irish speaking entity, the Gaeltacht plays a key role in supporting the survival of Irish as a vibrant living language. It is also a unique and irreplaceable resource for learners of the language. However, the status of Irish as a family and community language in Gaeltacht areas is increasingly under threat. In some areas, Irish is no longer a community language. Even in the strongest Gaeltacht areas, current social and language dynamics are leading to the dominance of English. The report on the Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht in 2007 concluded that:

‘without a major change to language-use patterns, Irish is unlikely to remain the predominant community and family language in those areas with the most widespread and inclusive Irish-speaking networks for more than another fifteen to twenty years.’

The educational system has a key role to play in supporting the use of Irish as the language of the community in Gaeltacht areas. However, the status of Irish within Gaeltacht schools is also fragile. There are less than 1,000 native speakers in primary schools in the strongest Gaeltacht areas. Less than 10% of 15-18 year olds in Gaeltacht areas speak Irish on a daily basis. Schools are challenged to meet the needs of learners who come from diverse language backgrounds, particularly those of native speakers. There has also been a steady decline in the use of Irish as the medium of instruction in Gaeltacht schools.

In light of these challenges and the importance of the Gaeltacht for the future of the Irish language, the Department of Education and Skills commenced a review of Gaeltacht education in 2014. The objectives of the review were to identify policy options for the delivery of a quality education in primary and post-primary schools of various linguistic profiles in Gaeltacht areas and to clarify the policy of the Department with regard to teaching through Irish in such schools.

This document outlines policy proposals for educational provision in Gaeltacht areas arising from that review. The policy proposals contained in this document will form the basis of consultation with stakeholders in Gaeltacht areas and nationally.

This document is supported by reports on each of the four strands of work carried out as part of the Gaeltacht review:

- *School Provision in Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas – Current Supply and Future Demand*
- *Educational Provision through Minority Languages: Review of International Research*
- *A Report on Irish-medium Educational Provision in Gaeltacht Schools: Primary and Post-Primary Case-Studies*

These reports are being published in tandem with these *Policy Proposals* as part of the consultation process. The consultation will take place over the next six months. The findings of the consultation will inform the finalisation of the Department’s policy on Gaeltacht education.
2. Background

2.1 Policy context

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. Having vibrant Irish speaking communities in Gaeltacht areas is a vital resource for learners of Irish from outside the Gaeltacht. The Strategy highlights the important role that education and schools in Gaeltacht areas can play in fostering Irish language competence and usage to support the survival and sustainability of Irish speaking communities in Gaeltacht areas. The Gaeltacht Act 2012, which provides for a redefinition of Gaeltacht areas based on linguistic criteria instead of geography, gives Gaeltacht communities an ideal opportunity to actively engage in planning for and implementing a range of measures to support the use of Irish in everyday life in the Gaeltacht, including in the educational domain.

2.2 Challenges

There are many challenges facing Gaeltacht schools. A key challenge is how to provide for the linguistic diversity among students including those who are native speakers of Irish, as well as for speakers of English including those with some proficiency in Irish, and for that small minority of learners whose first language is neither Irish nor English. The challenge of providing for linguistic diversity among learners is magnified by the configuration of Gaeltacht schools. Many Gaeltacht schools are small, students are taught in multi-class or multi-grade contexts and school leaders are faced with an additional administrative load.

Another key challenge for Gaeltacht schools is how to maintain the status of Irish as the language of communication and instruction in a context where language patterns in the wider community continue to shift from Irish to English. There is evidence of ongoing decline in the use of Irish among young people in the Gaeltacht and in the numbers of native speakers enrolling in Gaeltacht schools. There is also evidence of a decline in the oral competence of young people in Gaeltacht areas, including learners of Irish and native speakers. In addition, native speakers are sparsely distributed which creates difficulties for the creation of sustainable Irish speaking networks and the Irish language socialisation of young Irish speakers both within schools and in the wider community. The changing profile of Gaeltacht schools and conflicting demands from parents have also led to many schools choosing to move over time from Irish-medium instruction to English-medium instruction.

3. Overarching messages from the Gaeltacht review

A number of key messages have emerged from the review of Gaeltacht education to date.

The first message is that schools can play a critical role in language revitalisation in the Gaeltacht but that measures from the formal education system alone will not be enough to support usage of Irish in the community. Action is also required in other domains to reinforce the effects of teaching. The importance of other domains is highlighted by the fact that young people can be expected to spend just 10% of their time in State funded education from 0-18 years. This suggests that a policy on Gaeltacht education and its associated supports should complement language measures in Gaeltacht communities, support collaboration between Gaeltacht schools and their local communities, and stimulate action and participation at local level. In particular, a policy on Gaeltacht education should complement the language planning processes that are occurring under the Gaeltacht Act 2012. The facilitation of such complementarity by the Department of Education and Skills proceeds on the understanding that the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG) and Údarás na
Gaeltachta have principal responsibility respectively for overseeing and for supporting the implementation of the language planning processes by communities in individual Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas.

Another key message from the review of Gaeltacht education is that the language needs of native speakers of Irish should be provided for in a targeted and comprehensive manner. Researchers on Gaeltacht education argue that the focus of language provision in Gaeltacht schools is on learners of Irish at the expense of native speakers. They also argue that there is need to make differentiated provision within the educational system in Gaeltacht areas in order to enrich the language development and support the Irish language socialisation of native speakers.

The review of Gaeltacht education highlights the need for a clear definition of what constitutes a Gaeltacht school. A Gaeltacht school is currently defined on the basis of geographical location in a recognised Gaeltacht area in accordance with the Gaeltacht boundaries first defined under the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act, 1956 and last amended in 1982. Practice with regard to the promotion of Irish as the language of communication and instruction varies across schools located in recognised Gaeltacht areas with schools providing instruction either fully through Irish, partially through Irish or fully through English. In light of the lack of a clear definition of Gaeltacht schools, schools are often uncertain regarding the course of action to be taken in the face of competing demands from parents regarding the language of instruction. A definition of a Gaeltacht school that provides clarity about expectations in relation to language and educational practice will assist schools and local communities in addressing such issues.

Finally, the Gaeltacht review indicates that the Irish-medium education provided must be of high quality if it is to have the desired impact on Irish language use among students within the school and community context. The quality of the Irish-medium education provided is also critical to winning the confidence and support of parents for the work of the school through Irish and for supporting Gaeltacht parents who choose to raise their children through Irish.

4. Education models

4.1 Irish-medium models

The review of Gaeltacht education suggests that a robust form of Irish-medium education should be provided in all areas that are designated as Gaeltacht areas. The research indicates that a total immersion approach where all subjects apart from English are taught through Irish should be the preferred model in terms of supporting the Irish language. Other models such as partial immersion and bilingual approaches have limitations in terms of their impact on Irish language development but have potential for implementation on an interim basis to support schools that intend moving from English-medium to Irish-medium provision and do not have the capacity currently to do so. The transition from English-medium to Irish-medium would require clear guidance to schools on how they could implement a phased move towards a total immersion approach within a specific timeframe.

4.2 Provision for native speakers

There is general agreement in the national research on Gaeltacht education that there is a need to make differentiated language provision for native speakers but there is variance of opinion on how this may be delivered. One option is that Irish-medium provision be provided for native speakers of Irish that is entirely separate to provision for learners of Irish in Gaeltacht areas. Advocates of this approach contend that separate provision would allow for more intensive engagement and socialisation of native speakers in Irish in a manner that would support them to achieve native-like competence in the language. However, the feasibility of implementing this
option would be problematical in most Gaeltacht areas, given the dispersed location and low density of young native speakers of the language and the potentially adverse impact that the implementation of this option would have on the participation and socialisation of young native speakers in their local community.

Another option is the implementation of an Irish-medium immersion model for both native speakers and learners of Irish which provides differentiated language supports for native speakers. Additional supports that have emerged for consideration include strengthening of the language assistant scheme administered by the DAHG, making provision for language enrichment teachers in accordance with the proportion of native speakers, and the delivery of differentiated teaching and learning approaches within classrooms. In addition to this, the national and international research makes a strong case for the provision of an extended period of total early immersion (i.e., up to two years) in the primary infant cycle in the interest of the Irish language development of native speakers.

A model of Irish-medium provision that provides for both native speakers and learners of Irish and makes differentiated provision for native speakers would appear to be more feasible for implementation than separate models of Irish-medium provision for native speakers and learners of Irish. It could form the basis of a definition of a Gaeltacht school that enables the school to meet its obligations with regards to the promotion of the Irish language in the local community and the implementation of the language planning process in individual Gaeltacht Planning Areas. In particular, a model that provides for both native speakers and learners of Irish has the advantage of allowing all children in a local community to access education in their local Irish-medium school while attending to the specific needs of young native speakers of Irish.

4.3 English-medium provision

Account must also be taken of the fact that there will be parents in Gaeltacht communities who do not wish to have their children educated through Irish and whose preference is for English-medium education. At the moment, such parents, especially those in isolated areas, do not have any choice but to send their children to the local Irish-medium school.

The national research on Gaeltacht education is largely silent on the provision of English-medium education in Gaeltacht areas. The international research indicates that parallel provision is available in some minority language contexts such as the Basque Country but it is difficult to make comparisons with such jurisdictions because of the varying sociolinguistic and political contexts. However, it does raise the point that consideration should be given to the provision of English-medium education in tandem with Irish-medium provision, at least where the school population mass is sufficient to support such parallel provision and there is demand for same. Consideration of parallel provision of Irish-medium and English-medium education in other Gaeltacht areas could also be considered on the basis that there would be a reconfiguration of existing schools and where there is sufficient demand in the Gaeltacht area to merit such provision. Options for reconfiguration of schools are discussed later in section 5.2.

4.4 Provision for learners of Irish as L2

The research conducted as part of the Gaeltacht review suggests that in situations where separate English-medium provision is not feasible, consideration should be given to the provision of temporary bespoke supports that assist learners for whom English is the first language to develop the competence necessary to access education in the minority language. One option includes the establishment of language acquisition units as evidenced in Wales, where young speakers of English are placed in an acquisition unit attached to a Welsh-medium school and engage in intensive learning of Welsh for a sustained period to enable them to move into a bilingual education context. The Welsh experience indicates some success in terms of the development of linguistic competence among the target students but has limitations in relation to aspects such as curricular provision. The potential for the provision of such units in the Gaeltacht context might be explored in the form of
a pilot which would explore issues such as location of the units, access by pupils, demand for places, transitions from the unit and linkage with mainstream educational structures in the Gaeltacht.

Another option for supporting English speakers in developing competence in Irish is the establishment of a bilingual Bridging Programme attached to an Irish-medium school. Such a programme has been successfully delivered at junior cycle in one post-primary Gaeltacht school. In this instance, English-speaking students with low proficiency in Irish receive bilingual instruction on a transitional basis with a view to supporting their integration into Irish-medium provision. The programme includes the delivery of a comprehensive range of language, pedagogical and assessment interventions to the target students that is supported by extensive resource provision such as additional language and teaching supports. The success of the Bridging Programme in meeting the needs of the target students and winning the confidence of their parents and the local community suggests that the extension of this programme or at least a modified version of the programme to other Gaeltacht schools merits consideration. Nonetheless, account must be taken of the feasibility of replicating the Bridging Programme on a wide-scale basis given the level of resourcing in question and the need for key drivers such as strong leadership, effective planning processes, communication, and teacher commitment being in place in the parent school to support its implementation.

5. Structure of Gaeltacht education

5.1 Stand-alone school provision

The research and cases studies reports, completed as part of the Gaeltacht review, indicate that the most desirable structure for the delivery of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools is a stand-alone school. Stand-alone provision allows the individual school to establish a clear Irish language identity both within the school itself and in its community and has the potential to facilitate extended use of Irish among pupils outside of the classroom context. The Gaeltacht review indicates that the focus should be on strengthening stand-alone provision.

A review of supply and demand carried out by the Department, as part of the review of Gaeltacht education, indicates that demand for school provision in Gaeltacht areas is stable and that there is not likely to be need for additional school accommodation in the school feeder areas containing the Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas (GLPAs), except potentially at primary level in the environs of Galway city. Strengthening of stand-alone provision, including the provision of additional resources in support of native speakers and learners of Irish, is therefore likely to require considerable restructuring of education provision in the Gaeltacht generally. There is a large proportion of small Gaeltacht schools, particularly at primary level, which presents management and administrative difficulties at school level. Such difficulties would also constrain the efficient allocation of additional supports for Gaeltacht schools. At post-primary level, students that attend a small school have access to a much more limited range of subject options than their peers who attend larger schools.

5.2 Reconfiguring stand-alone provision

The review of Gaeltacht education suggests a number of options for reconfiguring school provision at primary level in Gaeltacht areas with a view to strengthening stand-alone provision at this level. These options include: the amalgamation of small primary schools; the clustering of small primary schools where schools in particular areas collaborate to share resources, an administrative manager and secretarial services; and the establishment of a confederation of schools where a number of small schools in an area share an administrative principal and one board of management. It is envisaged that the reconfiguration of small primary schools in this manner would facilitate parallel provision of Irish-medium and English-medium education where there is sufficient demand for such in areas designated as Gaeltacht areas.
While the existing provision at post-primary level is sufficient and does not require reconfiguration, the establishment of a hub school or e-school with virtual classrooms is an option for extending the range of curricular choices available to students in small post-primary Irish-medium Gaeltacht schools.

### 5.3 Irish-medium units

In contexts where stand-alone Irish-medium provision is not feasible at post-primary level due to factors such as lack of demand, an alternative is the establishment of an Irish-medium unit (Aonad) attached to a parent school. The case studies carried out during the Gaeltacht review suggest that Irish-medium units have a number of limitations especially if directly attached to an English-medium parent school. These limitations include challenges in achieving a clear language identity, constraints on extending students’ use of Irish, reduced choice of subjects, lack of access to subjects through Irish and challenges in sustaining enrolment. Similar challenges have been identified where Irish-medium units have been established within English-medium schools outside the Gaeltacht. The Gaeltacht review suggests that Irish-medium units could be strengthened through the implementation of measures such as accommodating the unit in a separate building to the parent school, linking to an Irish-medium parent school, exploration of the potential of the virtual classroom to extend subject provision and making Irish-medium provision available through the full post-primary cycle.

### 6. Drivers of Educational Provision

The Gaeltacht review indicates that the provision of Irish-medium education is not enough in itself but must be of high quality in order to enable students to reach their potential linguistically and educationally, to harness the support and confidence of parents in the work of the school, and to support parents who choose to raise their children through Irish. The review identified a number of key drivers that are critical to the delivery of a quality Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools namely:

- Leadership and management
- Teacher supply
- Curriculum
- Resources and supports for Gaeltacht schools
- Parental involvement and support
- Community links

The review also identified a range of actions for consideration in relation to the activation of these drivers.

#### 6.1 Leadership and Management

The Gaeltacht review highlights that effective school leadership is essential for the successful delivery of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools, particularly in light of the challenges facing the schools. As noted in case studies carried out as part of the review, principals of Gaeltacht schools can play a key role in creating a vision regarding the place of Irish in the work of the school and in engendering commitment from teachers, parents and other members of the school community to the realisation of that vision. Principals of Gaeltacht schools also play a key role in leading whole-school planning and school self-evaluation processes that support the delivery of Irish-medium instruction in Gaeltacht schools in terms of clarifying expectations, ensuring consistency of implementation and promoting improvement in students’ learning. Boards of management and the senior management team within schools also have a very important role in supporting and planning for the delivery of Irish-medium education.
However, it is clear that both principals and boards of management in Gaeltacht schools need support to fully realise their leadership and management roles. The case studies carried out, as part of the Gaeltacht review, evidenced some excellent examples of effective leadership and management among principals in Gaeltacht schools with regard to Irish-medium education but there is need to ensure that such practice is shared and implemented in all Gaeltacht schools.

The review of Gaeltacht education highlights the need for bespoke induction and continuing professional development (CPD) provision for principals in Gaeltacht schools to ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills, including an understanding of immersion education and an ability to engage in whole-school language planning, to meet the particular demands of leading and managing in a Gaeltacht school and of supporting the Irish language as the language of the community. Such provision would be in addition to general CPD provision for principals and require additional investment. The establishment of networks among principals of Gaeltacht schools is also suggested to facilitate the sharing of best practice. Similarly, it is important that boards of management of Gaeltacht schools receive discrete support in the realisation of their leadership role in the Gaeltacht school context. Opportunities for the sharing of learning and practice about leadership and management between Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools more generally should also be explored.

6.2 Teacher supply

The review of Gaeltacht education indicates that ensuring a sufficient supply of teachers with the necessary language and pedagogical competence is a key driver of effective delivery of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools. The case studies of policy and practice in Gaeltacht schools evidenced many examples of effective practice in classrooms where teachers with high levels of competence in Irish and teaching skill provided quality language and learning experiences for pupils.

However, the review has identified a number of challenges in relation to teacher supply in Gaeltacht schools at both primary and post-primary level. The first of these challenges relates to the recruitment of teachers with sufficient competence in Irish to teach through the language. At primary level, Gaeltacht schools reported difficulties with the recruitment of teachers with sufficient proficiency in the language from the redeployment panels. Since 2013, the Department has made improvements to the operation of the redeployment process with a view to addressing such difficulties. Teachers on redeployment panels are now required to indicate whether they are interested in being redeployed to teach in an Irish-medium school. This assists the operation of the redeployment process for Irish-medium schools. This approach has been positively received by all the relevant education partners. Nonetheless, there is a need to monitor on an ongoing basis the effectiveness of the deployment arrangements, including their impact on Gaeltacht schools.

At post-primary level, schools have difficulties in recruiting teachers due to the small pool of teachers available with sufficiently high levels of Irish language competency across different subject specialisms.

The second challenge for Gaeltacht schools in relation to teacher supply relates to pedagogical knowledge and skill. While there was evidence of effective Irish-medium practice in many classrooms observed during the case studies in Gaeltacht schools, such good practice was not widespread. A particular challenge for teachers in Gaeltacht schools is how to differentiate teaching and learning approaches in classrooms in order to cater for the specific needs of native speakers of Irish, particularly in the multi-grade or multi-class context. There is need to ensure that teachers in Gaeltacht schools have the pedagogical knowledge and skills that are required to teach in a Gaeltacht school, including an understanding of language dynamics in Gaeltacht areas and of immersion education.

The Gaeltacht review has presented a number of options on how to address challenges in relation to teacher supply. In particular, it highlights how the supply of teachers available to teach in Gaeltacht schools can be enhanced through strengthening of provision for Irish-medium education during all phases of the teacher
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education continuum - initial teacher education, induction and continuing professional development. While many initial teacher education (ITE) providers at primary level provide modular options relating to Irish-medium education, the potential for making a complete ITE course or courses available through Irish should be explored in the context of the Teaching Council’s review of supply and demand for teachers. Similarly, the potential for extending current provision for Irish-medium education in ITE at post-primary to a larger number of entrants should also be explored.

It is also evident that teachers in Gaeltacht schools need access to dedicated continuing professional development (CPD) provision that will support them to deliver Irish-medium provision across the curriculum in the complex context that characterises educational provision in Gaeltacht schools - providing for learners of diverse language backgrounds, differentiating provision for native speakers, providing for children with special educational needs (SEN), and managing multi-grade classes. The need for bespoke programmes for those intending to work as learning-support or resource teachers in Gaeltacht or Irish-medium schools is also highlighted.

It will be essential that all such CPD is fully aligned with best practice in each of the areas, such as special educational provision, multi-grade class teaching etc., and not isolated from current research and pedagogical knowledge. At the same time, there are particular additional challenges to be faced by teachers in Gaeltacht schools, which should be addressed by targeted CPD. Given the small number of Gaeltacht schools, there is need to ensure that CPD support for principals and teachers does not become lost in general teacher education provision.

One option is to guarantee a definite level of support from the national support services for teachers and principals. A strong case can also be made for nominating a specific agency with an Irish language interest to co-ordinate CPD supports for principals and teachers of Gaeltacht schools and to liaise with existing providers. The potential for COGG to have such a co-ordinating and liaison role in relation to professional development of school leaders and teacher professional development should be explored in light of its capacity and resources to take on this role, its current roles and responsibilities and those of the national teacher-education support services. The potential for enhancing the support role of the three existing part-time education centres located in Gaeltacht areas should also be explored in this context.

It is also desirable that the learning across an Irish-medium sector, that is relatively small in size nationally, is leveraged as much as possible. Hence the opportunities for sharing of practice between teachers in Gaeltacht schools and across the Irish-medium sector generally should be explored.

6.3 Curriculum

The content of language curriculum has a central role in supporting the development of Irish language competence among both learners and native speakers in Gaeltacht schools. A key theme arising from the Gaeltacht review is the need to ensure that Irish language curricula take account of the needs of native speakers of Irish and help to enrich their language development.

Action is already being taken by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in relation to the development of new curricula at primary level and at junior cycle to meet the particular language needs of Gaeltacht pupils, including native speakers of Irish. At primary level, separate language outcomes for Irish will be provided for pupils in Irish-medium schools, including pupils in Gaeltacht schools to those provided for pupils in English-medium schools. It is intended that an optional short course in Irish will be provided at junior cycle, in addition to the subject specification for Irish that will enable students in Gaeltacht schools to engage in more intensive learning of aspects of the language. There will be need for ongoing review of the development, implementation and the content of such curricula to ensure that they are fit for purpose and that Irish language curricular provision for native speakers is strengthened as necessary.
6.4 Resources and supports for Gaeltacht schools

The Gaeltacht review highlights the key role that Irish language resources and materials play in supporting the delivery of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools. Such resources relate to the full range of educational activity, both mainstream and SEN, in terms of planning, curriculum and assessment.

Mainstream resources and supports

Over the past ten years, there have been significant improvements in the range of Irish language resources and textbooks that are available to support teaching through Irish. COGG has played a central role in co-ordinating this enhanced provision. Such progress is particularly visible in the comprehensive directory of materials available online on the COGG website and in the planning template for primary schools that Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta produced with the support of COGG. Other sources such as An Gúm, and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Áisnaonad in Northern Ireland, have also made a significant contribution to the availability of Irish language teaching resources and reading material for young people.

Many examples of effective practice were observed during case study visits to Gaeltacht schools, where primary and post-primary schools made judicious use of the Irish language textbooks available to support teaching and learning, and either supplemented or replaced them, as appropriate, with teacher-designed resources and other Irish language resources sourced from the internet.

Despite the significant progress made, issues remain in relation to the suitability of the language content of existing materials to native speakers, the availability of Irish-medium material for all subject areas and awareness among schools and teachers regarding the materials available.

SEN resources and supports

There also has been a significant enhancement of the range of Irish language curriculum and assessment materials available for use in the Irish-medium special educational needs context in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. However, consideration needs to be given on how to co-ordinate and leverage existing expertise and resources that are available in both jurisdictions, North and South, in relation to SEN and Irish-medium education.

There are also a number of matters specific to SEN provision in the Irish-medium context that require clarification. Such matters includes guidance on the prioritisation of Irish language literacy skills for SEN learners in Gaeltacht schools and the language of instruction for learners in SEN contexts in Gaeltacht schools in areas of the curriculum such as mathematics.

The Gaeltacht review also points to the need to strengthen the level of support through Irish provided by the support services to Gaeltacht schools. It is evident that some progress has been made with regard to the provision of support services through Irish to schools. For example, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has identified staff competent in Irish for assignment to Gaeltacht schools.

However, it should be noted that there are practical difficulties relating mainly to critical mass that constrain the ability of the education sector to deliver the services in Irish in the SEN context. The low numbers of SEN students combined with their dispersal across the wide Gaeltacht geographical entity presents challenges in ensuring access to specialists for low-incidence SEN with capacity in Irish. Nonetheless, there is need to ensure that there is awareness among professional and para-professional staff of the literature supporting the intellectual, speech and career benefits of bilingualism and the specific bilingual needs of pupils in Gaeltacht contexts with special needs. COGG, NEPS and the Special Education Support Service (SESS) could play a role in providing guidance on support for the bilingual needs of children with special needs in Gaeltacht areas.
Assessment materials

It is evident that significant progress has been made in relation to the provision of assessment materials relevant to the Irish language needs of learners in Gaeltacht schools. The development in recent years of standardised tests that are normed for the population of Irish-medium primary schools, including Gaeltacht schools, is a significant advancement. Standardised testing will also be included in the assessment modes to be introduced as part of the new Junior Cycle.

It is clear, however, that there is need to ensure on an ongoing basis that the nature of tests available, at least those that are most critical, is appropriate to testing the competences of native speakers of Irish. That said, consideration must be taken of the practical difficulties associated with norming tests for native Irish speakers, such as the small numbers involved for the purposes of sampling and challenges with variation in dialect. With regard to supporting the provision of as wide a range of tests as possible, it would be worthwhile to explore the potential for greater North / South co-ordination of the expertise and materials already available involving relevant parties, such as the psychological services, SESS, and COGG.

Options for action

It is clear that there is need for positive discriminatory measures and sustained investment to support the development and updating of the resources for the full range of educational activity, both mainstream and SEN, that are available to the Irish-medium education sector, including Gaeltacht schools. In particular, there is need to ensure that the Irish language educational materials available are accessible in terms of language content to learners and that the quality of the materials available are comparable to the quality of the materials available in English. There is also need to ensure that the Irish language materials are available for the full range of subjects, particularly at post-primary. The phased introduction of a complete set of new subject specifications as part of junior cycle reform will present particular challenges in this regard.

Given the small proportion of Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools relative to school provision nationally, there is need to consider how to create new synergies and to leverage resources in relation to support for Gaeltacht education or Irish-medium provision more generally. The Gaeltacht review has identified a range of effective practices in relation to Irish-medium education that should be widely disseminated. There are also a number of important pedagogical issues that need to be clarified. It is also desirable that expertise and resources available in both jurisdictions, North and South, in relation to SEN in the Irish-medium context are co-ordinated and leveraged.

One option for realising the creation of new synergies and leveraging of resources includes the establishment of a dedicated support site for Gaeltacht education or Irish-medium provision more generally.

Another option for the leveraging of knowledge and resources with regard to Gaeltacht education includes the provision of guidelines on planning, management, pedagogical and assessment practice in Gaeltacht schools that build on the materials produced to date from various groups and incorporates the understandings and best practice described in national and international research and observed in Gaeltacht classrooms and schools. Such guidelines could be hosted on a dedicated website for Irish-medium education as mentioned above.

The implementation of these options and their future management and maintenance will require co-ordination by a nominated agency that has responsibility for Irish language provision in the educational domain. An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) is well placed for the co-ordination of such initiatives given its remit for advising on and co-ordinating language materials and supports for Irish-medium education. Undoubtedly, there will be need to ensure that COGG has the capacity and resources in terms of staff with relevant educational experience to deliver these initiatives. Action is already being taken to advance the provision of additional personnel with relevant educational and language expertise to COGG to support the provision of Irish-medium materials in accordance with the significant curriculum reform agenda at primary and junior cycle.
6.5 Parental involvement and support

The Gaeltacht review highlights the importance of parental support for the language policy and the medium of instruction in individual schools and the key role that schools can play in harnessing parental support in this regard. The case studies of practice in Gaeltacht schools and the national research on Gaeltacht education provide many examples of effective communication, planning and participation strategies that schools can employ to engage parental support for the work and language policy of the school and to enable parents to support their children’s learning and language development.

The Gaeltacht review also illustrates the role that schools can play in supporting the endeavours of parents who are raising their children with Irish, by ensuring differentiated provision and the provision of additional supports that attend to the needs of native speakers.

It is important that effective practice and ideas in relation to parental involvement is leveraged and shared so that all Gaeltacht schools have the confidence to capture parental support for the work of the school and to support Irish-speaking parents in their own language choices and use. The dissemination of such practice could be facilitated through guidelines for Gaeltacht schools or through the establishment of networks of teachers and schools.

6.6 Community links

Similarly, the case studies of practice in Gaeltacht schools show that the fostering of positive school-community links can make a significant contribution to the promotion of Irish within and outside the school. Such links, which include links between schools and cultural, sports and language organisations, primary/post-primary inter-school links and pre-school setting/primary school links, can support the school in a number of ways including the extension of opportunities for students to use Irish, the enrichment of students’ Irish, and enhancement of their ability to learn and live through Irish.

Again, it is important that effective practice in relation to community links is shared among all schools, possibly through the guidelines or through teacher or school networks referenced in 6.5.

6.7 Early-years educational provision

The Gaeltacht review indicates that attendance by children in Irish-medium pre-schools or naíonraí in Gaeltacht areas has a positive impact on children’s language development in Irish and on parents’ own use of the language in the home. This in turn supports the work of the primary schools in advancing children’s proficiency in Irish, both native speakers and learners of the language, and enabling their pupils to access the curriculum through the language. Many primary schools have established useful and mutually beneficial links with the local naíonraí.

Given the importance of the contribution that early-years educational provision can make to language proficiency and usage, it is therefore important that the potential of the naíonraí in Gaeltacht areas to support the Irish language development of young learners in Gaeltacht areas is harnessed. This is particularly important in the context that many eligible pre-school children will be attending naíonraí as part of universal pre-school provision.

One option of strengthening early-years educational provision is to explore the accommodation of naíonraí on the site of primary schools. This could feature as part of reconfigured provision at primary level. Taken together with provision at infant level, it is envisaged that such provision would accommodate a sustained period (up to three years) of early total immersion in Irish and linguistic continuity in the language at a critical stage of children’s language development. It is also critical that practitioners in naíonraí have sufficient competence in the language and an understanding of language pedagogy including immersion education in early-years educational settings. It is expected that consideration would be given by relevant agencies such as DAHG,
Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), and Údarás na Gaeltachta on how to enhance the qualifications and continuing professional development opportunities available to practitioners working in the naíonrai.

The growth of Family Support Centres in some Gaeltacht areas is seen as a positive development in this regard. These centres can provide essential services and advice for young Gaeltacht parents who wish to raise their children through Irish. These centres promote language awareness issues as well as providing family support services such as childcare services, pre-school services, language advisory services, pre-marital and ante-natal advisory services, public health services, speech therapy and psychological services and other youth services. Current trends indicate that the further development of such centres in Gaeltacht areas, encompassing a strong Irish language policy, would greatly assist Gaeltacht schools in meeting the language challenges outlined in this document.

7. Policy proposals for Gaeltacht education

In light of the above, it is proposed that the following be considered for inclusion in a policy for Gaeltacht education.

7.1 Overarching principles

- The Department of Education and Skills will acknowledge that the status of the Irish language in school provision is core to the support of Irish usage in Gaeltacht communities and the language planning process under the Gaeltacht Act, 2012
- The Department will restate its commitment to the provision of a quality Irish-medium education in areas that are recognised as Gaeltacht areas in accordance with the planning processes under the Gaeltacht Act, 2012, and with due regard to the respective roles of Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG) and Údarás na Gaeltachta in overseeing and supporting the implementation of the language planning processes by communities in individual Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas
- The Department's policy on Gaeltacht education and its associated supports will complement language measures in Gaeltacht communities, support collaboration between Gaeltacht schools and their local communities, and stimulate action and participation at local level.

Definition of Gaeltacht school-model of instruction

- The Department will provide a definition of a Gaeltacht school that clarifies expectations in relation to language and educational practice. Such a definition will be based on an Irish-medium total immersion model where Irish is the language of communication, administration, and instruction for all subjects, apart from English and modern languages. Schools wishing to be recognised as Gaeltacht Irish-medium schools would meet specific criteria in relation to aspects such as language ethos, implementation of the total immersion approach, differentiated provision for native speakers, use of Irish language materials and resources, delivery of curricular and extra-curricular activities, communication with parents, and co-operation with the Gaeltacht language planning processes. Such criteria will be reflective of good practice and national and international research.
- Primary schools, recognised as Gaeltacht schools, will be allowed to practise total early immersion through Irish for a period of up to two years in the infant cycle.
- English-medium schools or schools that practise partial immersion or a bilingual approach that wish to be recognised as Gaeltacht schools will be facilitated to move, on a phased basis, to a total immersion approach within a timeframe to be agreed with the Department. Guidance will be provided to schools on how they can transition to full recognition as a Gaeltacht school.
English-medium instruction will be provided in parallel with Irish-medium instruction where there is critical mass and where there is sufficient demand for such parallel provision in recognised Gaeltacht areas. The reconfiguration of school provision such as amalgamations and confederation of existing schools will be considered as necessary to facilitate such parallel provision. Where parallel provision is not feasible, consideration will be given to options to support the integration of English speakers into Irish-medium provision. Such options may include Language Acquisition Centres and in the case of post-primary schools, a Bilingual Bridging Unit and will be contingent on resources available.

Structure of provision

The Department will prioritise and strengthen stand-alone school provision to support the delivery of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools to the extent that it is practicable to do so. The Department will explore options for strengthening stand-alone provision including reconfiguration of existing schools and the provision of virtual learning experiences.

Where stand-alone provision is not feasible, consideration will be given to the establishment of Irish-medium units. Options for strengthening Irish-medium units will be explored including provision of separate accommodation, linking with an existing Irish-medium school, and provision of Irish-medium education for the full post-primary cycle.

Model of support

An integrated model of support which includes positive discriminatory measures at school, community, and system level will be available to schools that are recognised as Gaeltacht schools. This integrated model will be informed by the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in schools (DEIS) model which includes support measures such as more favourable teacher/pupil ratio and additional grants. The model of support will include differentiated supports to assist with the language enrichment of native speakers in accordance with the proportion of such speakers in the school.

The Department will put measures in place to

- develop the necessary infrastructure and supports to assist with the realisation of the definition and model of a Gaeltacht school in practice
- enhance the capacity of schools to differentiate provision for native speakers from that provided to learners of Irish
- ensure a sufficient supply of teachers to teach in Gaeltacht schools at both primary and post-primary level, teachers to have competence in Irish and knowledge and understanding of Irish-medium education in a Gaeltacht context
- enhance the capacity of principal teachers in Gaeltacht schools to meet the demands of leading and managing a Gaeltacht school
- enhance the capacity of boards of management
- support schools to promote parental involvement and participation
- support schools to enhance their links/integration with the local community
- enhance the quality of planning, management, teaching, learning and assessment resources in schools
- ensure that the curriculum for Irish meets the needs of all Gaeltacht pupils, particularly native speakers of Irish
- support Irish-medium provision in early-years educational settings through for example, the establishment of links between naíonraí and primary schools and the professional development of staff in such settings.
7.2 Actions to support the delivery of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht areas

Language planning processes

▼ Engage with DAHG and Údarás na Gaeltachta to clarify the role that education will play in complementing the language planning processes taking place in accordance with the Gaeltacht Act, 2012.

Development of definition

▼ Develop and communicate a definition of a Gaeltacht school that clarifies expectations in relation to language and educational practice. Such a definition to be based on an Irish-medium total immersion approach.

Structure and management of schools

▼ Identify resources to strengthen stand-alone Irish-medium school provision at primary level in individual Gaeltacht areas and where feasible with the agreement of local communities, accommodate parallel provision of Irish-medium and English-medium education. Options to facilitate such parallel provision to include:
  ● the amalgamation of small primary schools
  ● the clustering of small primary schools where schools in particular areas collaborate to share resources, an administrative manager and secretarial services
  ● the confederation of schools, whereby a number of small schools in an area would be administered by one senior manager/principal
▼ Explore the potential for the establishment of a hub school or e-school with virtual classrooms as an option for extending the range of curricular choices available to students in small post-primary schools
▼ Take steps as necessary to strengthen Irish-medium units where stand-alone provision at post-primary level is not feasible by:
  ● accommodating the Irish-medium unit in a separate building to the parent school
  ● linking the unit to an Irish-medium parent school
  ● exploring the potential of the virtual classroom to extend subject provision in the Irish-medium unit and
  ● making Irish-medium provision available through the full post-primary cycle in the Irish-medium unit
▼ Support schools or units at both primary and post-primary that are in transition from English-medium or partial immersion or bilingual approach towards meeting, within a specific timeframe, the definition of the Gaeltacht school and provide guidelines regarding same.

Language supports

▼ Introduce measures to support both the language development of native speakers and the learners of Irish. Options to include:
  ● establishment of a Language Acquisition Centre for learners with little or no Irish on a pilot basis
  ● consultation with DAHG regarding a review of the effectiveness of the Language Assistants’ Scheme (Sceim na gCúntóirí Teanga) and its potential for expansion and for greater quality service
  ● exploration of the potential for provision of language enrichment teachers for native speakers.
**Teacher Supply**

- Carry out an ongoing review of the effectiveness of the arrangements for the redeployment of teachers at primary level including, in particular, for Gaeltacht schools.

- Introduce measures to support the delivery of bespoke initial teacher education, induction and CPD provision for teachers in Gaeltacht schools to include:
  - provision by one or more Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers of an Irish-medium course leading to qualification as a primary teacher
  - the extension of supply on the ITE course that currently prepares post-primary teachers for Irish-medium teaching
  - the establishment of networks of teachers to include links with teachers in the Irish-medium sector more generally
  - expansion of opportunities for teachers to engage in post-graduate research on Irish-medium and immersion education, and language pedagogy for first and second language learners of Irish
  - a dedicated provision by national support services for teachers in Gaeltacht schools
  - provision for the sharing of practice across the Irish-medium sector generally including between Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna and Gaelchlóistí.

**Capacity of leaders and managers**

- Introduce measures to support the delivery of bespoke induction and CPD provision for principals including:
  - the development of professional development networks for principals in Gaeltacht schools to include links with principals in the Irish-medium sector more generally
  - expansion of opportunities for principals to engage in post-graduate research on leadership and management, particularly in relation to Irish-medium and immersion education
  - dedicated provision by national support services, including that provided through the Centre for School Leadership, for principals in Gaeltacht schools

- Introduce measures to support boards of management in Gaeltacht schools in their management and governance role, particularly with regard to language ethos and language planning. Clarify the role of patrons in this regard particularly when appointing boards.

**Curriculum**

- Carry out ongoing review of the development, implementation and the content of Irish language curricula to ensure that they meet the needs of pupils in Gaeltacht schools, particularly native speakers of Irish.

**Resources**

- Enhance the provision of resources and supports to assist with whole-school planning, teaching, learning and assessment in both mainstream and SEN contexts by:
  - sustained investment in the provision and updating of Irish-medium materials for all aspects of the curriculum and in the SEN context, including where possible, the development of additional assessment tools specific to the needs of native speakers and the Irish-medium context
  - development and dissemination of good practice guidelines for Gaeltacht schools in relation to key drivers such as language planning, leadership and management, use of resources, provision for the
language needs of native speakers of Irish, Irish-medium pedagogical practice, use of information and communications technology (ICT), parental involvement and community links

- the establishment of a dedicated support site for Gaeltacht education and Irish-medium provision more generally in mainstream and SEN contexts to facilitate access to resources, the sharing of resources, access to best management and pedagogical practice guidelines, and the sharing of practice
- exploring the potential for the sharing of Irish-medium resources on an all-Ireland basis.

**Information Communications and Technology (ICT)**

- As part of the Department of Education and Skills ICT Strategy, consider the potential of ICT to support the expansion and delivery of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools to include:
  - communication between parent schools and Irish-medium units
  - extension of subject provision in Irish-medium units and in smaller Gaeltacht schools and classrooms at post-primary level
  - provision of additional professional support to teachers

**Parental involvement and participation**

- In consultation with COGG, build awareness among parents and communities in Gaeltacht areas of the value of Irish-medium education, through information booklets or guidelines for parents, seminars and/or social media
- In consultation with COGG and other agencies, such as DAHG and Údarás na Gaeltachta, identify opportunities for enhancing the Irish language competence of parents in Gaeltacht areas.

**Early-years education**

- Explore options to strengthen Irish-medium provision in early-years educational contexts in Gaeltacht areas and develop links between such contexts and primary provision to include the potential for the location of *naíonraí* on the site of local Irish-medium primary schools
- Liaise with relevant bodies including DAHG, DCYA and Údarás na Gaeltachta regarding the identification of opportunities to support the training and professional development of practitioners in Irish-medium early-years educational settings in Gaeltacht areas.

**Support services through Irish**

- Increase awareness among professional and para-professional staff of the literature supporting the intellectual, speech and career benefits of bilingualism and in particular, the specific bilingual needs of pupils in Gaeltacht contexts with special needs.
- Provide guidance on support for the bilingual needs of children with special needs in Gaeltacht areas.

**Co-ordination of the delivery of supports**

- Consider extension of COGG’s role to include co-ordination of the delivery of supports, in collaboration with existing support services, to schools and teachers in Gaeltacht areas. Enhance COGG’s capacity as necessary. Additional areas of focus for COGG to include:
  - Co-ordination of CPD provision for teachers and principals in Gaeltacht schools
  - Development and management of an on-line resource site for Gaeltacht schools
  - Development of good practice guidelines for Gaeltacht schools.
Governance

- Establish an interdepartmental partnership group involving DES, DAHG, DCYA and Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DENI) and other relevant agencies to monitor implementation of the policy over time and make adjustments as necessary.

Evaluation and research

- Establish an evaluation and research programme to review the effectiveness of the overall implementation of the policy and its measures; such an evaluation programme to involve the Educational Research Centre, and the Department’s Inspectorate.