

POLICY ON GAELTACHT EDUCATION 2017 – 2022

POLASAÍ DON OIDEACHAS GAELTACHTA 2017-2022

1. Launch of Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022

The Department of Education and Skills' *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* will be launched in the presence of An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, TD; Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, TD; and Minister of State for Gaeltacht Affairs, Sean Kyne, TD on Friday, 28 October 2016 at 12.00 in Scoil Náisiúnta Mhic Dara, An Cheathrú Rua (Carraroe), Co Galway.

The finalisation and publication of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* is a central commitment contained in Minister Bruton's *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* which was published in September of this year. Publishing and implementing this Policy on a phased basis and as resources permit is a major element of the Government's *20-Year Strategy for Irish 2010-2030*.

2. What does the Policy set out to do?

The Policy is the first comprehensive strategy for education in the Gaeltacht since the establishment of the State. The Policy

- Sets out a **vision for Gaeltacht education** that recognises the role that schools and early-years settings play in providing high quality Irish-medium education and in fostering Irish-language proficiency and usage in the wider Gaeltacht community
- Aims to **support and improve the quality of Irish-medium instruction in Gaeltacht schools and pre-schools**, so as to **ensure that Irish-medium instruction is the first choice of parents in each of the Gaeltacht areas**
- Sets out a comprehensive **range of interlinked actions to ensure the availability of a high quality and relevant Irish-medium educational experience for all young people living in Gaeltacht areas** and in this way to support the use of Irish as the main language of Gaeltacht communities
- Introduces a policy whereby **schools located in Gaeltacht planning areas can opt to seek recognition as a Gaeltacht school** – a Gaeltacht school will be a school where the school commits to delivering all curriculum areas and subjects through the medium of Irish and engages with the community in the Gaeltacht language planning process. Schools that opt for Gaeltacht school status will have up to five years to achieve this status. These schools will gain access to packages of additional teaching and other

resources in a staged way as they demonstrate progress towards Gaeltacht school status.

- Seeks to **align the work of Gaeltacht schools closely with the language planning process** under the Gaeltacht Act.

3. A vision for Gaeltacht education in the Policy

The Policy on Gaeltacht Education recognises the uniqueness of the Gaeltacht as an area of significant linguistic, cultural and economic importance. The Policy notes that the status of Irish as a family and community language in the Gaeltacht area is very fragile but recognises the Gaeltacht as an irreplaceable resource for speakers and learners of Irish. The Policy reaffirms the Government's commitment to the regeneration and survival of the Gaeltacht as a viable Irish-speaking entity.

The Policy recognises the role that schools and early-years settings play in providing high quality Irish-medium education and in fostering Irish-language proficiency and usage in the wider Gaeltacht community. The confidence and support of parents and the local community for the work of schools in Gaeltacht areas are critical.

The Policy aims to build on the advantages and linguistic strengths which exist in the Gaeltacht in conjunction with local language-planning processes. It seeks to strengthen Irish-medium educational provision through a range of actions and targeted supports in the Gaeltacht.

4. The Overarching Goal of the Education Policy for the Gaeltacht

The overarching goal of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* is to ensure the availability of a high quality and relevant Irish-medium educational experience for all young people living in Gaeltacht areas and in this way to support the use of Irish as the main language of Gaeltacht communities. Specifically, the Policy aims to ensure that a sufficient number of schools and early-years settings use Irish as the language of communication and instruction for all areas of learning (apart from English and other languages), in each of the Language-Planning Areas within the Gaeltacht (as set out under the Gaeltacht Act, 2012). This will involve:

- Supporting and improving the quality of Irish-medium instruction in Gaeltacht schools and pre-schools, so as to ensure that Irish-medium instruction is the first choice of parents in each of the Gaeltacht areas
- Increasing the proportion of schools and early-years settings that operate solely through the medium of Irish so that all students have access to Irish-medium instruction¹

¹ Currently, 78% of primary schools and 68% of post-primary schools in Gaeltacht areas self-report that they operate schools solely through the medium of Irish. It is also known that 46% of publicly funded early-years settings operate through the medium of Irish.

- Fostering innovation and excellence in the delivery of Irish-medium education and in schools' linkages with Gaeltacht communities through the recognition of Gaeltacht Schools of Excellence that can act as exemplars of good practice.

The Policy will be successful if it ensures that all children have ready access to schools and early years settings that use Irish as the language of communication and instruction for all subjects, and that support the use of Irish in their communities.

5. Gaeltacht School Recognition Process

At present, schools located in the Gaeltacht are expected to teach through the medium of Irish, but practice varies widely. Under the new policy, schools will be invited to **seek recognition as a Gaeltacht school**. The recognition of Gaeltacht schools in this way is consistent with the international research that demonstrates the importance of designating schools as schools providing high-quality Irish-medium education.

To achieve Gaeltacht school recognition, schools will be required to operate entirely through the medium of Irish, (apart from English and other languages), in accordance with language-based criteria. These schools will:

- implement a two-year early-immersion programme in the infant cycle in all Gaeltacht primary schools, during which no English will be taught
- extend the availability of a full curriculum through Irish for students in post-primary schools in the Gaeltacht by moving towards a total-immersion approach where all subjects, apart from English and other languages, will be taught through Irish
- focus particular attention on the differentiated language needs of native Irish speakers as well as learners of Irish
- provide equal opportunities for those in remote Gaeltacht schools through online and blended-learning programmes
- support their school communities in the language-planning process by contributing to the use and maintenance of Irish in the school and local Gaeltacht community.
- participate in the language-planning process, as set out under the Gaeltacht Act, 2012

Schools will be able to achieve this recognition through a staged, incremental process over a period of five years.

Schools that commit to becoming Gaeltacht Schools will, through their self-evaluation process, develop an Action Plan that will demonstrate clearly how the school will fulfil the requirements of the recognition process in a staged way and how it will build linkages with its local communities to foster the use of the Irish language.

Schools, whose application to participate in the Gaeltacht Schools recognition process is approved, will be granted additional teaching and/or other resources, including dedicated CPD, on a staged basis, as the recognition process commences and as each stage of it is successfully achieved. The supports available to individual schools that are recognised as Gaeltacht schools, or participating in the Gaeltacht school recognition process, will include:

- access to additional teaching staff for the purposes of language support, including differentiated support to assist with the language enrichment of native speakers
- the opportunity to avail of additional teaching resources through the placement, on an ex quota basis, of newly-qualified graduates from Irish-medium initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in Gaeltacht primary and post-primary schools
- additional funding to schools to support the roll out and implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education and Gaeltacht school recognition process at school level in accordance with specific criteria (such as size of the school, current staff allocation, schools' language profile and needs, socio-economic contexts, proportion of staff that have attained qualifications that are related to Irish-medium education, and levels of progress and commitment to the Irish language)
- access to dedicated professional development opportunities, overseen by COGG, for teachers, principals and language assistants to build capacity and support the implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education.

6. Gaeltacht Schools of Excellence / *Scoileanna Gaeltachta Bharr Feabhais*

Recognised Gaeltacht schools will also have an opportunity to work towards becoming Irish-medium Gaeltacht Schools of Excellence / *Scoileanna Gaeltachta Bharr Feabhais* in conjunction with existing and new award programmes. These schools will be particularly innovative in the ways in which they provide high-quality Irish-medium education and in the ways in which they will link with their local communities. A key objective in identifying such schools will be to acknowledge innovative practices and to seek to disseminate them to other schools. These schools will have opportunities to share their practices with other schools and they may become involved in the delivery of teacher education or principal support programmes.

7. Actions to support the implementation of the Policy

The Policy recognises that a specialised and specific range of supports is required to develop the capacity of Gaeltacht schools and early-years settings to ensure that the overall vision of providing high quality Irish-medium education in the Gaeltacht is reached.

These supports are set out under the seven pillars of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education*, and the details are in Chapter Five of the document.

The seven pillars of dedicated support in the Policy are:

(1) Strengthening the structure of educational provision, including

- Ensuring that high-quality Irish-medium education is available to students in each of the Gaeltacht planning areas through recognised Gaeltacht primary schools and through recognised Gaeltacht post-primary schools (or through e-schools) by 2022
- Providing some additional funding to Gaeltacht schools to support the roll out and implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education and the Gaeltacht School recognition process at school level in accordance with specific criteria
- Exploring the potential for reconfiguring the many small schools in the Gaeltacht
- Exploring 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
- Implementing measures to strengthen Irish-medium educational provision in 3 Irish-language Units (*Aonaid*) attached to post-primary schools in the Gaeltacht, where feasible

(2) Supporting and improving the quality of Irish-medium instruction in Gaeltacht schools and pre-schools, so as to ensure that Irish-medium instruction is the first choice of parents in each of the Gaeltacht areas

- Ensuring that redeployment arrangements support the delivery of Irish-medium education in the Gaeltacht
- Increasing opportunities for preparation of student teachers to deliver the curriculum through Irish
- Extending supply of newly qualified teachers for Irish-medium education at post-primary level
- Exploring potential for linking assessment of student teachers' competence in Irish to the TEG
- Providing dedicated CPD opportunities for principals and teachers in Gaeltacht schools
- Expanding opportunities for teachers to engage in post-graduate study and research on Irish-medium and immersion education and language pedagogy for first and second-language learners of Irish
- Expanding opportunities for networking and sharing of practice

(3) Building the capacity of school leaders and school management, including

- Providing dedicated induction and high quality professional development opportunities for principals in Gaeltacht schools
- Expanding opportunities for principals to engage in post-graduate research on leadership and management, particularly in relation to Irish-medium and immersion education in the Gaeltacht school context.
- Expanding opportunities for networking and sharing of practice

- Supporting boards of management in their management and governance role, particularly with regard to language ethos and language planning
- Clarifying the role of school patrons with regard to upholding the language ethos in Gaeltacht schools under their aegis

(4) Improving the curriculum for Irish, including

- Ensuring that the content of Irish language curricula meets the needs of pupil/students in Gaeltacht schools, particularly native speakers of Irish
- Introducing measures that will incentivise students in Gaeltacht schools to engage with the L1 specification for Irish at junior cycle and senior cycle

(5) Improving language resources and supports, including

- Enhancing the provision of resources and supports to assist with whole-school planning, teaching, learning and assessment in both mainstream and SEN contexts
- Introducing measures to support the language development of native speakers of Irish and learners of Irish
- Increasing 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 context with special needs
- Enhancing school support services through Irish

(6) Strengthening early-years educational provision (the Policy recognises that a ctuions nin Early Years education is mainly the responsibility of the DAHRRGA, Údaras na Gaeltachta and DCYA):

- Providing guidance for *naíonraí* and primary schools on the development of links between *naíonraí* and primary school to include exemplars of good practice
- Providing additional funding and staffing resources to support:
 - existing *naíonraí* in enhancing their provision
 - other early-years educational settings that may wish to deliver their services through Irish
 - the establishment of new *naíonraí* where there is demand for same
 - increasing the number of Irish-medium *naíonraí* under the auspices of Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta by 14% phased in from 2017 to 2022
- Identifying and delivering opportunities to support the training and professional development of practitioners in Irish-medium early-years educational settings in Gaeltacht areas e.g. develop a Level 6/7 Programme on Irish-medium and Gaeltacht early-years education for early-years practitioners
- Enhancing the delivery of inspection services through Irish in *naíonraí*

(7) Building awareness, communicating and supporting parents, including

- Increasing awareness of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education

- Sharing best practice regarding the fostering of positive school-community links
- Clarifying the role that education and schools will play in complementing the language-planning process taking place under the Gaeltacht Act and the structures that will facilitate such engagement
- Supporting parental engagement and participation

8. Dedicated structures

The Policy envisages that a new dedicated Gaeltacht Unit will be established in the Department to oversee and support the implementation of the Policy to ensure a quality Irish-medium education in the Gaeltacht for young people. The Gaeltacht Unit will be supported by the Department's Inspectorate who will support schools and monitor and report on the impact of the Policy. In their support work with schools, the Inspectorate will work closely with An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) and with the school and leadership support services that will cooperate with COGG.

The Department will also allocate additional resources to COGG to develop quality learning resources and oversee specific actions within the Policy that will assist in further developing high quality Irish-medium education and Irish-language teaching thereby ensuring that schools are well equipped to meet the needs of both their teachers and students.

The Inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre (ERC) will collaborate on the overall evaluation of the impact of the Gaeltacht Education Policy.

9. Funding

Implementation of the policy will begin on a phased basis from September 2017. The budget required for 2017 is approximately €1 million and this has been provided for in Budget 2017.

10. Research underpinning the development of the Policy Document

The development of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education was informed by extensive research including the experiences in other countries and regions associated with lesser used languages, commissioned from academics during the preparation of the Policy. It was also informed by research conducted by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills through a number of cases studies of Gaeltacht schools at primary and post-primary level in a number of Gaeltacht areas. All of this underlying research has been published in four research studies which are available on the website of the Department of Education and Skills.²

Some of the key messages emerging from the research included:

² See complete listing of the published research at the end of this note.

- Gaeltacht schools play a very important role in supporting the Irish language in Gaeltacht areas but they face many challenges that are impeding their ability to provide a high-quality Irish-medium educational experience for children whose home language is Irish and children for whom their parents want to obtain an Irish-medium education
- Schools in Gaeltacht areas have to provide education to students from a wide diversity of language backgrounds – those raised through Irish, those raised through Irish and English, those raised through English, and those whose mother tongue is neither Irish nor English. The schools must cater for all of these groups as the Gaeltacht school is often the only school in the local area. This poses a significant extra challenge for teachers and schools
- The use of English continues to increase in Gaeltacht areas. Therefore, children raised through Irish are now a minority within Gaeltacht schools and there can be conflicting demands from parents with regard to the language of instruction. The ability of Gaeltacht schools to adequately address the learning needs of children who are being raised through the medium of Irish is compromised in some schools as a result
- Many schools in Gaeltacht areas experience difficulty in recruiting teachers with the capacity to deliver the curriculum through Irish.
- 78% of primary schools and 68% of post-primary schools located in Gaeltacht areas self-report that they operate schools solely through the medium of Irish. However, there is some anecdotal evidence that these percentages may over-state the availability of fully Irish-medium education.
- It is known that less than half (46%) of publicly funded early-years settings located in Gaeltacht areas operate through the medium of Irish. This has considerable implications for the language skills of young children entering primary schools.³
- Evidence from the case studies of Gaeltacht schools demonstrates that where the right circumstances exist, the schools can provide a high-quality Irish-medium education and can play a significant role in enhancing the use of Irish in the community served by the school. Critical factors include:
 - committed and skilful leadership from school leaders who recognise and foster the importance of strengthening the quality and usage of Irish in the school and in the wider community

³ The development and funding of early years provision in Gaeltacht areas is the responsibility of Údaras na Gaeltachta, the Department of the Department of the Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (DAHRRGA), and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The Department of Education and Skills is not directly involved in this provision.

- the provision of high quality teaching and learning in the school
 - the active involvement of parents with the school; and
 - strong support from the local community.
- The cases studies demonstrated that even where the quality of Irish-medium education in the school and the usage of Irish in the community had declined, energetic leadership in the school and a strong commitment from the local community could help to reverse a decline.
 - Evidence from countries and jurisdictions where education measures have been used to support the maintenance of minority languages as vernacular languages shows that a range of integrated measures and requirements are necessary to be successful. These can include:
 - Schooling through the medium of the minority language, of itself, cannot secure the usage of the minority language, but it can play a significant role in the transmission of the language from one generation to another
 - The status and level of usage of the language within the community served by the school is a critical factor in the success of education through the minority language
 - Parents living in minority language communities need to have confidence that if their child receives schooling through the minority language, the quality of his/her education is not compromised
 - The designation of some schools as schools operating exclusively through the minority language can be effective. This enables these schools to provide rich learning experiences in the target language including the use of immersion education in the early stages of education Other systems have found that a range dedicated supports and incentives may be effective in encouraging schools to operate in this way and to maintain and enhance education through the minority language
 - The provision of specialised teacher education and school leadership programmes that equip teachers and principals to understand and teach in situations where students come to the education system with very varying linguistic backgrounds is important
 - The provision of curricula suited to the needs of L1 users and learners of the target language; and the use of incentives to encourage schools to maintain and enhance education through the target language.

The measures included in the Policy on Gaeltacht Education are based on these findings: they propose that schools will be recognised as Gaeltacht schools, they emphasise the importance of such schools providing an Irish-medium education of the highest quality to their students, and the range of supports to be provided to these schools under the Policy mirror the lessons from national and international research.

11. Consultation underpinning the development of the Policy Document

The Policy on Gaeltacht Education was also informed by extensive consultation with a range of educational and Irish language stakeholders both at national level and within Gaeltacht communities.

A draft policy, entitled *Policy Proposals for Educational Provision in Gaeltacht Areas*, was published in May 2015 and a detailed consultation process undertaken. The consultation events included meetings in the Kerry, Galway and Donegal Gaeltacht areas, a number of focus groups with key stakeholders and a Forum in the Department of Education and Skills in Dublin. Gaeltacht schools and communities were very appreciative of the many opportunities provided to engage with officials from the Department of Education and Skills during the consultation process. They also welcomed the prioritisation of educational provision in the Gaeltacht by the Department as part of its commitment to the 20 Year Strategy for Irish. The policy proposals were the source of extensive discussion in Gaeltacht communities and in the Irish language media.

The Department of Education and Skills also consulted closely with national bodies and stakeholders. The Department worked closely with officials from the Department of the Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (DAHRRGA) on the consultation process and on the drafting of the Policy. The draft proposals were considered by the Inter-departmental Committee on the Implementation of the 20-Year Strategy for Irish, which involves Údaras na Gaeltachta, Foras na Gaeilge and An Chomhairle um Scoileanna Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG). Submissions were received from, and/or discussions held with officers from a number of state-sponsored and non-governmental bodies and individuals (over 550 in total).

This Policy is designed to complement the work that is on-going in defining Gaeltacht areas in accordance with the language planning processes under the Gaeltacht Act, 2012. The Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs along with Údarás na Gaeltachta have responsibility for overseeing and supporting the language planning processes by communities in individual Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas. The proposals link the recognition of schools as Gaeltacht schools explicitly with this process.

12. Research published as part of the development of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education

Department of Education and Skills (2015). *Policy Proposals for Educational Provision in Gaeltacht Areas*.

Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate (2015). *A Report on Irish-medium Educational Provision in Gaeltacht Schools: Primary and Post-Primary Case-Studies*.

Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate (2015). *Review of Education in the Gaeltacht: Review of National Literature*.

Department of Education and Skills (2015). *Educational Provision through Minority Languages: Review of International Research*.

Department of Education and Skills (2015). *School Provision in Gaeltacht Language-Planning Areas - Current Supply and Future Demand*.
