**Department of Education and Skills Briefing note**

**Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection**

**Developments in Irish Language Education**

**1st April 2015**

**1. Introduction**

The work of the Department of Education and Skills on improving the teaching of Irish in the school system is taking place in the context of wider policy initiatives relating to the Irish language, particularly the 20-Year Strategy for Irish 2010-2030 and the Gaeltacht Act, 2012. The Department of Education and Skills is fully committed to the implementation of the 20 Year Strategy for Irish and has put a wide range of measures in place to support the delivery of actions in relation to education. To date, the Department has published two progress reports relating to the implementation of the 20 Year Strategy- one in July 2013 and another in September 2014. These progress reports are available on the Department’s website [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)

This briefing note outlines the significant progress made and the work that is ongoing in relation to enhancing provision for Irish in the educational system at primary and post-primary level. It focuses particularly on the delivery of measures relating to curriculum, assessment and teacher education and the work of the Department in strengthening provision for education through Irish, both in Gaeltacht areas and outside the Gaeltacht.

**2. Gaeltacht Education**

The Department recognises that the Gaeltacht is of significant linguistic and cultural importance in terms of the key role that it plays in supporting Irish as a spoken language and as a resource for learners of the language. The Department recognises that there are particular challenges facing Gaeltacht schools.

These include:

* How to provide for the linguistic diversity of pupils/students
* The prevalence of small schools which makes provision for linguistic diversity an even greater challenge.
* The challenge in enriching the capacity of native speakers in Irish given the diversity of pupils/students
* The ongoing shift of language patterns in the wider community from Irish to English, thus making it more difficult to sustain Irish language culture in the schools. A report in 2007, *Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht*, indicated 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*.

As part of its wider commitment to improve the teaching and learning of Irish in the educational system, the Department has carried out a review of Gaeltacht education, commencing in 2014. The purpose of the review is to:

* identify options for educational provision in primary and post-primary schools in Gaeltacht areas of varying linguistic profiles
* clarify the Department’s policy with regard to teaching through Irish in such schools
* examine the impact of pre-school provision on primary education in Gaeltacht areas
* identify support measures that would be required to improve teaching through Irish in Gaeltacht schools.

It is also intended that the policy proposals arising from the review will complement the implementation of the language planning processes under the Gaeltacht Act 2012.

Work on the review is almost complete. Intensive reviews of relevant national and international research in language contexts similar to the Gaeltacht have been carried out. An analysis of supply and demand for educational provision in Gaeltacht areas and case studies of practice in a sample of primary and post-primary schools have also been carried out. The reports on these strands of work have informed the development of draft policy proposals which are currently being considered by Government.

The review is being carried out on a consultative basis. The Department has collaborated with the DAHG in particular with regard to the implementation of the review. It has also consulted with the High Level Group established under the 20-Year Strategy - this group includes DES, the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG), Foras na Gaeilge, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) and Údarás na Gaeltachta.

It is intended that a consultation on the draft policy proposals will be carried out during 2015. The four papers on the initial research outlined above will also be published. COGG is assisting the Department with the implementation of the consultation process. The consultation will involve:

* a survey (hard-copy and online) of stakeholders at local and national level
* consultation meetings with groups of stakeholders

It is also intended that a national forum on the outcomes of the consultation will take place in autumn 2015. It is intended that Department’s policy paper on Gaeltacht education will be finalised in light of the consultation and presented to the Minister and Government for consideration before the end of 2015.

**3. Curriculum development- primary**

**3.1 New language curriculum**

The focus of curricular activity at primary level is the development of an integrated language curriculum which is informed by a number of research papers commissioned by the NCCA. This curriculum will clearly outline the learning outcomes that pupils will achieve at different stages of their primary schooling. Learning outcomes for Irish and English for both English and Irish-medium schools will be differentiated.

Work on the development of the new language curriculum for infants to second classes is well advanced. The language curriculum for these classes will be available to schools in hardcopy and online from September 2015 and will be implemented from September 2016. A continuing professional development programme will be provided to schools and teachers during the 2015-2016 school year to enable them to become familiar with the curriculum and support their delivery of the new curriculum during the following school year.

Work on the development of the new language curriculum for third to sixth classes will commence this year. The new curriculum for these classes will be available to schools in 2017 for implementation from September 2018

**3.2 Partial immersion/CLIL**

The 20-Year Strategy for Irish emphasises the implementation of partial immersion in all primary schools. The current primary curriculum advocates the teaching of some subjects or aspects of subjects through Irish but this practice is rare in schools. The NCCA has been asked to advise on partial immersion (or Content and Language Integrated Learning) as part of its work on the development of a language curriculum at primary level. In collaboration with the NCCA, the Professional Development Service for Teachers is currently implementing a CLIL initiative with seven schools teaching visual arts through Irish. This will inform the considerations of how CLIL might be employed to support the teaching and learning of Irish in primary schools in the context of the new curriculum.

**3.3 Irish language programme for English medium schools**

The NCCA and COGG have been invited to make a joint submission to DES on the development of an Irish language programme that will support the implementation of the new curriculum for Irish in English-medium schools. Following a review of the programmes already on the market, it is evident that further research is needed on how the proposed programme can best support teachers in the delivery of the Irish language curriculum. The Department has obtained additional staffing resources for COGG to facilitate such research which will inform the provision of a joint proposal from COGG and NCCA.

**3.4 Digitisation of Séideán Sí**

Plans are in train to digitise the reading materials currently available in hard copy for Séideán Sí, the integrated Irish language programme that has been especially designed to support the teaching of Irish in Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht primary schools. A dedicated website will be provided which will give teachers and learners access to the digitised materials. This initiative is a collaborative partnership involving Foras na Gaeilge and the Council for Curriculum, Evaluation and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland as key partners and assisted by DES, COGG and others.

**3.5 Prescription of the Primary Curriculum**

The Department is taking steps to clarify its policy on immersion education in primary schools. It plans to prescribe the primary curriculum as soon as possible and to make arrangements that will allow for a period of immersion education in Irish to be implemented in Irish-medium primary schools. It is intended that these arrangements will provide for a delay in the teaching of English in Irish-medium schools up to the end of senior infants, subject to the approval of the school’s board of management and following consultation with the patron, teachers and parents’ association. This arrangement will give sufficient flexibility to schools to engage in the practice of total immersion while remaining cognisant of school context factors and the needs of the pupils.

Work has commenced on the drafting of the regulatory instrument to prescribe the primary curriculum. It is expected that the instrument will be passed through the relevant legislative processes by the end of 2015.

**4. Curriculum development- post-primary**

**4.1 New Junior Cycle - full specification**

The key curricular development at post-primary level is the development of a new specification for Irish as part of Junior Cycle reform. The new specification will make provision for an oral language assessment- this is reflective of the Department’s commitment to the development of learners’ oral language competence in particular.

A background paper, which will inform the development of the new specification, was published for the purposes of consultation (November 2013- January 2014). A draft of the new specification was published for consultation on 12 March 2015 on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) . A consultation forum was also held on the 12 March. The consultation will continue until the end of April 2015.

Subject to the outcomes of the consultation, t is intended that the new specification will be implemented from September 2016 at the earliest

**4.2 New Junior Cycle - short course**

On the request of DES, the NCCA is developing a short course which will meet the specific needs of students in Irish-medium schools. The new short course in Irish will allow students to engage with particular aspects of Irish language learning from a different perspective, such as those related to literature.

**5. Assessment**

**5.1 Standardised testing**

Standardised tests in Irish reading are now available from the Educational Research Centre for administration by all primary schools at 2nd, 4th and 6th classes. The use of such tests is optional in English-medium schools but mandatory at the end of second class, fourth class and sixth class in Irish-medium schools. Each Irish-medium school is required to report the results of these tests to parents and to the school board of management. Each school is also required to report the results of the assessments to DES using an online facility.

The administration of standardised testing in Irish as part of the new Junior Cycle is under consideration. The Travers Proposal (February 2015) has requested that the Department review the timing of the phasing in of standardised tests in school in light of the impact of the cumulative assessment burden in school as the new Junior Cycle is rolled out. No decision has been made as to when standardised tests in English, Irish, Maths and Science will be introduced.

**5.2** **Oral Irish – current Junior Certificate**

From 2010, there have been changes in the distribution of the marks in the various components in Junior Certificate examinations for Irish.  These changes resulted in an increase in the proportion of marks awarded to the optional oral component from 20% to 40%.  There has been a significant increase in the numbers of candidates and schools who participated in the optional oral Irish test. Students are assessed by their own teachers.

In 2013, a total of 10,486 candidates took the optional oral test compared to 7,388 candidates in 2012 (an increase of 3,098 candidates). 24 schools offered the optional oral in 2009, 54 schools in 2010, 94 schools in 2011, 155 schools in 2012 and 194 schools in 2013. This rose further in 2014 when a total of 14, 172 candidates took the optional oral, from over 251 schools. The increase in the numbers of students taking the optional oral language assessment in the Junior Certificate may be directly related to the increased weighting of marks to the oral language assessment in the Leaving Certificate.

**5.3 Oral Irish – Senior Cycle**

In 2012, changed assessment arrangements at Leaving Certificate increased the weighting of marks allocated to the oral assessment from 25% to 40%. The NCCA is carrying out a review of the impact of these changed assessment arrangements in light of the experiences of students who sat the Leaving Certificate in 2014 relative to those of students in 2011. Work on the review has commenced and it will be completed during 2015.

The NCCA review will take account of the findings of a separate review commissioned by COGG and published in 2013 on the impact of the assessment arrangements at Leaving Certificate.

**6. School Provision - Irish medium**

**6.1 New schools**

In accordance with the Minister’s announcement in 2011, four of some 20 new primary schools to be established up to 2015 are to be designated as Irish medium schools. Three of the 17 post-primary schools to be established up to 2014 will be Irish medium schools.

One new Irish medium primary school out of seven new schools was established in 2012; three new Irish-medium schools out of seven new schools were established in 2013.

Two new Gaelcholáistí at post-primary level were established in 2014 - Balbriggan and Ballinteer/Dundrum.

One new Gaelcholáiste at post-primary level is to be established in 2015 - Carrigaline.

On 5th February, 2015, the Minister announced the establishment of 7 new primary schools. Two have agreed patrons but the patronage of the other 5 has yet to be determined. Patron bodies will be contacted. Patronage is overseen by the New Schools Establishment Group.

**6.2 Primary provision**

At primary level, the need for a gaelscoil in areas of demographic growth will be decided on the basis of demographic factors and parental demand and applications for patronage from potential patrons. In areas of stable demographic numbers, DES will facilitate the divesting of existing English language schools to new patrons including those who will operate them as gaelscoileanna. Another option that DES intends exploring is the concept of a satellite school where the Irish-medium unit shares a building with an English-medium school but is managed by a parent Irish-medium school located elsewhere.

**6.3 Post-primary provision**

The Department of Education and Skills is committed to making Irish medium education available at post-primary taking account of the demand for such provision in an area and the availability of resources. DES will continue to identify areas where there is need for a new stand-alone Irish medium school in accordance with a threshold of demand (i.e. 400 pupils) that is considerably lower than the equivalent for English-medium schools (i.e. between 800 and 1,000 pupils). Other options such as Irish language units and Irish language streams attached to an English medium school are considered in areas where the demand for Irish-medium education does not meet this threshold. The extent to which students are immersed in the Irish language in units and streams will be contingent on a number of interrelated factors such as support from management of the host school, the level of demand for Irish-medium instruction in the school, whole-school planning and the arrangements in place for the allocation of teaching resources.

**7. Teacher Education**

**7.1 Continuing Professional Development**

The Professional Development Service for Teachers continues to support teachers in the delivery of Irish curricula at both primary and post-primary levels with a particular emphasis on in-school support and provision of materials online. A range of relevant Continuing Professional Development (CPD) events (seminars and workshops) are offered based on national education priorities. These include school self-evaluation and Link Teacher (for literacy and numeracy) seminars for Irish-medium schools and a range of workshops covering areas such as accuracy, understanding and reading. In addition to this, the Tionól Teagaisc event was held for post-primary teachers. At primary level, a North/South project involving Gaelscoileanna is on-going. Attendance at CPD events in 2013/14 was as follows:

* **CPD Primary:** Gaeilge CPD - 79 teachers; School Self Evaluation through Irish – 146 teachers
* **CPD Post-primary:** Gaeilge CPD - 334 teachers; Tionól Teagaisc – 223 teachers; School Self Evaluation as Gaeilge – 49 teachers
* **Workshops:** 160 primary teachers; 184 post-primary teachers
* **In-school support:** 1,437 primary teachers and 1064 post-primary teachers

CPD to support the delivery of the new language curriculum for infants to second class is to be provided during the 2015-2016 school year, one year in advance of its introduction in schools in September 2016. CPD in the context of the new junior cycle specification for Irish is also expected to begin in 2015/16, a year in advance of the introduction of the specification in schools. CPD content will be differentiated for Irish-medium and English-medium schools, as appropriate.

**7.2 Initial Teacher Education**

The Teaching Council commissioned an online survey on a number of aspects of entry criteria for programmes of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in February 2013. Included was a proposal to raise the entry requirement in Irish from C3 Higher to a B Higher. The overall results of that survey were inconclusive. In summary, while a majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with the entry criteria as a whole, a majority also expressed dissatisfaction with each of the requirements for Maths, English and Gaeilge. The Council felt that this did not offer a sound basis on which to develop advice for the Minister. Accordingly, it commissioned research with the ESRI on the matter. It is the Council’s intention that advice should follow early in 2015.

There has been a lengthening of initial teacher education. This includes an extended Gaeltacht Placement experience (from one 3-week period to two 2-week periods). As well as the changes to the Gaeltacht placement, as part of the overall reconfiguration of primary initial teacher education programmes, provision for Irish has been strengthened across the board.

During 2013, DES engaged with DAHG and the Teaching Council to ensure that a more cohesive framework is in place to support the implementation of the Gaeltacht Placement for student teachers. The ITE providers have developed a common syllabus to be used by all Gaeltacht course providers that run Irish courses for student teachers. The Teaching Council is also open to course providers making differentiated provision available to student teachers with a strong competence in Irish, including students who reside in Gaeltacht areas.

At least one College of Education has expressed interest regarding the provision of ITE courses fully through Irish at primary level. The discussions are at an early stage. At post-primary level, NUIG wants to expand the numbers (currently 40) on its ITE programme which is delivered through Irish. The Department is supportive in principle of such proposals; however, in exploring the feasibility for same, account must be taken for any consequent impacts such as on resources and teacher supply. Any decision will also take account of the research currently being carried out by the Teaching Council on teacher supply;  teacher supply for the Irish-medium sector will be considered as part of that research. The Teaching Council is expected to provide a final report by summer 2015.

**8. COGG**

Since July 2013, COGG has been co-located with the NCCA. This has enabled NCCA and COGG to collaborate so that Irish language curricula and materials are developed in tandem with each other. An example of this is the joint submission that DES has invited the NCCA and COGG to make on the development of an Irish language programme for English-medium schools.

COGG is supporting DES in the implementation of a number of strands relating to the DES review of Gaeltacht Education. It has commissioned a review of research, national policies and practice in other jurisdictions that are comparable to Gaeltacht areas. It is also assisting with the consultation with stakeholders on draft policy proposals.

In accordance with its remit, COGG also continues:

* to plan for and co-ordinate the provision of textbooks and resources in support of the teaching and learning of Irish. COGG published a range of resources in 2013 and will fund 30 applications for the development of resources in 2014.
* to provide support service to schools that teach through Irish. For example, COGG has provided bursaries to students enrolled on the M.Ed. in Irish Medium Education - the first cohort of students are due to complete this course.
* to fund and publish a range of research papers.

Permission has been obtained from DPER for the appointment of additional staff (two educational officers) in COGG.

**9. Exemptions from Irish**

The Department is completing its review of exemptions from Irish. The research will:

* Establish data regarding the number and the trends in the provision of exemptions and the basis on which the exemptions have been sought, granted and refused at school level.
* Examine the pattern of appeals, including numbers sought, numbers granted and numbers refused.
* Examine the curricular choices (including other language choices) and examination outcomes of students to which exemptions had been granted to establish the impact, if any, that exemptions have had on the students involved.

The review involves a number of strands, namely the analysis of data held by the Department, consideration of the findings of relevant external research, and case studies in a small sample of schools. Information from these strands will inform the provision of a report on current exemption arrangements and recommendations on future arrangements. Arising from the report, a new draft circular will be prepared and the guidelines for parents updated. These will be issued for consultation with a meeting of the key partners to determine the best way forward.

The analysis of the data held within the Department has been completed. Case studies on the implementation of current arrangements have also been carried out by the Inspectorate in a sample of schools. A report will be provided for consideration by the Minister by the end of 2015.

**10. Current redeployment panel arrangements for Irish-medium schools**

The core function of the redeployment arrangements is to facilitate the redeployment of all surplus permanent teachers to other schools that have vacancies. The redeployment of all surplus permanent teachers is key to the Department's ability to manage within its payroll budget and ceiling on teacher numbers.

Thereafter, schools are required under the panel arrangements to fill permanent vacancies from supplementary panels comprised of eligible fixed-term (temporary/substitute) and part-time teachers.

At primary level for the 2014/15 school year the Department, following consultation with the relevant education partners, arranged to give teachers on redeployment panels the option to tick a box if they had a particular interest in teaching in a school that operates through the medium of Irish. The purpose of the tick box is to assist the school led redeployment process for schools that operate through the medium of Irish. In the event that a Panel Officer is appointed to facilitate the redeployment of teachers from a panel, the Panel Officer can also take note of whether or not a teacher has ticked the box.

At the review meeting of the 2014/15 allocation and redeployment process all of the education partners who attended, including those representing schools that operate through the medium of Irish, expressed very positive feedback to the Department on how well the teacher allocation and redeployment process operated for the 2014/15 school year. The discussions at this meeting resulted in some actions to be taken by the Department on how the redeployment process will operate for the 2015/16 school year.  These actions are expected to further assist schools, including those that operate through the medium of Irish, in ensuring that the redeployment process operates in a smooth and timely manner.

In addition to the current arrangements, schools will also have the **option of using a website** such as educationposts.ie as a means of engaging with the supplementary redeployment panel. This can be done by the school using the website as the means to invite teachers on the relevant supplementary panel to express interest in a permanent post that falls to be filled from that supplementary panel. It is envisaged that this option will be particularly useful for schools that operate through the medium of Irish.   If no teachers on the relevant supplementary panel expresses interest in the post then the school can proceed to fill its permanent vacancy in the normal manner via the standard public advertisement.

The aforementioned tick box process introduced on redeployment panel application forms for the 2014/15 school year was considered during the review and was deemed by all to be very useful and will continue for the 2015/16 school year.  It will be refined to enable teachers to also expressly indicate if they do not have a particular interest in being redeployed to a school that operates through the medium of Irish.

The arrangement for panel access for fixed term/temporary and part-time teachers to the Supplementary Redeployment Panel for the 2015/16 school year were published in Circular 0072/2014 on 12 November, 2014.

Part 1.3 of this circular sets out the improvements to the process for filling a permanent vacancy from the Supplementary Redeployment Panel as outlined above.