



## **A Vision: Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022**

### **Dept. of Education & Skills 2017**

The Dept. of Education & Skills Policy on Gaeltacht Education recognises the uniqueness of the Gaeltacht as an area of significant linguistic, cultural, and economic importance. It is an irreplaceable resource for speakers and learners of Irish. The Department's 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 and early-years' settings in Gaeltacht areas are critical. The Policy is designed to ensure the availability of a high quality and relevant Irish-medium educational experience for young people in the Gaeltacht. The Policy values and promotes quality in the education system in the Gaeltacht and its actions are grounded on the principles of effective self-evaluation, improvement, collaboration, and partnership. 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.

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 families and 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 early-years' settings, so as to ensure that Irish-medium instruction is the first choice of parents in each of the Gaeltacht areas
- Supporting appropriate Irish-medium educational provision for children and young people who are being raised through Irish
- 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 instruction. 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 (Scoileanna Gaeltachta Barr Feabhais)** that may share their practices with other schools and become involved in leading communities of practice.

The Policy will be successful if it ensures that all children in the Gaeltacht 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. **Gaeltacht School Recognition Process:** Under the Policy, schools will be invited to seek recognition as a Gaeltacht school.

To achieve Gaeltacht school recognition, schools will be required to operate entirely through the medium of Irish, (apart from the English and other language curricula), in accordance with language-based criteria set out in this Policy. **For example, these Gaeltacht schools will:**

- **Implement a two-year total-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 the English and other language curricula, 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. Further details of criteria for recognition as Gaeltacht Schools are outlined in this Policy. 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 processes, 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 community 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 continuing professional development (CPD), on a staged basis, as the recognition process commences and as each stage of it is successfully achieved. In addition, recognised Gaeltacht schools will also have an opportunity to work towards becoming Irish-medium Gaeltacht Schools of Excellence / Scoileanna Gaeltachta Barr Feabhais in conjunction with current and new award programmes. The Policy notes the importance of early-childhood provision and envisages that supports will be provided by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Udarás na Gaeltachta to improve urgently the availability of high quality early-years' education through Irish in the Gaeltacht.

**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 outlined in this document. The seven pillars of dedicated support in the Policy are: 1. Strengthening the structure of educational provision 2. Improving the quality of teaching through Irish 3. Building the capacity of school leaders and school management 4. Improving the curriculum for Irish 5. Improving language resources and supports 6. Strengthening early-years' educational provision 7. Building awareness, communicating with, and supporting parents. **Dedicated structures:** 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 assisted by the Department's Inspectorate who will support schools, monitor, and report on the impact of the Policy. In their support work with schools, the Inspectorate will work closely with 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 Policy on Gaeltacht Education.

**A recognised Gaeltacht School will be expected to:**

- At primary level, implement a two-year full-immersion programme through Irish in the infant cycle, during which no English will be taught.
- At primary level, implement a total-immersion approach, where all areas of learning, apart from English, will be taught through Irish.
- At post-primary level, extend the availability of a full curriculum through Irish, apart from the English and other language curricula, as the Gaeltacht school moves towards a total immersion approach.
- Deliver high quality educational experiences through Irish to all students focusing particular attention on the differentiated language needs of native Irish speakers<sup>3</sup> as well as learners of Irish.
- Develop an Action Plan that will articulate how the school will ensure the use of Irish as the language of communication, instruction and socialisation within the school and will communicate and promote the benefits of learning Irish and learning through Irish to students, parents and the school community.

Review the quality of Irish-medium educational provision to ensure continuous improvement using the school self-evaluation (SSE) process.

- At primary level, provide Irish-language learning experiences in accordance with the L1 learning outcomes in the Primary Language Curriculum for Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools.
- At post-primary level, implement L1 specifications for Irish at junior cycle and senior cycle, when such are available<sup>4</sup>, and encourage their uptake by students, particularly native speakers of Irish.
- Use Irish-language materials to support the teaching of all curricular areas through Irish, apart from English and foreign languages.
- Deliver curricular, co-curricular activities, and where relevant, extra-curricular activities through Irish.
- Support their school community in the language-planning process by contributing to the use and maintenance of Irish in the school and local Gaeltacht community.
- Prioritise the use of Irish in communicating with parents, the local community and other parties.

- At primary level, establish useful and mutually beneficial language and cultural links with the local Naíonraí
- At post-primary level, establish useful and mutually beneficial language and educational links with local Irish-medium primary and/or post-primary schools by utilising online and blended-learning opportunities.
- Make every effort to recruit teaching and ancillary staff that are proficient in Irish and have a knowledge and understanding of pedagogical practice relevant to teaching through Irish as well as an understanding of the language and cultural dynamics of the Gaeltacht.

### **We must maintain and revitalise the Irish language.**

The continued existence of areas where Irish prevails as the language of the family and the community is an important cornerstone for the maintenance and revitalisation of the Irish language. As an Irish-speaking entity and as the heartland of native speakers of Irish, the Gaeltacht provides an environment where the language can evolve naturally in a modern context. The Gaeltacht is also a unique and irreplaceable resource for speakers and learners of Irish from outside the Gaeltacht. The linguistic and cultural landscape in Ireland would be greatly impoverished by the absence of vibrant Irish-speaking communities in Gaeltacht areas. Irish as a family and community language in Gaeltacht areas is very fragile.

The stark reality is that the status of Irish as a family and community language in Gaeltacht areas is very fragile. In some areas, Irish is no longer the language of the family and the community. Unless immediate action is taken, it is likely that this will increasingly be the case across all Gaeltacht areas. A report published by Údarás na Gaeltachta in 2015 on the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht, *Staidéar Cuimsitheach Teangeolaíoch ar Úsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht: 2006-2011* [Comprehensive Linguistic Study on the Usage of Irish in the Gaeltacht: 2006-2011], concluded that as things stood, Irish would not survive as the language of the community in any Gaeltacht area beyond the next ten years.

### **Education can play a role:**

There is widespread recognition that the educational system can play a key role, albeit together with other domains, in supporting the use of Irish as the language of the family and the community in Gaeltacht areas. The Education Act, 1998, highlights the responsibilities of schools in Gaeltacht areas to contribute to the maintenance of Irish as the primary community language. The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010- 2030 and the language-planning processes taking place under the Gaeltacht Act, 2012 also highlight the role of Gaeltacht schools in fostering Irish-language competence and usage in support of the language in the wider Gaeltacht community. The provision of Irish-medium education that is of a high quality and relevant to the needs of students is critical in this regard. Early-years' education through Irish has an important contribution to make. There is also widespread recognition of the important contribution that early-years' education through Irish can make to the revitalisation of the Irish language in Gaeltacht areas, particularly with regard to supporting families who are raising their children through Irish. The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 gives a commitment to the provision of Irish-medium early-years' educational

settings (Naíonraí) in every area where there is an Irish-medium primary school, and in other areas where there is a demand for such. Status of Irish in schools located in the Gaeltacht currently is under threat.

#### **Raising awareness of the benefits of bilingualism:**

There is an opportunity to increase the awareness among professional and para-professional staff of the literature and other evidence supporting the intellectual, speech and career benefits of bilingualism and the specific bilingual needs of pupils with special educational needs in Gaeltacht contexts. COGG, in collaboration with NEPS and the Inclusion Support Service (ISS), to which the Special Education Support Service (SESS) is transitioning, could play a role in providing guidance on support for the bilingual needs of children with SEN in Gaeltacht areas and in the development of guidelines to support professional and para-professional staff on the benefits of bilingualism. The potential to increase the capacity of other professionals to deliver services through Irish in support of the educational needs of students in Gaeltacht areas will be a matter for relevant bodies.

#### **Supporting and involving parents:**

The establishment of positive partnerships and relationships between schools and parents is particularly important in the case of Gaeltacht schools. It is also important in the case of Naíonraí. On the one hand, parents in Gaeltacht areas, regardless of their language backgrounds, need to be assured of the benefits of Irish and of Irish-medium education for their children in terms of their current and future learning, their capacity to learn languages, their personal and social development, and their career opportunities. Parents who are raising their children through Irish need to be assured that their efforts to do so are of value to their children and their community. Parents also need support to enable them to assist with their children's Irish-language development and their learning through Irish. On the other hand, parental support for the language policy and the medium of instruction in individual schools is critical to the effective delivery of Irish-medium education in those schools and in fostering positive attitudes and the co-operation of their children with their school's language policy.