

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS



I conducted an investigation in 2017 that had particular importance in relation to education through Irish. The central role of Irish-medium education is recognised in the “*Statement on the Irish Language 2006*” and the “*20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*”. That approach is seen in the obligations and objectives in relation to Irish in the Education Act 1998, for example that parents’ choice is heeded in respect of advancing students’ linguistic and cultural requirements.

The investigation I conducted showed that provisions of this Act, the Education Act 1998, had been breached. The linguistic objectives of the Act were not appropriately included in the process of appointing a patron for a new primary school to be located in the Drumcondra/Marino/Dublin 1 school planning area.

The investigation recommended:

- that the Department of Education and Skills re-examine the demand for multi-denominational education through Irish in the Drumcondra/Marino/Dublin 1 school planning area; and
- that the statutory language requirements are complied with in future in the process by which a patronage is awarded.

I was satisfied when the Minister for Education and Skills announced, on 31 October 2018, that the new school to be based in the Drumcondra/Marino/Dublin 1 school planning area would be an Irish-

medium school. Discussions continued in relation to the second recommendation, above-mentioned, in relation to the patronage process and the Minister announced the results of the 2019 patronage process towards the end of February 2019. It was not evident to me that the patronages were awarded in accordance with the recommendations made by the Department in response to the investigation. I noted the following in particular:

- Even with the inclusion of the new schools that were announced, two of the twelve areas involved would have no Gaelscoil provision.
- It appeared to me a weakness in the process that no information was provided in the individual reports as to whether there were resources in the Irish-medium schools to cater for the extra demand in the area. There was no analysis of the ethos in those areas either.

It was evident that the Department had changed direction from the recommendations presented to me previously in December 2017 and April 2018:

- To review the patronage process in respect of parents’ indications of Gaeloideachas as a choice by giving greater emphasis to proportionality. A Gaelscoil and an English-medium school could possibly be provided within one school planning area, for example a 24 classroom school could be designated as an 8 classroom school and a 16 classroom school. A shared solution like this would be achieved in cases where the number of preferences for a Gaelscoil achieved a certain proportion of the number of preferences for the patronage body receiving the highest number of preferences. Although a benchmark was not provided, a sample result was given in the case of 35% being agreed.

I thought at the time that this approach being adopted by the Department was sensible, insofar as a methodology was being recommended which seemed to me would accommodate parents’ wishes for Irish-medium education, even when that choice did not achieve the highest amount of preferences in the patronage process.



The Department advised that there had been a subsequent change of view as no 24 classroom school was to be established between 2019 and 2022 and that the result of the recent patronage process did not give a sufficient level of affirmation that there is demand for a viable, 8 classroom Irish-medium school.

The Department described the consultation process implemented by it and outlined the Project Plan that arose from that consultation, which included:

- To investigate adding an appendix to the current policy in relation to establishing new schools. In the case of schools to be established during the period 2020-2022, to examine the existing Irish-medium provision in the area. Where there is no provision in the area for Irish, to predetermine the teaching language of that school as Irish-medium, unless this is not suitable or necessary. In other cases, the teaching language would be decided after a patronage process.
- To investigate adding an appendix to the policy in the case of areas where new schools are to be established in the period 2019-2022. A decision would be made beforehand that at least one of those schools would be an Irish-medium school, unless there were specific local reasons why this would not be suitable or necessary.
- If one of the 26 primary schools to be established in the period 2019-2022 is to be expanded to a 24

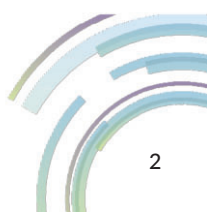
classroom school, following demographic review, that the possibility of delivering that school as a 16 classroom school and an 8 classroom school, with some shared facilities, will be explored on a pilot basis, where sites allow it.

One of the Department's most significant recommendations in this letter was that it be predetermined that Irish would be the language of education for a new school proposed in a school planning area which has no provision for Irish-medium education. I accepted that this recommendation was worthwhile although I was disappointed with what I saw as backtracking from the recommendation put to me previously in this respect.

I had a meeting with the Department of Education and Skills in July 2019 in relation to the implementation of the recommendations of the investigation. Notwithstanding that the changes were aimed at making better provision for Irish-medium education, I expressed the opinion that it was important that particular attention be given to the provision of Irish education-medium. This should specially apply in cases and areas where sufficient demand is shown during the patronage process, but where it is not the choice of the majority. I am hopeful that the work of the Department, as a result of the investigation, will have a positive effect on the provision of Irish-medium education in the country.

Initial liaison: 26 October 2017

Latest liaison: 8 November 2019





Appendix 1 - Timeline

27 April 2017: Completed Investigation Report issued.

26 October 2017: Meeting requested by the Department to discuss the recommendations of the investigation.

5 December 2017: Meeting with the Department to discuss the recommendations.

12 April 2018: Letter from the Department providing details of the recommendations discussed at the meeting in relation to (1) the difference between ethos and language, (2) online system, (3) site-sharing (opportunities that could arise for a 16 classroom school and an 8 classroom all-Irish school on the same site, sharing facilities), and (4) proportionality.

27 August 2018: Letter from the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga (OCT) to the Department seeking a meeting to obtain an updated account of the implementation of the recommendations. The Department requested that the meeting be postponed until after the meeting of the New Schools Establishment Group (NSEG).

24 October 2018: Reminder sent to the Department in relation to the meeting/update requested.

31 October 2018: Press release issued by the Minister announcing the foundation of 4 new second-level schools. Reference in the press release to NSEG and its reference to the recommendations of An Coimisinéir Teanga and to the amendments implemented by the Department so far. It was stated that more thought and consultations with the patronage organisations on the matter were required.

12 November 2018: Letter from the Department advising that NSEG had noted, at its meeting, the recommendations of An Coimisinéir Teanga in its report and that it had recommended to the Minister that the patronage for the new school to be established in the Dublin1/Marino/Drumcondra area should be awarded to An Foras Pátrúnachta. The Department gave an account of the overview given to the NSEG at its meeting of the Online Patronage Process System it had developed and the initial work carried out by it to improve the process, particularly to illustrate the parents' choice in relation to Irish education. The opportunity to have a 24 classroom school designated in the form of an English-medium 16 classroom school and an Irish-medium 8 classroom school was again mentioned. It was stated that it would take more time to examine the question fully. It was also mentioned that there would be an opportunity through the Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity Process.

10 December 2018: Press release issued by the Department announcing an invitation to parents to indicate their choice of patronage for 12 national schools to be established in 2019.

21 February 2019: Press release issued by the Department announcing the patronage for 12 national schools to be established in 2019.

12 March 2019: Letter sent by An Coimisinéir Teanga to the Department of Education and Skills stating the announcement in the Department's press release was a matter of some disappointment to him as it appeared that the recommendations previously made by the Department had not been taken account of when the patronages were being awarded. A definitive timescale was sought whereby those recommendations would be implemented.

29 March 2019: Extension sought by the Department to answer the letter of 12 March, as it would have a meeting with the patrons on 5 April and as it wished to include the results of that meeting in its response.

18 April 2019: Further extension until 3 May sought by the Department.



7 May 2019: Letter received from the Department. The actions taken to date in relation to the 5 significant actions listed in the letter from the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga, dated 12 March, were outlined in this letter, along with an explanation in relation to the change of direction in the case of Action 5 – *“that a review of the patronage process be conducted giving greater emphasis to proportionality in respect of parents indications of Gaeloideachas as a choice”*. Information was made available on the draft project plan developed by the Department, focusing on a range of mechanisms being in place to accommodate parents’ choices (7 in total).

6 June 2019: Letter sent to the Department conveying disappointment in relation to the backtracking from the first recommendations made, but accepting the new recommendations presented were of some value.

12 June 2019: Acknowledgement received from the Department.

21 June 2019: Phone call from the Department seeking a meeting with senior Officers to discuss the matter.

2 July 2019: Letter sent to the Department outlining what was expected from the meeting.

31 July 2019: Meeting between senior officials of the Department and An Coimisinéir Teanga and officials from OCT.

27 September 2019: Letter from the Department with an account of the discussions held at the meeting of 31 July.

6 November 2019: Response sent to the Department acknowledging all the Department had achieved, but warning that the root cause of the investigation could reoccur, despite the amendments, as mentioned at the meeting. I asked that extra actions be examined to ensure that where a strong demand exists in a particular district for education through Irish, without it being the preference of the majority, that this demand is accommodated.

