Workforce Challenges and Strategic Priorities in the Irish-medium Sector; IME (Workforce Plan) Bill

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)

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***All research referenced throughout this paper is available at the link at the end of the document. ***

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) strongly welcomes and fully supports the introduction of the IME (Workforce Plan) Bill. Its passage is not simply desirable – it is essential. Without decisive action on workforce planning, the growth of Gaeloideachas or Irish-medium education (IME) will continue to be constrained by a problem that has been known, documented, and unaddressed for far too long.

The chronic shortage of staff across the IME sector is the single greatest barrier to fulfilling the Department of Education's statutory duty to *'encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education'* under Article 89 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998-a duty that cannot be met without a workforce capable of delivering it.

Two systemic failures must be confronted: recruitment and retention. In some areas, such as IME primary, the system is producing enough teachers, but too many are lost due to inadequate support, dangerously unsustainable workloads, limited career pathways, or the absence of incentives to remain in the sector. In other areas, most notably specialist post-primary subjects, the system is simply not training enough teachers to meet demand. This is not a temporary fluctuation; it is a structural deficit that requires structural solutions.

The core question for policymakers is therefore urgent and unavoidable: Do we have enough of the right people, in the right roles, in the right places, to sustain and grow the IME sector? And where we do, are we doing enough to ensure they stay?

The IME (Workforce Plan) Bill provides the first meaningful opportunity in decades to address these issues in a strategic, coordinated, and future-focused way. CnaG urges the Department and the Assembly to seize this opportunity, because without a stable, well-supported workforce, the true potential of Irish-medium education cannot be realised.

Why the Irish-medium Education Strategy Is Not Enough – and why the IME (Workforce Plan) Bill Is Essential

The forthcoming Irish-medium Education Strategy is an important and welcome development. Workforce is one of its seven core pillars, and the strategy will provide a valuable framework for what the system should do to support the long-term growth of IME. However, a strategy, no matter how well-designed, has no legislative force. It cannot compel action, guarantee delivery, or ensure that the Department of Education acts on its commitments.

We have had strategies before. They are launched with ambition, gather dust on shelves, and too often fail to translate into real-world change. There is no statutory obligation on

the Department to implement a strategy, no mechanism to enforce progress, and no consequence if key actions are delayed or quietly abandoned. The pace of the current IME Strategy only reinforces this concern: its completion date falls outside the mandate of the current Executive and Minister, meaning there is no guarantee it will ever be launched, let alone implemented.

This is precisely why the Private Member's Bill on IME Workforce is so important. Unlike a strategy, a Bill, once passed and granted Royal Assent, becomes an Act of the Assembly, creating a legal duty on the Department of Education. A strategy outlines aspirations; an Act sets out what the Department must do. The difference is fundamental:

A strategy says:

'This is what we intend to do.'

Legislation says: 'This is what you are required to do.'

The IME Workforce Bill would ensure that workforce planning is not optional, not aspirational, and not dependent on political cycles. It would require the Department to:

- **Develop and maintain a long-term IME workforce plan.**
- **Model future teacher-supply needs.**
- **Address subject-specialist shortages.**
- **Report progress transparently to the Assembly.**

This Bill does not replace the IME Strategy; it complements and strengthens it. The strategy provides the vision; the Bill provides the legal mechanism to ensure that vision is delivered.

Without legislation, the sector will continue to rely on goodwill, policy preference, and political stability, none of which can be guaranteed. With legislation, the Department of Education will be obliged to act, to plan, and to deliver the workforce infrastructure that IME urgently needs.

In short: The strategy tells us what should happen. The Bill ensures it *will* happen.

1. Summary

The Irish-medium (IM) education sector in the north of Ireland is the fastest-growing part of our education system, with sustained annual enrolment increases and consistently rising parental demand. Enrolments across all phases have now surpassed 8,000 pupils, and with the establishment of Scoil na Seolta, the first integrated Irish-medium school, IME provision now exists across every other sector.

Irish-medium schools deliver education through a proven method of language acquisition known as *immersion education*, where children learn through the target language from pre-school to post-primary. This approach is internationally recognised as the most effective model for second-language acquisition and is used successfully in Canada, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and many other jurisdictions.

Immersion education is a research-driven pedagogical model in which the target language is used as the primary medium of instruction across the curriculum. Rather than teaching the language as a standalone subject, pupils acquire it naturally through meaningful, everyday learning experiences. International evidence shows that immersion learners achieve high levels of bilingual proficiency without compromising attainment in other subjects. The model is built on specialist training, carefully structured progression, and a strong emphasis on cognitive development, cultural awareness, and linguistic confidence. It is important to note that the Irish language is the vehicle through which IME pupils access the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

This growth represents a major opportunity, not only for the education system, but for the wider revitalisation of the Irish language and the economy. However, the sector's rapid expansion has far outpaced workforce planning, teacher supply, and the system-level supports required to sustain high-quality immersion provision.

Recent research from Stranmillis University College shows that IM teachers face significantly higher workload, greater administrative pressure, and more complex pedagogical demands than their English-medium counterparts. CnaG's own analysis reinforces this picture: the sector is experiencing acute shortages in key subject areas, limited pathways into immersion teaching, and a lack of coherent, long-term planning at system level.

International comparators, particularly Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, demonstrate clearly that immersion systems flourish when governments invest in

specialist teacher education, structured induction, targeted retention supports, and strategic workforce planning.

CnaG therefore calls supports this bill and the need for a coherent, workforce strategy for Irish-medium education, underpinned by investment in teacher education, leadership development, workload reduction, and sustainable staffing models.

2. Context: A Rapidly Expanding Sector with Systemic Workforce Pressures

Irish-medium education has been established locally for 55 years, growing from a small community initiative into a mainstream and rapidly expanding part of the education system. Enrolments continue to rise across all phases, with Department of Education figures showing a 400% increase over the past 25 years. Planned expansion at post-primary level will further increase demand for qualified teachers, particularly those with subject specialisms.

However, this growth has not been matched by the workforce infrastructure required to sustain it. The sector is now facing a series of systemic pressures that require strategic intervention:

- **Insufficient teacher supply**, particularly in post-primary STEM and other specialist subjects
- **Limited access to immersion-specific ITE**, restricting entry routes into the profession.
- **High workload and administrative demands**, especially in developing schools
- **Leadership shortages**, with principals reporting unsustainable pressures.
- **Fragmented support structures** that lack the coherence seen in other immersion jurisdictions

Support from across the Education Workforce

Despite significant growth in pupil numbers and a sharp increase in demand for sectoral support, staffing within Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the statutory body responsible for the development of Irish-medium education, has reduced, not increased. This reduction is being felt acutely at a time when the wider education system is undergoing major, generational reform through the Minister's TransformED agenda, including SEN reform, curriculum reform, and a review of assessment. Each of these reforms' places additional and complex demands on schools. The IME sector is being asked to navigate these system-wide changes with fewer staff than ever, despite being the fastest-growing part of the education system.

Irish-medium Education requires specialist expertise across the entire education workforce. Officers with immersion-specific knowledge are needed not only within CnaG, but across the Education Authority, CCEA, CCMS, and crucially within the Department of Education itself. Without this expertise embedded at system level, IME schools and staff are left without the support they require in critical areas such as:

- **Teacher Professional Learning** tailored to immersion pedagogy.
- **Linguistically appropriate SEN support** that recognises the needs of bilingual learners
- **Curriculum development** that reflects immersion methodology
- **Assessment design** that is valid, reliable, and fit for purpose for IME pupils
- **Resource creation** to ensure teachers have access to high-quality materials in Irish.

These needs become even more urgent in the context of TransformED and SEN reform. The new curriculum and revised assessment framework will both require tailored, linguistically appropriate resources for IME pupils. At present, these materials do not exist, and IME teachers are expected to create or translate them individually, a practice that is inefficient, inequitable, and unsustainable and must change with the roll-out and implementation of the new curriculum in the near future.

For this reason, CnaG strongly advocates for the establishment of a dedicated IME curriculum, assessment, and resource-development team within the Department of Education. Such a team would ensure that:

- **new curriculum materials are developed in Irish from the outset,**
- **assessments are designed to be valid for immersion learners,**
- **a comprehensive suite of curriculum resources is produced to support teaching, learning, and the effective delivery of the new curriculum, and**
- **IME schools are not left to recreate or translate resources that should be provided centrally.**

At present, these functions are under-resourced, fragmented, or entirely absent, leaving IME schools to shoulder responsibilities that, in other jurisdictions, are supported by well-established immersion teams within government agencies.

The absence of system-wide expertise has real consequences: teachers face higher workloads, principals face greater administrative burdens, and pupils risk receiving support that is not aligned with immersion best practice. As the sector continues to grow, these gaps will only widen unless the Assembly and the Department commit to embedding immersion expertise across all relevant bodies.

A sustainable IME system requires a whole-system workforce, not just classroom teachers. Strengthening CnaG's capacity and ensuring that every education organisation, including the Department, has access to officers with immersion expertise is essential if the sector is to meet rising demand and deliver high-quality outcomes for pupils.

CnaG's Leadership Role in Workforce Planning

Given its statutory remit, sectoral expertise, and long-standing role in supporting IME development, CnaG is uniquely positioned to lead the implementation of a system-wide workforce plan. To fulfil this role effectively, CnaG should be supported through the appointment of a dedicated Workforce Planning Officer with responsibility for:

- **Monitoring present and emerging workforce needs** across all phases of IME
- **Coordinating with DE, EA, CCEA, ITE providers and other stakeholders** to ensure alignment of planning and provision
- **Advising on teacher supply, subject-specialist needs, and future growth**
- **Ensuring IME considerations are embedded in all TransformED reforms.**

Class Sizes and Pupil-Teacher Ratio in the Immersion Classroom.

Queen's University Belfast is currently undertaking research on behalf of CnaG into optimal class sizes in immersion education. While the findings are not yet published, early indications suggest that immersion pedagogy is likely to require smaller teacher–pupil ratios than those used in mainstream settings. This reflects the unique demands of immersion learning, where pupils are developing subject knowledge and a new language simultaneously, requiring more frequent modelling, targeted feedback, and structured oral interaction.

If confirmed, these findings would have significant implications for the future of Irish-medium education. Smaller class sizes would necessitate revised staffing ratios, increased teacher supply, and a more strategic approach to workforce planning. They would also impact accommodation and infrastructure requirements in IME settings, many of which are already operating under pressure due to sustained enrolment growth.

CnaG expects to publish the full research findings in the autumn. This evidence will be critical in shaping a workforce strategy that reflects the pedagogical realities of immersion education and ensures that pupils receive the level of linguistic support required for successful language acquisition.

3. CnaG's Research Report; *Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-medium Sector (2023)*

In 2023, CnaG completed a comprehensive research project entitled '*Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-medium Sector.' This report was* developed in close collaboration with schools, teacher-education (ITE) partners, and other key stakeholders. The research also examined international immersion systems in Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland, and Canada to identify effective models of workforce planning. The findings and recommendations were formally presented to the Department of Education in 2023.

The report identified a series of structural barriers that continue to restrict the development of a stable and sustainable IME workforce:

- **Insufficient ITE pathways tailored to immersion pedagogy.**
- **A mismatch between teacher-training output and sectoral demand**
- **Lack of incentives to recruit and retain graduates in IME.**
- **Limited opportunities for career progression, particularly in small schools**
- **Inadequate long-term workforce planning, with no modelling of projected sector growth**

This final issue is particularly significant. The sector continues to experience sustained enrolment growth, yet teacher supply has not increased at a rate that reflects this expansion. Without intervention, the gap between pupil numbers and available teachers will continue to widen, placing additional pressure on existing staff and limiting the sector's capacity to grow.

Crucially, the 2023 report did not simply identify problems, it presented clear, evidence-based recommendations to address each of these challenges. These included proposals (some of which are cost neutral) for new immersion-specific ITE pathways, targeted incentives to attract and retain teachers, structured career-progression routes, and the development of a long-term workforce model aligned to projected sectoral growth.

CnaG's position remains unequivocal: teacher supply must be treated as a strategic priority. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action from the Department of Education, the Education Authority, ITE providers, and sectoral bodies. Only a system-wide response will ensure that the IME sector can meet current demand, plan effectively for future growth, and maintain high-quality immersion provision.

Substitute Teacher Supply for the IME Sector

A persistent and acute challenge within the Irish-medium sector is the difficulty in securing substitute teachers, which significantly constrains the ability of schools to function effectively and develop their workforce. The lack of available substitute teachers has been identified as one of the most pressing issues across IM primary schools, with a systemic shortage of appropriately qualified Irish-medium supply staff available to cover even short-term absences. While these challenges were historically felt more acutely in rural and isolated areas, they are now evident across the sector, reflecting a systemic shortage of appropriately qualified Irish-medium supply teachers.

The impact of this shortage is both immediate and far-reaching. In some cases, schools have been forced to combine multiple classes in order to remain operational, directly affecting the quality of teaching and learning and placing additional strain on both staff and pupils. Principal release has been significantly eroded, with many teaching principals unable to access their allocated non-contact time due to the absence of cover, and even full-time principals required to step into classrooms on an ad hoc or sustained basis. Critically, access to Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is heavily constrained, as teachers cannot be released from their classrooms to attend training, engage in upskilling, or fulfil wider professional responsibilities such as SENCo or coordinator roles.

This creates a self-perpetuating cycle within the system. The inability to release teachers limits professional development and leadership capacity, which in turn affects staff confidence, retention, and the overall quality of provision. Without a reliable and sustainable substitute teacher pool, Irish-medium schools are effectively prevented from engaging fully in system-wide improvement and reform. Irish-medium schools were unable to participate in the initial stages of curriculum reform, as they could not release teachers to contribute to Department of Education taskforces, reinforcing the urgent need for workforce planning that explicitly addresses substitute provision as a core component of teacher supply.

4. Post-primary Teacher Supply

Evidence from the Irish-medium post-primary sector shows a particularly acute and widening gap between teacher supply and the needs of a rapidly expanding system. Although more than three hundred post-primary teacher-training places are available annually across the wider system, only a very small proportion are accessible to Irish-medium candidates through the current enhancement model. This structural

imbalance severely restricts the number of subject-specialist teachers entering the IME sector each year.

At post-primary level, there is currently only one ITE route into Irish-medium teaching:

- a mainstream subject-specific PGCE delivered by UU or QUB,
- with an Irish-medium Enhancement / Immersion Education Certificate offered in partnership with St Mary's University College Belfast (**approximately eight places annually**)

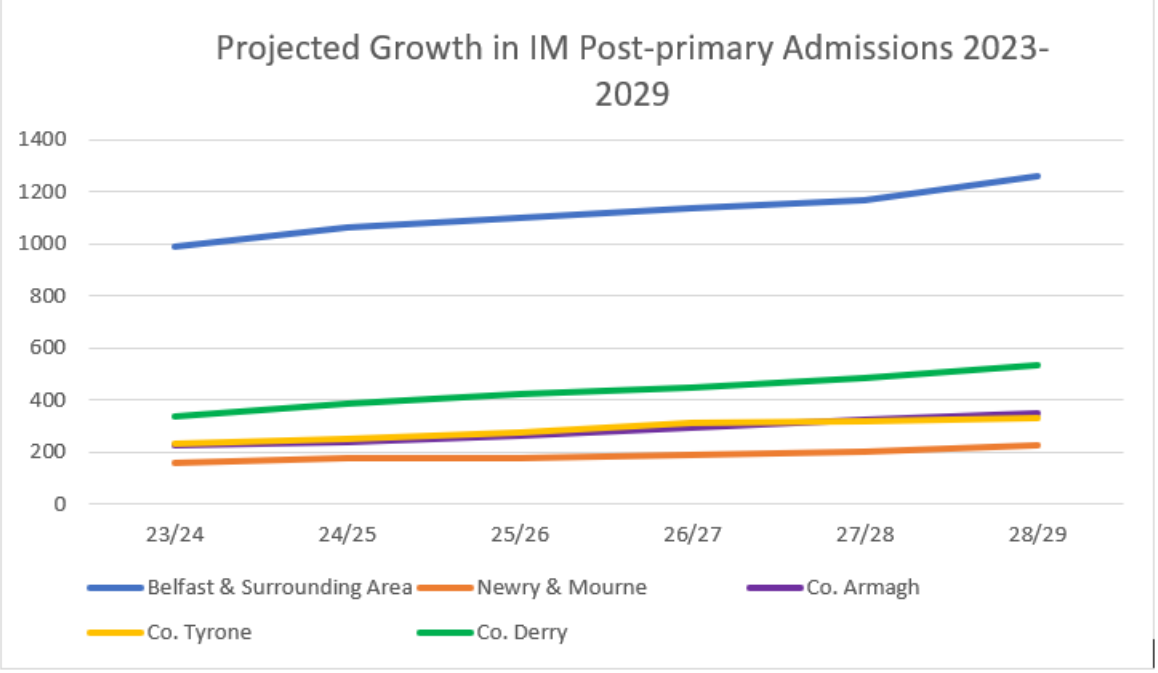
Applicants cannot apply directly to a bespoke Irish-medium course; instead, they must apply to QUB or UU and then indicate interest in the enhancement pathway. This indirect process limits recruitment in key subject specialisms and reduces the visibility and attractiveness of IME as a career route.

Undergraduate subject offerings also restrict the pipeline. While QUB offers French alongside subjects such as Mathematics and Physics, equivalent joint degrees with Irish are far more limited. This reduces the number of graduates who could progress into immersion-specific teacher education.

The enhancement model — introduced over a decade ago as an interim solution — is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of a rapidly growing sector. It should be replaced with a fully mainstreamed course, giving institutions greater autonomy to recruit directly into Irish-medium pathways and ensuring a more reliable supply of subject-specialist teachers.

A strengthened pathway must also be supported by a broader undergraduate offering, enabling students to undertake joint degrees such as Irish and Mathematics, Irish and Chemistry, or Irish and Computing. This would equip future teachers with the subject expertise required before progressing to postgraduate qualification.

These structural issues are emerging at the same time as sustained growth in post-primary enrolment, which has increased by over 30% in recent years and is projected to rise further. Schools report significant challenges in recruiting teachers in STEM, modern languages, and other specialist disciplines due to the absence of a clearly defined, immersion-specific route into post-primary teaching. As a result, pupils risk reduced access to a full breadth of subject provision.



Projections indicate that substantially higher numbers of post-primary teachers will be required annually to meet future demand, further exposing the limitations of the existing model. To address this, CnaG specifically recommends:

- **the establishment of an Irish-medium post-primary PGCE**, and
- **the creation of an Irish-medium post-primary B. Ed**

These dedicated pathways are essential to ensuring a sustainable pipeline of subject-specialist teachers capable of delivering high-quality immersion education at post-primary level.

Clarification on Bursaries and TransformEd

Reference was made during the debate to bursaries available through TransformEd and to teacher-training routes for Irish-medium education. While bursaries attached to existing routes are welcome, it is important to clarify that **there is currently no stand-alone Irish-medium PGCE for post-primary education in the North of Ireland**.

Instead, prospective teachers must:

- apply for a mainstream subject-specific PGCE (UU or QUB), and
- separately express interest in the Irish-medium Enhancement / Immersion Education Certificate (SMUCB).

This model significantly limits capacity and does not constitute a comprehensive Irish-medium ITE pathway comparable to English-medium provision.

Concerns remain that:

- there is widespread misunderstanding of the scope and impact of bursaries, and
- bursaries do not address the **structural limitations** of the IME post-primary training pathway.

Notably, in the previous academic year:

- **neither of the two stand-alone Irish-medium post-primary schools recruited a teacher from the enhancement programme**,
- despite both schools recruiting staff -demonstrating a clear disconnect between training supply and workforce demand

Throughout the past year, CnaG has worked closely with the Department to ensure that any bursaries linked to initial teacher education within the Irish-medium sector are aligned to demonstrable need, targeted at genuine subject shortages, and reflective of the specialist competencies required for immersion teaching. Financial incentives must not distract from the core issue: without a dedicated IME post-primary PGCE, the sector cannot produce the teachers it urgently requires, regardless of bursary availability.

5. Challenges with Recruitment and Retention for Classroom Assistants and Early Years Staff

Recruitment and retention challenges for classroom assistants and nursery staff represent a critical pressure point within Irish-medium education. With over 90% of children in IME coming from non-Irish-speaking homes, early years settings carry the heaviest responsibility for establishing the linguistic foundation on which all later learning depends. Early years provision, particularly in naíscoileanna, forms the essential foundation of immersion education and is the first building block in children's linguistic and educational development. Classroom assistants in these settings play a central pedagogical role, providing rich, natural Irish through play, routines, and responsive interaction — the core mechanisms through which immersion pedagogy works. Their contribution is not supplementary; it is fundamental to successful language acquisition.

However, there is a very limited pipeline of staff who meet both the minimum qualification standards and the required fluency in Irish to work effectively in immersion settings. Nurseries and schools are frequently recruiting from the same small pool of individuals, creating competition within the sector rather than growth of the workforce. This is compounded by the lack of accessible, structured training pathways to

adequately prepare staff for working in an immersion setting, where both linguistic competence and pedagogical understanding are required.

Retention presents an equally significant challenge. There is limited availability of ongoing teacher professional learning (TPL) and career development opportunities tailored to Irish-medium support staff, reducing opportunities for progression and professional confidence. As a result, staff may feel underprepared and insufficiently supported in their roles, contributing to attrition. Without targeted investment in training, upskilling, and structured career pathways, the sector risks losing valuable staff and undermining the continuity and quality of early years provision. This ongoing churn not only disrupts learning environments for young children but also places additional strain on schools and settings, further highlighting the urgent need for workforce planning that explicitly includes classroom assistants and early years practitioners within the Irish-medium sector.

6. Why are IME practitioners leaving the sector? -Independent Research

Independent research commissioned by CnaG and conducted by the **Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU)** at **Stranmillis University College**, led by **Professor Noel Purdy**, provides the clearest and most comprehensive evidence to date on why Irish-medium practitioners are leaving the sector. The report, *Teacher Workload in the Irish-medium Sector – Evidential Insights*, states unequivocally that:

'Irish-medium teachers in Northern Ireland are facing significant workload challenges unique to their sector.'

The findings highlight a pattern of systemic, sector-specific pressures that go far beyond the workload experienced in English-medium settings. Key findings include:

- **IM teachers report significantly higher workload** than the Northern Ireland average, driven by dual-language planning, translation demands, and resource creation.
- **Teachers in developing IM schools face additional administrative burdens**, including governance, community engagement, and curriculum development.
- **Teachers in the IME sector work 46% more on average than their contractual 1265 hours.** Four out of five (82%) work more than 40 hours per week; more than a quarter (28%) work over 50 hours; and one in twenty (5%) exceed 60 hours.
- **76% of teachers feel unappreciated**, and **87% believe their remuneration is insufficient**.

- **87% find their workload excessive**, **81% consider it unsustainable**, and **88% believe it negatively impacts their teaching quality**.
- **80% report that workload affects their physical health**, while **90% say it compromises their mental wellbeing**.
- **A lack of sector-specific support services** (e.g., SEN, educational psychology, curriculum resources) increases pressure on school staff.
- **Almost all teachers are required to translate materials (99%)** and **develop subject-specific resources (97%)**, alongside producing bilingual communications and adapting materials for pupils with additional needs.
- **Leadership workload is disproportionately high**, with principals often fulfilling multiple roles due to limited staffing allocations.

Taken together, these findings reveal a sector where teachers are carrying significant additional responsibilities that are intrinsic to immersion education but not recognised resourced within current system structures. The cumulative impact is profound: teachers report that workload pressures affect not only their professional practice but also their physical and mental health, family life, and long-term commitment to the profession.

The research concludes that without targeted interventions, workload pressures will continue to undermine recruitment, retention, and teacher wellbeing-posing a direct threat to the sustainability of Irish-medium education.

Additional Independent research by Dr Gabrielle Nig Uidhir (St Mary's University College Belfast) and Dr T.J. Ó Ceallaigh (University College Cork) entitled, *'Core Competencies in Irish-medium Education'* (2023), reinforces that IME practitioners require a distinctive and highly specialised set of competencies that go far beyond those expected in English-medium settings. Their study identifies three core domains essential to effective immersion teaching: vision and values, specialist practitioner knowledge, and immersion-specific pedagogical skills and practices. These include the ability to teach academic content *through* Irish, model high-quality language input, scaffold bilingual development, and understand the socio-cultural dimensions of immersion learning. Crucially, the research highlights that there is no existing system-wide framework for assessing or supporting these competencies, despite their centrality to pupil outcomes. This means IME teachers are expected to meet additional professional demands without the structured training, professional development, or support mechanisms that such specialist work requires, further contributing to stress, burnout, and attrition within the sector.

7. International Comparisons: Lessons from Scotland, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland

Scotland (Gaelic-medium Education – GME)

Scotland has developed a more coordinated national approach to Gaelic-medium teacher supply, including dedicated Initial Teacher Education pathways and targeted recruitment initiatives supported by government, including:

- Dedicated ITE programmes for immersion teaching
- National recruitment campaigns supported by government.
- Funded and supported specialist resource centres (e.g., Stòrlann) producing immersion resources.
- Clear workforce planning models aligned with projected growth.
- financial incentives in priority subject areas, with bursaries available to support entry into Initial Teacher Education, alongside funding and programme support provided through Bòrd na Gàidhlig to promote Gaelic-medium teaching.
- The national Teacher Induction Scheme guarantees a one-year probationary teaching post for newly qualified teachers across the Scottish education system, providing a structured entry into the profession and supporting workforce stability.

Wales (Welsh-medium Education)

Wales has developed one of the most comprehensive immersion workforce strategies in Europe: The Welsh Government's *Workforce Plan for Welsh-medium Education* sets explicit targets for teacher numbers and offers:

- Financial incentives for Welsh-medium ITE students
- Sabbatical schemes enabling teachers to upskill in Welsh.
- Strong leadership development programmes tailored to immersion contexts.

The system in Wales includes a range of provision models, including Welsh-medium schools, bilingual schools, and dual-stream settings, with a corresponding emphasis on preparing teachers to deliver the curriculum through Welsh and to teach Welsh as a subject.

Initiatives such as 'Welsh in a Year' further support workforce development by enabling teachers in the English-medium sector to develop their language skills and contribute to Welsh-medium provision.

This approach demonstrates the role of sustained government investment and structured workforce development initiatives in supporting immersion education systems. While the context differs from the North of Ireland, these measures illustrate the importance of coordinated workforce development in sustaining growth in immersion education.

Republic of Ireland (Gaeltacht and Irish-medium Schools)

The Republic of Ireland provides further examples of good practice:

- Recent reintroduction of a teaching allowance for teachers in IME (and Gaeltacht schools)
- Specialist Gaeltacht teacher education pathways
- Additional staffing supports for schools operating through Irish.
- Targeted grants for resource development and language enrichment
- Structured induction and mentoring for new immersion teachers.

These measures recognise the linguistic and pedagogical complexity of immersion education and support teacher retention.

8. Workforce in relation to SEN in the Irish-medium Education Sector

A critical gap within the current system is the absence of Irish-medium SEN specialist provision within Local Impact Teams, which include cognition and learning specialists and language and communication teachers.

At present, there are no Irish-medium professionals available within these roles, nor among Educational Psychologists or advisory services, to deliver teacher professional learning (TPL), assessment, intervention, or support through the medium of Irish. This means that Irish-medium schools must routinely access SEN services through English, despite operating an immersion model.

The impact of this is significant and far-reaching. Pupils are assessed in a language that is not their primary language of learning, increasing the risk of misidentification or delayed statementing. This can result in inappropriate or delayed interventions, negatively affecting attainment, confidence, and overall wellbeing. The absence of Irish-medium expertise within Local Impact Teams further limits schools' access to timely, high-quality, linguistically appropriate advice, weakening the effectiveness of early intervention.

For teachers and schools, this deficit creates substantial additional workload. Staff must for example adapt English-medium interventions, often without specialist training. This aligns with broader evidence that a lack of sector-specific SEN and educational psychology services significantly increases pressure on Irish-medium schools and compromises provision. Moreover, the reliance on English-medium SEN support disrupts the immersion environment, undermining linguistic continuity and pupils' Irish language development.

Crucially, this gap undermines the core aims of the SEN Reform Agenda, which seeks to ensure children receive the *right support, from the right people, at the right time, and in the right place*. **In the Irish-medium context, the absence of Irish-medium specialists means that, in practice, pupils are not consistently able to access support from the "right people," nor always at the "right time" or through the language of curriculum delivery. This creates a structural inequity whereby Irish-medium pupils do not have equal access to effective SEN provision compared to their English-medium peers.** Without dedicated Irish-medium SEN specialists within Local Impact Teams, and Irish-medium Educational Psychologists, the system cannot fully realise its own reform ambitions. This underscores the urgent need for a Workforce Planning Bill to ensure the development of a sustainable pipeline of Irish-medium SEN professionals, embedding parity of access and supporting the long-term viability of the sector.

9. AI as a potential solution to the IM Workforce Challenges

While there is growing emphasis on the potential of AI to reduce teacher workload, this should not be overstated within the Irish-medium context. Although there is innovative work underway within the Education Authority to explore AI-enabled efficiencies, and proposals to appoint an accredited AI lead in each school, these developments are not accompanied by additional funding through TransformED. As a result, this responsibility is likely to fall to existing staff, most commonly principals or ICT coordinators, thereby redistributing rather than reducing workload. Furthermore, the effectiveness of AI in IM settings is inherently limited by the underdevelopment of Irish-language tools. AI systems remain significantly less advanced in Irish than in English, with reduced accuracy and a lack of consistency across dialects, including Ulster Irish, which is most relevant in the north. This means that teachers must spend additional time reviewing, correcting, and adapting AI-generated materials, diminishing any intended efficiency gains. Rather than alleviating pressure, AI risks introducing new layers of complexity, requiring training, oversight, and quality assurance within an already stretched workforce. **Critically, AI cannot replace the professional judgement, pedagogical expertise, and linguistic expertise required of teachers working in immersion education.** Overreliance on AI as

a solution to workload pressures risks obscuring the underlying structural issue: the need for a properly planned and resourced Irish-medium teaching workforce.

10. Strategic Priorities for the IM sector

Drawing on local evidence and international best practice, CnaG identifies the following priorities:

- Establish a dedicated Irish-Medium Workforce Strategy; a cross-departmental plan should set out clear targets for teacher supply, leadership development, and specialist support services.
- Focus on cost neutral / low-cost solutions to the issue of workforce pressures in IME, particularly those mentioned in CnaG's paper 'Ensuring an Effective Teacher Supply in IME,' including:
    - Development of secondment opportunities to allow teachers in English-medium schools to acquire appropriate language, terminology, and subject-specific skills, allowing them to work in IME
    - Improved co-ordination between ITE providers and schools to identify subject areas where teacher shortages are most acute.
    - A small cohort of IM specialists, to work on a liaison basis, recruited to work in Local Impact Teams
- Expand and Reform Initial Teacher Education
- Develop immersion-specific ITE pathways for post-primary.
- Provide financial incentives for IM ITE students.
- Reduce Workload and Administrative Burden
- Fund centralised resource creation.
- Provide translation and administrative support to schools.
- Seek to expand the curriculum offer for Irish-medium post-primary pupils and address the lack of access to qualifications.
- Address the lack of supply of teachers with subject specialisms, which is equally restrictive to the curriculum offer at post-primary level.

In order to strengthen Recruitment and Retention, implementation of the findings of the Stranmillis report on Workload in IME is imperative, specifically:

- Introduction of an Irish-medium-specific Teaching Allowance (or an uplift in the IM allowance via the Common Funding Formula, to a similar level of other specified groups of children.)
- Additional Time for Planning, Preparation, and Assessment (PPA)

- Expansion of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for Irish-medium Education
- Development of an Irish-medium Teacher Apprenticeship Model and Career Progression for Classroom Assistants
- Investment in the Irish-medium Schools Estate
- Improve Workforce Data and Planning
    - Implement annual workforce modelling.
    - Track teacher movement, subject shortages, and projected demand.

11. Conclusion

Irish-medium Education is one of the most compelling success stories in our education system — a model of innovation, community leadership, and linguistic revitalisation. It deserves to be protected, supported, and strengthened. But its continued success depends on a workforce that is stable, well-planned, and properly resourced.

The evidence is clear: without targeted investment in teacher supply, workload reduction, and immersion-specific pathways, the sector will face chronic shortages that restrict parental choice, undermine educational outcomes, and risk contravening the statutory duty to*, 'Encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium Education.'*

CnaG therefore reiterates its full and unequivocal support for this Bill. The Assembly now has a critical opportunity to put in place the legislative framework required to secure the future of Irish-medium education. If the Bill fails to achieve agreement, the system will continue without the strategic workforce planning it urgently needs, and the pressures already facing schools will intensify.

If the Assembly passes this Bill and it receives Royal Assent, the Department of Education will be required to act, finally providing the structured, long-term workforce planning that the sector has lacked for decades. The need for implementation is immediate. Delay will only deepen existing shortages and jeopardise the sustainability of a sector that has already demonstrated extraordinary potential.

The IME sector has shown what is possible. It is now for the Assembly to ensure that the system provides the support, planning, and investment required for that success to continue.

(Research reports cited above can be found here: Taighde - Research — Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta)

A Snapshot from a Sectoral Survey of Irish-medium Schools, February-March 2026

