

IRISH-MEDIUM EDUCATION (WORKFORCE PLAN) BILL

EXPLANATORY AND FINANCIAL MEMORANDUM

INTRODUCTION

1. This Explanatory and Financial Memorandum has been prepared by Pat Sheehan MLA (the Bill Sponsor) in order to assist the reader of the Bill and to help inform debate on it. It does not form part of the Bill and has not been endorsed by the Assembly.
2. The Memorandum needs to be read in conjunction with the Bill. It is not, and is not meant to be, a comprehensive description of the Bill. Where a clause or part of a clause does not seem to require an explanation or comment, none is given.

BACKGROUND AND POLICY OBJECTIVES

3. The Bill seeks to address serious and persistent Irish-medium education (IME) sector staffing shortages across all roles (teachers, classroom assistants, support staff, leaders) and all phases (early years, primary and post-primary) by requiring the Department of Education (the Department) to prepare, publish and keep under review a strategic workforce plan at defined intervals.
4. IME is immersive education provided in an Irish-speaking school or in a dedicated Irish-speaking unit or stream within an English-speaking school. It is an expanding and integral part of the education system in the north with around 8000 pupils currently enrolled across 90 settings.
5. Specific IME workforce issues highlighted by reports¹², research publications³ and consultation⁴ include:
 - a. Shortages of fluent Irish-speaking teachers and classroom assistants
 - b. Disproportionate workload on existing IME teachers and support staff

¹ For example, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta: [Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the IM sector \(Aug 2023\)](#)

² For example, Department of Education Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement: [A Fair Start \(May 2021\)](#)

³ For example, Queen's University Belfast Centre for Language Education Research: [Fair? Shared? Supported? \(Feb 2024\)](#)

⁴ Pat Sheehan MLA: [IME Workforce Bill Consultation Summary \(June 2025\)](#)

- c. Shortages of Irish-speaking subject specialists at post-primary level
 - d. Gaps in Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision and SEN assessment
 - e. Barriers to recruitment and conversion for teachers trained outside the north
 - f. Insufficient IME teacher training places to meet projected demand
6. The Department has a statutory duty under Article 89 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 to encourage and facilitate the development of IME. The Bill seeks to reinforce obligations under this existing duty by ensuring sustained, measurable action is taken to address workforce shortages which would otherwise impede the development of IME.
 7. The Bill places a duty on the Department to prepare and then publish an IME workforce plan within one year of the resultant Act coming into operation, to keep the plan under review and to publish revised plans at intervals of not more than five years.
 8. The Bill also places a duty on the Minister of Education to lay any/all IME workforce plans before the Assembly as soon as possible after publication and then, within 18 months of the date of laying, to publish a report on the implementation of said plan and also lay that report before the Assembly as soon as possible.
 9. The Bill establishes criteria that the Department must satisfy in respect of the preparation of an IME workforce plan.
 10. The Bill does not define specific policy interventions. Rather, it establishes a statutory framework in order to ensure departmental action will be timely, consistent, and informed by robust consultation and analysis of need.

CONSULTATION

11. The Bill Sponsor conducted a 12-week online public consultation on the policy objectives and proposed legislative options between January and April 2025. 529 responses were received. 95% of responses came from individuals with the remainder from organisations.
12. Direct engagement took place with a wide range of stakeholders (including but not limited to: teachers, principals, classroom assistants, early years practitioners, SEN professionals, parents, pupils, Irish language organisations, training providers and representative bodies) before, during and after the online consultation period.
13. The Bill Sponsor shared the initial legislative proposal with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.
14. The Minister of Education has stated that the Department are undertaking work on a non-statutory strategy for IME which is expected “mid-2027” but that there is no intention to legislate in this area during the 2022-27 Assembly mandate.

15. The consultation findings directly informed the development of the Bill, particularly in relation to the need for evidence-based planning, targets, and measurable Assembly oversight. These responses reinforced the view that while the Bill should not prescribe specific policy interventions, it should establish a statutory framework capable of supporting and shaping the development of such measures over time, informed by evidence and subject to Assembly scrutiny.

OPTIONS CONSIDERED

16. Option One: Continue with the status quo i.e. take no legislative action and rely on the existing statutory duty.
17. Option Two: Take no legislative action and rely on a future non-statutory IME strategy. It is impossible to assess the potential of such a strategy until it is published.
18. Option Three: Take focussed legislative action on workforce planning.
19. Following consultation, advice and deliberation, the Bill Sponsor concludes that introducing and enacting primary legislation is the most appropriate and proportionate approach. The Bill seeks to encourage effective and robust action to alleviate the distinct workforce challenges of the IME sector by providing a structure which enables the Department to plan in a long-term, sustained and measurable manner at the earliest opportunity.

OVERVIEW

20. The Bill has 2 Clauses and no Schedules. A commentary on each of the Clauses follows below.

COMMENTARY ON CLAUSES

Clause 1:

Is the only substantive clause in the Bill. This clause amends the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. Article 89 of the 1998 Order imposes a duty upon the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education.

Clause 1 builds upon Article 89 of the 1998 Order by setting out some specifics on the mechanics of facilitating Irish-medium education. The clause imposes a duty upon the Department of Education to prepare a workforce plan for the Irish-medium education sector. The first plan must be produced within 12 months of this Bill coming into operation and subsequent plans must be produced at intervals of no more than 5 years.

The workforce plans must be published and laid before the Assembly.

In making the plan, the Department must consult with representative bodies (schools, teachers, pupils and their parents). It must consult with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, as the body established and funded by the Department to advise the Department and other educational institutions on their obligations in respect of IME.

Clause 1 also sets out some details of the areas the plan must consider and address:

- a. current and anticipated demands on workforce
- b. sufficiency of current workforce to meet those demands
- c. recruitment, retention and development of the workforce
- d. differing functions of the workforce (e.g. teachers, classroom assistants, SEN staff, school leaders)
- e. all types of schools providing IME (i.e. early years, primary, post-primary, Irish-speaking schools and units/streams within English-speaking schools)

The plan must contain targets which are capable of being measured.

As well as laying workforce plans before the Assembly, the Minister of Education must also report back to the Assembly, within 18 months, on the implementation of a workforce plan.

Clause 2:

Sets out the Bill's commencement (the date from which the duties in the Bill will apply) and short title.

FINANCIAL EFFECTS OF THE BILL

21. In January 2026, the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISE) provided a briefing paper on the Bill's potential direct public purse implications. The paper was informed by data provided by the Department's Irish Medium and Integrated Education (IMIE) Team.
22. The Department assesses that IME workforce planning is unlikely to be absorbed within existing capacity and that additional resource or reprioritisation will be required.
23. The Department anticipates annual costs of £26,200 to £43,700 (averaged from total cost estimates of £131,000 to £218,500 per 5-year cycle) arising in the following areas: staff resources, consultation, research/data collection, ongoing monitoring.
24. The Bill Sponsor is content that the relatively modest administrative costs of IME workforce planning represent appropriate preventative investment against the greater financial and economic costs of crisis management and/or inaction.

25. Any costs associated with measures identified in future workforce plans, such as recruitment initiatives, training pathways, bursaries or enhanced SEN provision, would be subject to separate policy development, funding decisions and Executive and/or Assembly scrutiny. Such costs do not arise directly from the Bill.

HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES

26. The provisions of the Bill are considered to be compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights and with Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework.

EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

27. An Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) has not been undertaken. Engagement between the Bill Sponsor and the Equality Commission on the outline proposal did not raise any potential adverse effects and suggested that the Bill may positively affect some groups.
28. The Bill Sponsor is satisfied that the Bill will not have an adverse effect on any of the groups identified in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
29. The performance of the functions that the Bill imposes on the Department of Education will be subject to the Department's obligations under Section 75.

LEGISLATIVE COMPETENCE

30. At Introduction, Pat Sheehan MLA made the following statement under Standing Order 30:

“In my view the Irish-medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill would be within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly.”

