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Irish Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill

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(with additional input from RaISe-PFSU)

This paper has been prepared to provide an overview of the Irish Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill (Bill 28/22-27). The Bill was introduced in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 3 March 2026 by Pat Sheehan MLA.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

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Executive Summary

The Irish-Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill (Bill 28/22-27) is a Member's Bill introduced by Pat Sheehan MLA on 3 March 2026. It is a short, two-clause Bill. Clause 1 would insert a new Article 89ZA into the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, placing a duty on the Department of Education to prepare, publish and lay before the Assembly a strategic workforce plan for the Irish-medium education sector. The first plan must be published within 12 months of Royal Assent. Subsequent plans must be prepared and published at intervals of not more than five years. Within 18 months of laying each plan before the Assembly, the Minister of Education must publish a report on its implementation. Clause 2 provides for commencement and short title.

The Bill responds to persistent and documented workforce shortages across all roles and phases in Irish-medium education, including shortages of fluent Irish-speaking teachers at all levels, subject specialist gaps at post-primary level, insufficient classroom assistant and early years provision and gaps in Special Educational Needs support.

The Irish-medium sector has grown substantially, from 1,602 pupils in 2001/02 to 7,811 pupils across approximately 90 settings in 2025/26. The Department of Education has an existing duty under Article 89 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education, but that duty does not specify how it should be discharged or measured and no workforce planning has been undertaken in fulfilment of it. The Bill would address that gap through the statutory planning cycle described above.

The Bill's approach is most closely comparable to that of Wales, which is the only jurisdiction considered in this paper to have introduced primary legislation placing language-medium education planning, including workforce planning, on a statutory footing through the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025. The Republic of Ireland and Scotland both have statutory frameworks for language-medium education provision but neither has placed workforce planning on a statutory footing, and both continue to report documented shortages. The Welsh Act is at an early stage of implementation and the first National Framework under which its workforce planning provisions will operate is not due until July 2028. It is therefore too early to

assess whether placing these obligations on a statutory footing will produce materially different outcomes.

The Department of Education has provided high-level, non-definitive cost estimates, following consultation with the Irish Medium and Integrated Education team and the Education Workforce Directorate within the Department. The Department estimates the cost of fulfilling the Bill's duties at £131,000 to £218,500 per five-year cycle, averaging £26,200 to £43,700 annually. The Department has assessed that this work is unlikely to be absorbed within its existing capacity and has noted that new funding cannot be guaranteed. The Bill Sponsor's Explanatory and Financial Memorandum describes the direct financial implications as minimal and proportionate, characterising the duty as falling within the Department's ordinary strategic planning functions. The Department and the Bill Sponsor have reached different conclusions on this point and the financial and operational implications are considered further in the sections below.

Areas for further consideration

The following points identify aspects of the Bill that may be worth exploring during scrutiny. They address broader considerations of the Bill's rationale and its place within the wider education landscape, its implementation and the detail of its provisions.

The Article 89 duty and the case for a statutory workforce plan

Article 89 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 places an existing duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education. Research published in 2022 by Conradh na Gaeilge and the Committee on the Administration of Justice concluded that a significant gap existed in the implementation of that duty in practice, noting in particular the absence of any overarching departmental strategy, any mechanism for measuring how effectively the duty was being implemented and any shared objectives or targets between the Department and the sector.

In 2025/26, over £10 million was spent on Irish-medium education across the system. More recently, the Department introduced an ITE bursary scheme allocating eight post-primary PGCE places annually for the Irish-medium Enhancement Programme, representing a more targeted non-statutory response to workforce supply pressures. However, both the Republic of Ireland and Scotland have sustained more extensive investment in language-medium teacher supply over a longer period through non-statutory workforce planning arrangements, and both continue to report documented shortages. Wales, facing comparable challenges in its Welsh-medium sector, introduced a statutory planning framework through the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025, which includes workforce planning as a required component of a National Framework for Welsh language education under section 25 of the Act. However the first National Framework is not due until July 2028 and it is therefore too early to assess whether placing these obligations on a statutory footing will produce materially different workforce outcomes from the non-statutory arrangements that preceded it. **(Cont'd.)**

The comparative evidence is also relevant to the question of whether the existing Article 89 duty, properly implemented, could achieve what the Bill proposes without additional legislation. Scotland and the Republic of Ireland both have statutory duties relating to language-medium education provision, in Scotland's case progressively strengthened since 2005 and in the Republic of Ireland rooted in both constitutional provision and primary legislation. Neither has resolved documented shortages of language-medium teachers. This suggests that statutory duties framed around provision and promotion, without a dedicated workforce planning obligation, may not in themselves be sufficient to address supply pressures in a specialist sector. It may be worth exploring during scrutiny whether the existing Article 89 duty, even if more actively implemented, would produce a materially different outcome from the current position in the absence of the specific planning framework the Bill proposes.

Financial uncertainty and implementation timeline

The Department of Education has estimated the cost of fulfilling the Bill's duties at £131,000 to £218,500 per five-year cycle and has assessed that absorption within existing capacity is unlikely, stating explicitly that new funding cannot be guaranteed. The Bill Sponsor's Explanatory and Financial Memorandum characterises the duty as falling within the Department's ordinary strategic planning functions and describes its direct financial implications as minimal and proportionate. These positions are in tension. It is also worth noting that even if costs were absorbed within existing capacity, that would not be cost-free - the redirection of staff time within an already constrained team carries an opportunity cost in the form of activities displaced or deferred. It may be worth exploring how the gap between the Department's and the Bill Sponsor's respective positions would be resolved in practice, and whether the 12-month deadline for the first plan is realistic given that no funding is in place or committed.

Relationship with the forthcoming IME strategy

The Department is developing a non-statutory IME strategy expected in mid-2027 and has committed to addressing a number of areas of concern to the sector within it. The Department has also stated that the recently introduced ITE bursary scheme will be aligned with broader workforce planning objectives for Irish-medium education. If the Bill is enacted before the strategy is published, the Department would be under a statutory obligation to produce a workforce plan while simultaneously developing broader non-statutory strategy. It may be worth seeking clarification on how both documents would relate to one another in practice.

Interaction with TransformED NI

TransformED NI is a system-wide reform programme covering the whole of the Northern Ireland school sector, of which Irish-medium education forms a part. It is not clear from the strategy or its accompanying Delivery Plan whether the proposed teacher supply monitoring framework would capture IME-specific data or how any IME-specific workforce priorities would be reflected within the broader programme. It may be worth seeking clarification on how the two documents would interact in practice.

Clause 1(5)(d): Differing functions of persons within the workforce

Clause 1(5)(d) requires the Department to take into account "the differing functions of persons within the workforce" when preparing a plan, but this term is not defined in the Bill. The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum offers illustrative examples including teachers, classroom assistants, SEN staff and school leaders. Research evidence documents a specific shortage of staff with both Irish-language proficiency and the specialist expertise required to meet the SEN needs of Irish-medium pupils. It may be worth exploring whether the Bill as drafted would require allied professional roles, including educational psychologists and speech and language therapists, to be addressed as a discrete planning requirement and whether the absence of **(Cont'd.)**

bodies representing those professions from the mandatory consultee list under Clause 1(4) would affect the quality of any SEN workforce planning undertaken.

Scope of targets and baseline measurement (Clause 1(6))

Clause 1(6) requires the workforce plan to set out measurable targets against which its effectiveness may be assessed. In practice, the utility of any targets set will depend on the availability of reliable data against which to measure them. Northern Ireland does not, as far as RaISe has been able to ascertain, have an equivalent data collection framework for the IME workforce. Data collection is therefore a threshold activity that would need to precede meaningful target-setting, and it may be worth exploring whether the Bill should address it as a distinct planning requirement.

1 Background

This section provides background on Irish-medium education in Northern Ireland, including the workforce challenges facing the sector, considerations around SEN and socio-economic disadvantage in IME and initiatives undertaken to date.

1.1 Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland

Irish-medium education (IME) is immersive education delivered through the Irish language, provided either in dedicated Irish-speaking schools or in dedicated Irish-speaking units or streams within English-speaking schools. It encompasses early years, primary and post-primary phases.

The sector has grown substantially over the past two decades. Total enrolment across all settings stood at 1,602 pupils in 2001/02. By 2025/26 that figure had risen to 7,811 pupils across approximately 90 settings, representing a nearly five-fold increase. Primary settings account for the largest share of enrolment, with 4,731 pupils across 36 settings (28 schools and 8 units) in 2025/26, compared with 652 pupils in 2001/02. Post-primary enrolment reached 2,071 pupils across five settings in 2025/26, up from 342 pupils at the start of the period. Pre-school enrolment totalled 1,009 pupils across 21 pre-school education centres in 2025/26, compared with 400 pupils across 25 centres in 2001/02.

1.2 Workforce challenges

Multiple published reports and research have identified persistent workforce challenges across all phases and roles in IME. These include:

- Shortages of fluent Irish-speaking teachers across all phases, particularly at post-primary level.
- A lack of subject specialists at post-primary level, particularly in STEM subjects.
- A lack of SEN support staff, including the supply of Irish-speaking educational psychologists.
- High workload and burnout among existing staff.
- Larger class sizes resulting from unfilled vacancies.

- Insufficient supply of qualified classroom assistants and early years practitioners.¹

Data from June 2023 recorded 33 vacancies at primary level (31 full-time and 2 part-time) and 16 vacant positions across the five post-primary settings, with eight newly qualified post-primary IME teachers due to graduate that summer.²

The consultation process carried out as part of drafting the Bill indicated that workforce gaps have increasingly been addressed through informal means, including reliance on existing staff working beyond their contracted responsibilities and on the capacity of support organisations and volunteers.³

Teacher supply pressures are not confined to the IME sector in Northern Ireland. Across grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland in 2024/25, there were 21,803 teachers, of whom 21.5% worked part-time, giving a full-time equivalent figure of 20,123.6.⁴ There were 1,742 teacher vacancies at the end of the 2023/24 academic year, of which 360 (20.7%) remained unfilled by November 2024, compared with 19% unfilled the previous year. The highest proportion of unfilled vacancies was in special schools, at 28.1%.⁵

1.3 Projected future need

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta reported in August 2023 that the sector had grown by 8.5% over the preceding five years and projected a further 4% growth over the

¹ These include: [Department of Education, *Review of Irish-Medium Education \(2008\)*](#); Department of Education Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, [A Fair Start: Final Report and Action Plan](#) (May 2021); Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, [Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector](#) (August 2023); A O'Boyle et al., ['Fair? Shared? Supported? Examining Expectations and Realities for Irish-Medium Practitioners'](#), Centre for Language Education Research, Queen's University Belfast (February 2024); and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, [Submission to the Council of Europe Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#) (2024).

² Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, [Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector](#) (August 2023)

³ P Sheehan, [Irish-Medium Education Workforce Plan Consultation Summary Report](#) (June 2025)

⁴ Department of Education, [Teacher workforce statistics in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland, 2024/25](#) (June 2025)

⁵ Department of Education, [Teacher vacancy, sickness absence and substitution costs bulletin 2024/25](#) (June 2025)

following five years. Against that backdrop, the report projected rising teacher demand across both phases of education.⁶

At primary level, the total number of teachers required was projected to rise from 209 in 2022/23 to 245 by 2027/28, with the estimated annual ITE graduate requirement increasing from 24 to 41 over the same period. At post-primary level, teacher numbers required were projected to rise from 111 to 159, with the annual ITE graduate requirement estimated at between 24 and 28. The projections accounted for growth, new school provision, retirements, attrition and an existing shortage of substitute teachers estimated at 15 posts.

These figures should be treated with some caution. The demand side of the projections was based on applying current pupil-teacher ratios to projected enrolment growth, which is a standard approach, but the supply side, including estimates of attrition and departures from the sector, drew on anecdotal evidence gathered informally from schools rather than verified administrative data. The report acknowledged this limitation but noted that the small size of the sector makes informal intelligence gathering more reliable than it would be in a larger system. No more recent published projections are available, and the absence of a systematic data collection framework for the IME workforce means it is not possible to verify how the position has changed since the report was published in August 2023.

The report also captured the position as of June 2023: 33 vacancies were unfilled across 35 primary settings and 16 across 5 post-primary settings, with only 8 post-primary ITE graduates due to complete training that year.⁷

1.4 Challenge of teaching in a minority language

Research published in 2024 by Queen's University Belfast found that teaching through Irish places greater demands on practitioners than teaching in a shared dominant language. The research identified a range of additional demands on Irish-medium education staff:

⁶ Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, [Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector](#) (August 2023)

⁷ As cited above

- Developing subject-specific teaching and assessment materials that are not commercially available in Irish.
- Translating communications and administrative documents into both languages. Teaching language and vocabulary alongside subject content.
- Working without suitably trained Irish-speaking classroom assistants.
- At post-primary level, staff reported teaching subjects outside their specialism because suitably qualified subject specialists were not available.
- Teachers also described spending significant time outside school hours preparing resources that their counterparts in English-medium schools can access readily.

The research concluded that these additional requirements are not exceptional to the Northern Ireland context but reflect an internationally documented pattern in settings where education is delivered through a minority language.

What makes the Northern Ireland position significant is that these additional demands exist before the impact of workforce shortages is considered. Where vacancies remain unfilled or staff are deployed outside their subject specialism, the effect on both staff wellbeing and educational quality is likely to be more acute than in a mainstream English-medium school, because the baseline workload is already higher.⁸

1.5 Special educational needs and IME

The provision of special educational needs (SEN) support through the medium of Irish represents a recurring policy concern within the IME sector. In 2022/23, 22 per cent of pupils in Irish-medium education had special educational needs, compared with 19 per cent of pupils in English-medium education. Available evidence indicates that existing SEN support services, which were developed primarily to meet the needs of the mainstream English-medium sector, face limitations in addressing the

⁸A O'Boyle et al., 'Fair? Shared? Supported? Examining Expectations and Realities for Irish-Medium Practitioners', *Centre for Language Education Research*, Queen's University Belfast (February 2024)

linguistic and pedagogical requirements of immersion education contexts.⁹ The Department of Education's 2008 Review of Irish-Medium Education included four specific recommendations on SEN provision:

- That the Education and Skills Authority (ESA, now the Education Authority) should develop capacity to meet SEN needs through the medium of Irish, including through appropriately skilled SEN support staff with Irish-language skills;
- That where Irish-medium SEN support was unavailable, provision through English should be sensitive to the needs of children learning in an immersion context;
- That existing good practice in SEN support in IME settings should be identified, shared and promoted by the Education Authority and support agencies on an all-Ireland and East-West basis; and
- That the development of high-level diagnostic assessment tools specifically for the Irish-medium sector should be investigated.¹⁰

Though no formal audit of implementation has been published; Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta have noted that the majority of the 2008 Review's recommendations, including those related to SEN remained unimplemented.¹¹

Educational psychologists and speech and language therapists engaged with the IME sector typically lack Irish-language proficiency, which limits the extent to which assessments or consultations can be conducted through Irish.¹²

⁹ Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (2023). [Submission to the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages: Parallel Report for the Sixth Periodic Monitoring Cycle](#). Belfast: NIHRC, para. 4.5; Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland (2023). [Investing in a Better Future: Volume 2 — System reform and thematic analysis](#). Belfast: Department of Education, paras 3.151–3.153.

¹⁰ Department of Education, *Review of Irish-Medium Education* (Department of Education, 2008), Recommendation 17, pp. 96–97. The 2008 Review addresses its recommendations to the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), the body proposed at that time as successor to the five Education and Library Boards. The ESA did not come into existence under that name; the Education Authority was established under the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 and became operational on 1 April 2015.

¹¹ M Ó Mainnín et al. *Irish Medium Education and the 'Statutory Duty'*, p. 36. The assessment that most of the 2008 Review's recommendations remained unimplemented reflects the view expressed by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta to the research team. Practitioner accounts corroborating this assessment appear at p. 42 of the same work.

¹² Cited above pp. 42–43.

Qualitative research with IME practitioners, including principals and teachers, has recorded accounts of professionals advising parents that the IME sector could not meet their child's needs and of children requiring access to specialist provision being referred away from their IME school. While the Education Authority has stated this is not its policy, practitioner accounts describe it as a recurrent experience.¹³

Research by Queen's University Belfast's Centre for Language Education Research found that SEN assessment in IME is a particularly underdeveloped area, with practitioners reporting a lack of standardised diagnostic tools that are valid and reliable for use with an IME population and concern that pupils requiring additional support are not receiving it or are receiving it later than is appropriate.¹⁴

The 2023 Independent Review of Education 'Investing in a Better Future' recommended that the Educational Psychology Service develop sufficient expertise to support children with SEN in the IME sector and to address language barriers, noting that demand for psychological assessment exceeds available capacity across Northern Ireland more broadly.¹⁵

In February 2026 the Minister of Education confirmed that the IME Strategy under development will include a dedicated pillar focused on special educational needs and that officials are working with SEN policy colleagues, the Education Authority, assessment experts and Irish-medium stakeholders to explore the development or adaptation of appropriate bilingual SEN assessment tools.¹⁶ An internal EA Educational Psychology Service Working Group meets regularly and is focused on identifying ways to support Irish-medium schools.¹⁷ No specific engagement has taken place between the Department and the Department of Education in the

¹³ Cited above pp. 42–43.

¹⁴D Kirwan et al., *Fair, Shared, Supported: Expectations and Realities for Irish-Medium Practitioners* (Queen's University Belfast Centre for Language Education Research, 2023), pp. 5–6.

¹⁵ Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland (2023). [Investing in a Better Future: Volume 2. System reform and thematic analysis](#). Belfast: Department of Education, Northern Ireland. See specifically paragraphs 3.151–3.153.

¹⁶ AQW [40433/22-27](#); AQW [42821/22-27](#)

¹⁷ AQW [30105/22-27](#)

Republic of Ireland on sharing Irish-medium teaching resources; the Minister stated that this will be explored.¹⁸

1.6 Socioeconomic disadvantage and IME

Available data indicate that the IME sector serves a pupil population with a disproportionately high level of socio-economic disadvantage relative to the English-medium sector. The primary measure used to assess disadvantage in Northern Ireland schools is free school meal entitlement (FSME), which is used as a proxy indicator of household poverty and low income. According to NISRA and Department of Education data, 35.4 per cent of primary-age pupils in Irish-medium schools were entitled to free school meals in 2020/21, compared with 28.5 per cent in English-medium primary schools; at post-primary level the gap was more pronounced, at 44.3 per cent in Irish-medium schools against 26.8 per cent in English-medium schools.¹⁹

There is no detailed causal account of why IME schools serve a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils than the English-medium sector, however, the modern IME sector originated in working-class, Irish-speaking communities in West Belfast, with Bunscoil Phobal Feirste established in 1971 in the Shaw's Road urban Gaeltacht, and many of the sector's earliest and largest schools developed in areas of significant socio-economic deprivation.²⁰

The extent to which the disadvantage profile of the IME sector is fully understood and whether it is appropriately reflected in resource allocation and planning decisions has not been formally examined in published research specific to the sector.²¹

¹⁸ AQW [30809/22-27](#)

¹⁹M Ó Mainnín et al., *Irish Medium Education and the 'Statutory Duty': A Rights Perspective* (Queen's University Belfast, 2022), p. 37, citing Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency/Department of Education, *School Enrolments* (NISRA/DE, 2021).

²⁰M Ó Mainnín et al., *Irish Medium Education and the 'Statutory Duty': A Rights Perspective* (Queen's University Belfast, 2022), p. 14.

²¹ M Ó Mainnín et al., *Irish Medium Education and the 'Statutory Duty': A Rights Perspective* (Queen's University Belfast, 2022), p. 14.

1.7 Irish-medium education: developments to date

The following subsections set out the principal measures and developments relating to Irish-medium education workforce supply and planning

1.7.1 The 2008 Review of Irish-Medium Education

The most recent departmental review of the Irish-medium education sector remains the Department of Education's *Review of Irish-Medium Education* published in 2008. The review identified workforce supply as one of several challenges requiring action and made a series of recommendations on teacher recruitment, training and retention.²² Research published in 2022 noted that many of those recommendations remained partially or wholly outstanding, despite the sector having grown by approximately 80 per cent in the intervening period.²³

1.7.2 Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta was established by the Department of Education in 2000 to develop all aspects of Irish-medium education for public benefit. It receives its core funding through grant-in-aid from the Department under Article 89(2) of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and was designated an Executive Non-Departmental Public Body in 2012. Its functions include promoting Irish-medium education to DE, the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment and other bodies, and advising the Department on issues relating to the supply of teachers and other staff for the sector.²⁴

1.7.3 Initial teacher education provision

Initial teacher education (ITE) in Northern Ireland is delivered through two routes: a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for graduates and a four-year

²² R McVeigh, *Irish Medium Education and the Statutory Duty: A Rights Perspective* (Conradh na Gaeilge and Committee on the Administration of Justice, 2022)

²³ Cited above

²⁴ Department of Education, *Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) Partnership Agreement* (31 March 2026), available at education-ni.gov.uk

Bachelor of Education (BEd) undergraduate degree. Three higher education institutions offer ITE programmes with a specialist focus on Irish-medium education.

At primary level, St Mary's offers a four-year BEd Hons (Bilingual) programme with 18 places annually and a one-year PGCE with 20 places annually, giving a combined annual capacity of 38 primary graduates.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta noted that on paper the supply of primary teachers appears relatively healthy in terms of numbers trained, but identified retention as a significant problem, with anecdotal evidence suggesting around 40% of graduates enter the IME sector. Factors cited include graduates taking up positions abroad, movement to schools in the Republic of Ireland and approximately 15% of graduates taking up posts in English-medium schools.²⁵

Research drawing on stakeholder interviews conducted in 2023 further noted that student teachers on the bilingual BEd route typically complete their first two years of placement in English-medium schools, with placements moving to Irish-medium settings only in years three and four. This structure was described as functioning in practice as dual-language rather than full-immersion teacher education.²⁶

At post-primary level, Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University each offer post-primary PGCE programmes in partnership with St Mary's, with students applying to one institution or the other depending on their subject specialism. Students complete their subject specialism at their home institution alongside an Irish-medium enhancement course delivered by St Mary's, with eight places available annually.²⁷

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta identified concerns with this arrangement, noting that applicants cannot apply directly to a dedicated Irish-medium course but must apply to QUB or Ulster University and indicate an interest in the Irish-medium enhancement as a secondary step.²⁸

²⁵ Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, [Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector](#) (August 2023)

²⁶ A O'Boyle et al., 'Fair? Shared? Supported? Examining Expectations and Realities for Irish-Medium Practitioners', *Centre for Language Education Research*, Queen's University Belfast (February 2023)

²⁷ Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, [Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector](#) (August 2023)

²⁸ Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, [Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector](#) (August 2023)

A further constraint on post-primary IME teacher supply is that undergraduate subject offerings do not currently provide pathways for students to combine Irish with a specialist subject such as Mathematics or Physics. At QUB, students can undertake joint degrees combining French with a range of subjects including Mathematics and Physics, but the equivalent offering combining Irish with specialist subjects is more limited. This restricts the pipeline of graduates entering the post-primary PGCE with both the Irish-language competence and the subject specialism required for IME teaching at post-primary level.²⁹

1.7.4 Education Authority: Teacher Developer for Irish-medium education

Research published in 2022 noted that Irish-medium education within the Education Authority was supported by a single part-time directed officer and a head of sectoral support, without a dedicated team structure.³⁰ From August 2021 the Education Authority additionally appointed a Teacher Developer for Irish-medium education on a temporary basis. The current status of that post and the overall staffing arrangements for Irish-medium education within the Education Authority are not clear.

1.7.5 Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta: teacher supply action plan (2023)

In August 2023 Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta published 'Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector', a proposed action plan to address staffing shortages at primary and post-primary level.³¹ The report documented 33 primary vacancies and 16 post-primary vacancies as of June 2023, with eight newly qualified post-primary teachers due to graduate that summer. The plan identified recommended actions on recruitment, retention and initial teacher education, including promoting IME teaching as a career path in partnership with ITE providers, addressing career progression and workload concerns that were contributing to

²⁹ Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, [Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector](#) (August 2023)

³⁰ M Ó Mainnín et al., *Irish Medium Education and the 'Statutory Duty': A Rights Perspective* (Queen's University Belfast, 2022), p. 21.

³¹ Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, *Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector* (August 2023)

teachers leaving the sector and reviewing ITE programme structures to strengthen immersion placements.³²

For context, teacher supply pressures are not confined to the IME sector. As noted in section 1.2, across grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland in 2024/25, there were 1,742 teacher vacancies at the end of the 2023/24 academic year, of which 360 (20.7%) remained unfilled by November 2024, compared with 19 per cent unfilled the previous year. The highest proportion of unfilled vacancies was in special schools, at 28.1 per cent.

These figures are not directly comparable with the IME vacancy data above, as they are drawn from different data sources covering different time periods. Nonetheless, the available evidence indicates that difficulties with teacher recruitment and retention extend across the school system as a whole.

1.7.6 A Fair Start (2021) and the Independent Review of Education (2023)

The A Fair Start report, published in May 2021, acknowledged the sector's persistent difficulty in recruiting sufficient teachers and noted the need for greater focus on encouraging more Irish speakers to enter initial teacher education. It also highlighted that Irish-medium education has a disproportionately high proportion of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and pupils with special educational needs.³³

The Independent Review of Education, published in December 2023, also identified that the Irish-medium sector faces ongoing problems recruiting sufficient teachers and that increased demand requires a corresponding increase in qualified teachers across all phases.³⁴

³² Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, *Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector* (August 2023)

³³ Department of Education Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, *A Fair Start: Final Report and Action Plan* (May 2021) p66.

³⁴ Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland, *Investing in a Better Future*, Volume 2 (December 2023) para 7.54.

1.7.7 Initial Teacher Education Bursary Scheme (2025)

In September 2025 the Minister of Education announced a new Initial Teacher Education Bursary Scheme, under which PGCE students in selected shortage subjects receive a bursary of £17,000, comprising full tuition fee coverage and £1,000 per month for living costs, while Bachelor of Education undergraduate students receive full fee coverage across four years of study.³⁵ The scheme allocates eight PGCE places annually for the Irish-medium Post-Primary Enhancement Programme at a projected total cost of £550,240 over the five-year period from 2026/27 to 2030/31.³⁶ The Department has stated that it intends to align the scheme with broader workforce planning objectives for Irish-medium education, including special educational needs provision and will consider the sector's specific needs when finalising ITE intakes.³⁷

1.7.8 TransformED NI Strategy and Delivery Plan (2025)

In March 2025 the Department of Education published TransformED NI: A Strategy for Educational Excellence in Northern Ireland, its major system-wide education reform programme. The strategy is structured around curriculum reform, assessment and qualifications, teacher professional learning, school leadership and tackling educational disadvantage.³⁸

The accompanying Delivery Plan, published in April 2025, commits to implementing a monitoring framework for teacher supply and demand across Northern Ireland by the 2026/27 academic year. The plan also includes financial incentives for shortage subjects at an annual budget of £1.5 million and to a £27 million Teacher Professional Learning Fund for the period 2025 to 2028.³⁹ The shortage subjects

³⁵ Department of Education, 'Givan announces bursaries to tackle teacher shortages at post-primary' (23 September 2025), available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk>

³⁶ AQW [31884/22-27](#)

³⁷ AQW [31882/22-27](#); AQW [31883/22-27](#)

³⁸ Department of Education, [TransformED NI: A Strategy for Educational Excellence in Northern Ireland](#) (March 2025), available at [education-ni.gov.uk](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk).

³⁹ Cited above

³⁹ Cited above; Department of Education, [TransformED NI Delivery Plan](#) (April 2025), available at [education-ni.gov.uk](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk)

identified in the Delivery Plan as priorities for supply monitoring are mathematics, science, information technology and technology and design.

The Bill, if enacted, would create a statutory IME-specific workforce planning duty that sits outside and alongside the general teacher supply monitoring framework proposed under TransformED. It is not clear from either TransformED document whether the Department's proposed monitoring arrangements would capture IME-specific data. It is worth considering how IME workforce planning under the Bill would interact with the broader TransformED monitoring infrastructure.

1.7.9 Assessment materials and curriculum resources

The Department has confirmed that it is developing linguistically appropriate assessment tools for Irish-medium pupils. CCEA has developed a Computer Adaptive Assessment for numeracy which was piloted with 491 pupils across 14 Irish-medium schools in May and June 2025. A bespoke Irish literacy assessment framework has been developed by CCEA in collaboration with Irish-medium schools and stakeholders, with piloting to follow; the Irish-medium Computer Adaptive Assessment for literacy and numeracy is anticipated to be operational across Key Stages 2 and 3 by autumn 2028.⁴⁰ As an interim measure, paper-based Key Stage assessments in Irish and numeracy for pupils in Years 4, 7 and 10 in all Irish-medium schools were introduced from the 2025/26 academic year, with tests drafted by Irish-medium practitioners.⁴¹

The Department has also indicated that it provides professional development support for Irish-medium teachers and education workers, including specialist training in pedagogy, special educational needs and disability, digital technology and immersive education, and access to the EALearn platform. It also co-hosts an annual conference with St Mary's University College focused on digital and AI approaches in Irish-medium education, and noted that additional training opportunities are available through organisations outside the Department and the Education Authority.⁴²

⁴⁰ AQW [41359/22-27](#)

⁴¹ AQW [43591/22-27](#)

⁴² AQW [40964/22-27](#)

1.7.10 Non-statutory Irish-medium education strategy

The Minister of Education has stated that the Department is developing a non-statutory Irish-medium education strategy, expected in mid-2027. The Bill Sponsor's Explanatory and Financial Memorandum notes that it is not possible to assess the potential of such a strategy to address workforce planning until it is published and that it would in any case carry no enforceable planning obligations.⁴³

If the Bill were enacted before mid-2027, the Department would be under a statutory obligation to produce a workforce plan within 12 months of Royal Assent while simultaneously developing the broader non-statutory strategy. The relationship between those two documents has not been addressed in any published departmental position.

1.8 Existing Northern Ireland legislative framework

Article 89 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 places a legal obligation on the Department of Education to take steps to support and promote the development of Irish-medium education. Under Article 89 the Department is also empowered to provide funding to organisations whose purpose is to support or promote Irish-medium education and to approve the establishment of new Irish-medium schools. The article defines Irish-medium education as education provided in an Irish-speaking school.⁴⁴

The legal significance of the statutory duty has been recognised judicially. In a judgement delivered on the 25 October 2011, the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal stated in its judgement that: "The imposition of the statutory duty has and is intended to have practical consequences and legislative significance."⁴⁵

⁴³ P Sheehan, [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum to the Irish-Medium Education \(Workforce Plan\) Bill](#) (Bill 28/22-27) (Northern Ireland Assembly, 3 March 2026) para 17.

⁴⁴ [Education \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1998, art. 89.](#)

⁴⁵ [2011] NIQB 98, para. 15. The judgement was delivered in relation to an application by Coláiste Feirste, a full-immersion Irish-medium post-primary school, contesting the refusal of the Department of Education to provide transport services for pupils wishing to undertake their education at Coláiste Feirste through the medium of the Irish language, in both the Greater Belfast and rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Research published in 2022 by Conradh na Gaeilge and the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) concluded that a significant gap existed in the implementation of the Article 89 statutory duty in practice, noting in particular the absence of any overarching departmental strategy for the sector, any mechanism for measuring how effectively the duty was being implemented and any shared objectives or targets between the Department and the sector.⁴⁶

2 Comparative jurisdictions

Three comparable jurisdictions provide useful context for scrutiny of the Bill: the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Each has developed approaches to language-medium education workforce support, though the nature and statutory basis of those approaches differs significantly.

The Republic of Ireland and Scotland both have statutory frameworks for language-medium education provision, but neither has placed workforce planning for language-medium teacher supply on a statutory footing. Both have made sustained investment through non-statutory workforce planning arrangements, including dedicated initial teacher education routes, bursaries and cross-government coordination mechanisms, without resolving documented shortages

Wales is the only jurisdiction considered in this paper to have placed language-medium education planning, including workforce planning, on a statutory footing through primary legislation. Under section 25 of the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025, workforce planning is a required component of a National Framework for Welsh language education, though the first Framework is not due until July 2028 and it is too early to assess whether statutory status will produce materially different workforce outcomes.

Together the three comparators provide evidence on two related questions: whether non-statutory investment alone is sufficient to address language-medium workforce

⁴⁶M Ó Mainnín et al., *Irish Medium Education and the 'Statutory Duty': A Rights Perspective* (Queen's University Belfast, 2022), pp. 38 and 53.

pressures, and what a statutory planning framework looks like in a comparable jurisdiction. Both questions are relevant to scrutiny of the Bill.

Of the four jurisdictions considered, Wales and the Republic of Ireland require the minority language to be taught to all pupils regardless of school type — Welsh is compulsory in all state schools to age 16, and Irish is a core curriculum subject in all primary and post-primary schools. Scotland and Northern Ireland, by contrast, confine language-medium provision to dedicated schools and units on an opt-in basis.

2.1 The Republic of Ireland

2.1.1 ROI statutory framework

The Republic of Ireland's approach to Irish-medium education has a layered statutory basis, though as with Scotland this does not extend to workforce planning specifically. Irish is designated the first national language of the state under Article 8 of the Irish Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann).⁴⁷ At the level of primary legislation, section 31 of the Education Act 1998 places a duty on the Minister for Education to establish a body to plan and coordinate the provision of textbooks and resources for teaching through Irish and to advise the Minister on policies relating to the provision and promotion of education through Irish in recognised schools.⁴⁸ The body established under that provision is An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), the statutory body responsible for supporting Irish-medium and Gaeltacht education.⁴⁹ More broadly, section 6 of the Education Act 1998 includes among the objects of the Act a duty to contribute to the realisation of national policy on the extension of bilingualism in Irish society and in particular the achievement of a greater use of the Irish language at school and in the community.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Bunreacht na hÉireann, Article 8, available at: [Irish Statute Book Constitution of Ireland](#)

⁴⁸ Education Act 1998 (No. 51 of 1998), section 31, available at: <https://www.achtanna.ie/en/act/en511998>

⁴⁹ An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, 'About COGG', available at: [COGG | About Us](#)

⁵⁰ Education Act 1998 (No. 51 of 1998), section 6(i), as cited above.

These statutory provisions relate to the promotion and resourcing of Irish-medium education. They do not place any obligation on the Department in respect of planning the teaching workforce needed to deliver that provision.

The Republic of Ireland therefore shares with Scotland the characteristic of having a statutory framework for language-medium education provision that has not been extended to workforce planning.

2.1.2 Irish language competency and the teaching workforce

Irish is a compulsory subject in all state primary and post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland and is examined at Leaving Certificate level. Irish language competency is embedded within the teacher registration framework, all primary teachers must demonstrate Irish language proficiency as a condition of registration with the Teaching Council, with a minimum Higher Level Leaving Certificate grade in Irish required for entry to initial teacher education programmes. Post-primary teachers are not subject to a general Irish language requirement but must demonstrate fluency where they are employed in an Irish-speaking school or wish to teach Irish as a subject.⁵¹ This framework means that Irish language competency in the general teaching workforce is a baseline requirement rather than a sector-specific challenge, which distinguishes the Republic's position from that of Northern Ireland.

Irish has also been identified as one of several post-primary subjects with a system-wide shortage of qualified teachers able to teach it as a subject across all schools, a challenge distinct from, though related to, the shortage of teachers able to deliver the full curriculum through the medium of Irish in Gaelcholáistí (Irish secondary schools).

2.1.3 Documented shortages in Irish-medium settings

Despite this baseline, the Republic of Ireland faces its own documented shortages specifically in Irish-medium schools. A survey published in November 2025 by the Irish National Teachers Organisation, the Irish Primary Principals Network and the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association found that 43 per cent of

⁵¹ Teaching Council of Ireland, [Irish Language Requirement](https://teachingcouncil.ie), available at teachingcouncil.ie; Department of Education, Government of Ireland, [More information about teaching in Ireland](https://gov.ie), available at gov.ie.

Gaelscoileanna (Irish-medium primary schools) reported term-long teacher vacancies, compared with 10 per cent of mainstream schools.⁵²

The situation is more pronounced at post-primary level in Gaelcholáistí which require teachers to combine subject specialism with the fluency to deliver that specialism entirely through the medium of Irish, a dual requirement that significantly reduces the pool of eligible candidates beyond what either condition alone would produce. There is also a shortage of Gaelcholáistí at post-primary level, meaning that pupils completing primary education through Irish frequently have no accessible post-primary setting through which to continue their education in the language.⁵³

2.1.4 Initial teacher education provision

The Republic has invested in a range of dedicated initial teacher education provision for Irish-medium settings. At primary level, an Irish-medium Bachelor of Education is delivered by Marino Institute of Education; two cohorts totalling 68 students have graduated since the programme was established in 2019 and 165 students are currently enrolled.⁵⁴ At post-primary level, the Máistir Gairmiúil san Oideachas (Professional Master of Education) at the University of Galway is the only initial teacher education programme delivered entirely through the medium of Irish, with 55 students enrolled for 2024/25 and a bursary of €2,000 per annum available to students. The programme has been supported by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (statutory body responsible for supporting Irish-medium and Gaeltacht education) since 2017.⁵⁵

For practising teachers and school leaders, a Master of Education in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht Education is delivered by Trinity College Dublin, with 48 students enrolled for 2024/25. Budget 2024 also introduced an Irish language upskilling

⁵² Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Irish Primary Principals' Network and Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, [Teacher shortage survey: Special schools, DEIS and Irish-medium education continue to be worst hit](#) (November 2025), available at

⁵³ J Harford and M Fleming, 'Teacher supply in Ireland: anatomy of a crisis', *Irish Educational Studies* (2023); 'Crises, reforms and funding challenges: six key issues facing the next minister for education', *Irish Times*, 2 December 2024

⁵⁴ [Dáil Éireann Written Question 322](#) (11 February 2025).

⁵⁵ [Dáil Éireann Written Question 322](#) (11 February 2025).

programme for post-primary teachers delivered by Trinity College Dublin.⁵⁶ This programme, which extends an existing upskilling model already in place for shortage subjects including mathematics, physics and Spanish, is designed to qualify practising teachers to teach Irish as a subject in mainstream post-primary schools and is not specific to Irish-medium settings.

2.1.5 Investment and its limits

Despite this investment, Irish has been identified as one of several post-primary subjects with an acute shortage of qualified teachers, alongside STEM subjects, modern foreign languages and Home Economics.⁵⁷ Overall teacher supply has grown, with a 20% increase in initial teacher education graduates between 2018 and 2023 and a 30% increase in teachers registered with the Teaching Council since 2017, but this growth has not resolved the specific shortages in Irish-medium settings.⁵⁸

In November 2025 the Minister for Education and Youth launched two developments directed at strengthening Irish-medium education. The 'Policy for Irish-Medium Education outside of the Gaeltacht' establishes a range of support mechanisms including teaching resources, professional learning opportunities and a 'Taskforce on Models of Provision for Irish-Medium Education,' tasked with co-designing a pathway to grow the sector.⁵⁹

The Department has also provided €2.18 million in additional funding to expand the Gaelbhreach scheme, a school-based incentive programme administered by Gael Linn which supports schools to promote spoken Irish outside the classroom.⁶⁰

Patron bodies and language advocacy groups, including Conradh na Gaeilge, Gaelscoileanna and An Foras Pátrúnachta, gave the policy a mixed reception. While welcoming some elements, they criticised the plan as insufficiently ambitious and noted that little progress had been made since a similar goal of expanding Irish

⁵⁶ [Dáil Éireann Written Question 322](#) (11 February 2025).

⁵⁷ [Dáil Éireann Written Question 500](#) (5 February 2025); J Cummins TD (Social Democrats, Dublin South-Central), 'Teacher crisis hitting Ireland's most vulnerable pupils', *Dublin People*, 3 November 2025.

⁵⁸ [Dáil Éireann Written Question 322](#) (11 February 2025).

⁵⁹ Government of Ireland, [Policy for Irish-Medium Education outside of the Gaeltacht](#) (November 2025).

⁶⁰ Gaelbhreach, [About](#);

medium provision was outlined in a cross-party statement on Irish in 2006. An Foras Pátrúnachta cautioned that, without clear measurable targets for the taskforce, similar limited progress could be expected over the following twenty years.⁶¹

2.1.6 Workforce data and planning

For 2024/25, the Department allocated over 4,000 teaching posts to the Irish-medium sector across primary and post-primary schools. However, the Department does not collate data on how many of those teachers are able to teach uniquely through the medium of Irish, as recruitment is managed by over 3,700 individual school authorities rather than centrally. The scale of the Irish-language specific workforce gap within the broader teaching workforce therefore cannot be precisely quantified from available departmental data.⁶²

The Department of Education in the Republic of Ireland commenced a teacher workforce planning project in October 2024, supported by UNESCO and funded by the European Union's Technical Support Instrument, focusing on strategic workforce planning for teachers across the Irish education system. While this represents an acknowledgement of the need for evidence-based workforce planning, the project remains a non-statutory initiative and does not place any binding planning obligations on the Department in respect of Irish-medium teacher supply specifically.⁶³

⁶¹['Irish-language education policy ignores elephant in the room, advocacy groups warn'](#), Irish Times, 7 November 2025.

⁶² Dáil Éireann, Written Answer by the Minister for Education, 11 February 2025, [Parliamentary Question 322](#)

⁶³ UNESCO, 'Strategic Workforce Planning for Teachers' (UNESCO, 2024), available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/teachers/strategic-workforce-planning>; Dáil Éireann, Written Answer by the Minister for Education, 27 February 2025, [Parliamentary Question 72](#).

2.2 Scotland

2.2.1 Gaelic medium education in Scotland

Gaelic-medium education in Scotland is provided through dedicated standalone schools and through Gaelic-medium units within English-medium schools. The sector has grown substantially since its establishment, from 24 pupils in 1985, the first year of Gaelic-medium provision, to 5,673 pupils in 2025, according to the Scottish Government Pupil Census.⁶⁴ Scottish Government Pupil Census supplementary statistics for 2025 show that Gaelic-medium education provision was recorded across 19 of Scotland's 32 local authorities, with provision at primary, secondary and early learning levels. Gaelic-medium secondary provision was available in 14 local authorities.⁶⁵

2.2.2 Statutory framework

Scotland has a layered statutory framework for Gaelic education, though none of its provisions extends to workforce planning specifically. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 established Bòrd na Gàidhlig and placed a duty on it to prepare a national Gaelic Language Plan, and enabled Bòrd na Gàidhlig to require public bodies to prepare and implement Gaelic language plans in connection with their functions.⁶⁶

The Education (Scotland) Act 2016 went further in respect of education specifically, placing a duty on education authorities to promote and support Gaelic-medium education and Gaelic learner education, and establishing a process by which parents may request that their education authority assesses the need for Gaelic-medium primary education in their area.⁶⁷ Under section 9 of the 2005 Act, Bòrd na Gàidhlig has a duty to issue statutory guidance on Gaelic education, to which relevant public

⁶⁴Scottish Government (2025) [Pupil Census Supplementary Statistics 2025](#). (March) Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

⁶⁵Cited above

⁶⁶ Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2005/7/contents>

⁶⁷ Education (Scotland) Act 2016; Scottish Government, 'Gaelic', available at: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/languages/gaelic/>

authorities must have regard where their functions relate to Gaelic education.⁶⁸ The Scottish Languages Act 2025 added a further general duty on educational bodies to provide Gaelic education, or access to it, where relevant.⁶⁹

These statutory duties relate to the provision and promotion of Gaelic education. They do not place any obligation on education authorities or the Scottish Government in respect of planning the teaching workforce needed to deliver that provision. Scotland therefore provides an example of a jurisdiction where statutory duties around Gaelic education have been progressively strengthened over two decades without extending to workforce planning, which remains a non-statutory function.

2.2.3 Documented shortages

The Scottish Government's guidance to the Scottish Funding Council on initial teacher education for 2025-26 explicitly identifies Gaelic-medium education as a priority area. It requires universities to contribute to the teacher education workstream of the 'Faster Rate of Progress initiative for Gaelic', a cross-government coordination mechanism led by Scottish Ministers that brings together approximately 25 public bodies to progress Gaelic language commitments. The initiative operates through working groups and is not placed on a statutory footing; its working documents are not publicly available.^{70 71}

Official Scottish Government data on Gaelic-medium ITE recruitment indicates the scale of the supply challenge. Papers published by the Strategic Board for Teacher Education in May 2023 show that secondary PGDE intake for Gaelic-medium education reached only 33 per cent of target in 2022/23, with three students recruited against a target of nine.⁷² The same papers identify Gaelic as one of several hard-to-

⁶⁸ Bòrd na Gàidhlig, Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2022), issued under section 9 of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, available at: <https://www.gaidhlig.scot/en/education/statutory-guidance-on-gaelic-education/>

⁶⁹ Scottish Languages Act 2025 asp 10; Education Scotland, 'Legislation', available at: <https://education.gov.scot/about-education-scotland/policies-and-information/education-policy-and-legislation/legislation/>

⁷⁰ Scottish Funding Council, [Intake Targets for Initial Teacher Education in AY 2025-26](#) (SFC, 2025).

⁷¹ Scottish Government, [Gaelic Language Plan 2022-2027](#) (Scottish Government, 2022); [University of Edinburgh, response to Bòrd na Gàidhlig consultation on Updates to Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education](#) (2024)

⁷² Scottish Government, Strategic Board for Teacher Education Meeting Papers, May 2023 (Scottish Government, 2023), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/strategic-board-teacher-education-meeting-papers-2023/pages/2/>

fill subjects requiring targeted action, noting that the shortage of Gaelic teachers itself reduces the pipeline of future teachers, as fewer pupils have the opportunity to study Gaelic to a level that would support entry to teacher education.⁷³

A 2023 report submitted to the Scottish Government as part of its consultation on the Scottish Languages Bill warned that teacher recruitment was the biggest obstacle to Gaelic-medium education and that the situation was likely to get significantly worse, with schools in remote and rural areas at risk of closing or reverting to English-medium instruction.⁷⁴

A survey by School Leaders Scotland identified a specific shortage of Gaelic-medium mathematics and science teachers, particularly in rural areas, and recruitment for Gaelic is listed among the subjects where vacancy rates are most acute in secondary schools.⁷⁵ The Scottish Government's 2024-25 guide to teaching as a career also confirms that there is a shortage of qualified Gaelic-medium teachers in Scotland.⁷⁶

2.2.4 Initial teacher education provision

Three dedicated Gaelic-medium primary Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programmes are offered at the University of Edinburgh, the University of the Highlands and Islands and the University of Strathclyde. The University of Strathclyde and the University of the Highlands and Islands also offer secondary PGDE courses for Gaelic as a subject and for teaching other subjects through the medium of Gaelic.⁷⁷

In 2023 the Scottish Government's Teaching Bursary scheme, which provides £20,000 to career changers undertaking a one-year PGDE in hard-to-fill subjects,

⁷³ As cited above

⁷⁴ B Robertson and M Foxley, report submitted to the Scottish Government consultation on Gaelic and Scots commitments and a Scottish Languages Bill (2023), as reported in Times Educational Supplement Scotland, 'Warning over crisis brewing in Gaelic-medium education', 16 March 2023, available at: <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/stark-warning-over-crisis-brewing-gaelic-medium-education>

⁷⁵ School Leaders Scotland, Subject Shortages in Scottish Secondary Education (School Leaders Scotland, May 2025), available at: <https://www.sls-scotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/SLS-Survey-on-Shortage-Subjects-Report-May-2025.pdf>

⁷⁶ Scottish Government, [Becoming a Teacher in Scotland 2024/25](#) (Scottish Government, 2024).

⁷⁷ PGDE primary programmes at the University of Edinburgh, the University of the Highlands and Islands and the University of Strathclyde; secondary PGDE courses at the University of Strathclyde and the University of the Highlands and Islands. See Scottish Funding Council, [Intake Targets for Initial Teacher Education in AY 2025-26](#) (Scottish Funding Council, 2025), Annex C.

was extended to include Gaelic as a secondary subject and Gaelic medium across all secondary subjects and in primary.⁷⁸ Bòrd na Gàidhlig additionally administers its own supplementary Gaelic Teacher Training Grants to support those undertaking PGDE programmes in Gaelic education.⁷⁹

2.2.5 Workforce planning arrangements

The Teacher Workforce Planning Advisory Group, a non-statutory advisory body, advises the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on annual intake targets for teacher education programmes, and its recommendations inform the targets that the Scottish Funding Council sets for individual universities. The Group has recommended that Gaelic-medium education should be treated as a separate target within the PGDE secondary subject allocation, in recognition of the distinct planning challenges of the sector. The Scottish Funding Council has also confirmed that universities may recruit above their allocated Gaelic-medium ITE target without financial penalty, reflecting the acute and persistent shortage of Gaelic-medium teachers.^{80 81 82}

Scotland's approach reflects sustained investment in Gaelic-medium teacher supply, including dedicated intake targets, bursaries and cross-government coordination through the Faster Rate of Progress initiative. The progressive strengthening of statutory duties around Gaelic education provision since 2005 has not, however, been accompanied by equivalent statutory obligations in respect of workforce planning. There is no direct equivalent to the workforce planning duty proposed in the Bill.

⁷⁸Scottish Government, [Teaching Bursary Scheme: FOI release](#) (Scottish Government, 2024).

⁷⁹Bòrd na Gàidhlig, [Gaelic Teacher Training Grants 2025/26](#) (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2025).

⁸⁰Scottish Government, [Teacher Workforce Planning Advisory Group minutes, October 2024](#) (Scottish Government, 2025).

⁸¹Scottish Government, FOI response on teacher numbers and teacher workforce planning process (2024), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-202400439555/>

⁸²Scottish Funding Council, Intake Targets for Initial Teacher Education in AY 2025-26 (SFC, 2025), available at: <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/intake-targets-for-initial-teacher-education-in-ay-2025-26/>

2.3 Wales

Wales is the only jurisdiction considered in this paper to have placed language-medium education planning, including workforce planning, on a statutory footing through primary legislation. It has done so not through a standalone workforce planning duty but as part of a broader statutory framework addressing Welsh language education across all ages and settings. The Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 combines a range of statutory measures, including a national planning framework, a local authority strategic planning system, a statutory school categorisation system and a new national body for Welsh language learning, within which workforce planning sits as a required and enforceable component.

2.3.1 Overarching drive to increase Welsh speaking

The Welsh Government's Welsh language strategy, *Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers*, published in July 2017, sets two headline targets: reaching one million Welsh speakers by 2050 and doubling the proportion of the population using Welsh daily to 20% by 2050. Education sits at the centre of the strategy, with a target of 30% of pupils being educated through the medium of Welsh by 2031, rising to 40% by 2050.

2.3.2 Moving to a statutory approach and why

The Welsh Government decided that the *Cymraeg 2050* strategy's ambitious targets required a more enforceable planning architecture than the non-statutory system could provide. The Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 was introduced to address this, addressing a range of policy areas. Among other provisions it placed the one million speakers target on a statutory footing for the first time⁸³ and established a statutory common reference system for describing Welsh language ability across all contexts, from education to the workplace and community.⁸⁴

Wales initially pursued its Welsh medium education workforce targets through non-statutory means, operating a system of local authority Welsh in Education Strategic

⁸³ [Welsh Language and Education \(Wales\) Act 2025 \(asc 2\), s. 1\(1\)\(a\)](#).

⁸⁴ Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 (asc 2), ss. 5-7; [Explanatory Notes to the Welsh Language and Education \(Wales\) Act 2025](#), para. 2.

Plans (WESP) alongside a Welsh in Education Workforce Plan published in 2022. The workforce plan set out a ten-year strategy across four aims: increasing the number of teachers able to teach through the medium of Welsh; increasing the number of practitioners supporting Welsh-medium learners; developing all practitioners' Welsh language skills; and developing leadership capacity for Welsh-medium schools. It was accompanied by a Data Analysis document 'Welsh in Education Workforce Plan: Data Analysis' which drew on a range of data sources to assess teaching levels, training trends and projected workforce gaps.⁸⁵

The 2024 update to the Data Analysis supporting the workforce plan found that key targets were not being met, including the target to double post-primary ITE enrolments in Welsh-medium education.⁸⁶ Local authorities also identified in their WESP annual reports that increasing the number of teaching staff able to teach Welsh represented the greatest risk to progress against their strategic plans. Two reviews in 2015 and 2017 also identified issues with the WESP structure itself noting that the locally driven strategic plans system made consistent national progress difficult to enforce, as Welsh Ministers had no power to impose binding targets on local authorities and outcomes varied significantly across the 22 authorities.⁸⁷

These continued workforce shortages despite sustained non-statutory investment reinforced the case for change.

2.3.3 The National Framework and workforce planning

At the heart of the new statutory system is a National Framework for Welsh Language Education and Learning Welsh, required under section 24 of the Act.⁸⁸ The overall policy objective, as set out in the Explanatory Memorandum, is to ensure that Welsh language education and the arrangements for learning Welsh beyond school are designed in an integrated way within a single comprehensive framework,

⁸⁵ Welsh Government, [Welsh in Education Workforce Plan: Data Analysis](#), Welsh Government, 2024 (updated).

⁸⁶ Cite above

⁸⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [Welsh in Education Strategic Plans](#), National Assembly for Wales, December 2015; A Roberts, [Review of Welsh in Education Strategic Plans for 2017 to 2020: Final Report](#), Welsh Government, August 2017.

⁸⁸ [Welsh Language and Education \(Wales\) Act 2025 \(asc 2\), s. 24.](#)

covering early years, compulsory education, tertiary education and lifelong learning.⁸⁹ It will set specific targets for each local authority and create a clear line of accountability from national targets through local authority plans to individual school delivery plans.⁹⁰

Workforce planning sits within the Framework as a required component under section 25 of the Act.⁹¹ The Explanatory Memorandum identifies its purpose as ensuring that the capacity of education practitioners is planned at national level so that there is an adequate workforce to achieve the Framework's targets.⁹² The Framework must include an assessment of practitioners needed in each local authority area to meet those targets and set out the steps Welsh Ministers will take to ensure sufficient practitioners are available and appropriately supported.⁹³ The 2022 workforce plan remains the operative document until the Framework is laid, at which point the statutory provisions under section 25 take over.⁹⁴ The first National Framework must be laid before Senedd Cymru by July 2028, with consultation on a draft planned for Autumn 2026.⁹⁵

Despite sustained non-statutory investment, workforce shortages in Welsh-medium education remained documented at the point the 2025 Act was introduced and were among the factors that prompted the move to a statutory framework. Whether placing workforce planning on a statutory footing will produce materially different outcomes remains to be seen, as the first National Framework under which the statutory workforce provisions will operate is not due until July 2028.

⁸⁹ Welsh Government, [Explanatory Memorandum to the Welsh Language and Education \(Wales\) Bill](#), para. 3.182.

⁹⁰ [Explanatory Notes to the Welsh Language and Education \(Wales\) Act 2025](#), paras. 4-5.

⁹¹ Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 (asc 2), s. 25.

⁹² Welsh Government, Explanatory Memorandum to the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill, as cited above, para. 3.186 (table entry: "Ensure that training, professional development and support is available for education practitioners in Wales").

⁹³ Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 (asc 2), s. 25(1) and (2).

⁹⁴ Welsh Government, [Cymraeg 2050: Welsh Language Strategy Action Plan 2026 to 2027](#), Welsh Government, March 2026, education workforce section.

⁹⁵ Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 (asc 2), s. 28(3); Welsh Government, [Cymraeg 2050: Welsh Language Strategy Action Plan 2026 to 2027](#), as cited above.

3 The Irish Medium Education(Workforce Plan) Bill

This section sets out the structure of the Bill and examines its key provisions. It considers the scope of the planning duty, the consultation requirements and the target-setting framework, drawing on comparator experience where relevant.

The comparative analysis in section 2 provides relevant context for understanding what the Bill would add to the existing legislative and policy landscape. The Republic of Ireland and Scotland both have statutory frameworks for language-medium education provision but illustrate the limits of non-statutory workforce planning arrangements in resolving teacher supply pressures, while the Welsh experience of moving to a statutory framework is particularly relevant to understanding what statutory status adds in practice.

3.1 The significance of statutory status

A statutory duty differs from a non-statutory commitment in ways that are directly relevant to the workforce planning context. It creates an enforceable legal obligation that is judicially reviewable. It also shifts the direction of accountability: rather than the responsible body defining its own planning standard, it becomes answerable to one set externally and subject to Assembly scrutiny.

The Welsh experience illustrates why that distinction has practical significance. One of the specific weaknesses the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 addresses is that local authorities could set their own targets under the non-statutory Welsh in Education Strategic Plans system, with no mechanism for Welsh Ministers to hold them to national objectives. The statutory framework reverses that, requiring local plans to respond to nationally set targets rather than originating locally.

In the Northern Ireland context, the Bill would create equivalent obligations specifically in relation to IME workforce planning. Unlike the existing Article 89 duty, which places a general obligation on the Department to encourage and facilitate IME without specifying how that obligation should be discharged or measured, the Bill would require a published plan, measurable targets and a reporting cycle, with the plan laid before the Assembly and implementation reported on within 18 months.

Whether those features would translate into materially better workforce outcomes in practice is a question the available evidence cannot yet answer. The Republic of Ireland and Scotland have both sustained investment in language-medium teacher supply through non-statutory workforce planning arrangements without resolving documented shortages, and Wales has introduced a statutory framework but is at too early a stage to assess its effectiveness.

The existing Northern Ireland legislative framework is also relevant here. The Article 89 duty has been the subject of judicial interpretation: in *Coláiste Feirste's Application* [2011] NIQB 98 the court confirmed that the duty is not merely aspirational and that its imposition has and is intended to have practical consequences and legislative significance. Research published in 2022 concluded that despite that legal significance, no overarching departmental strategy, measurement mechanism or shared objectives existed to give the duty structured effect in practice. The Bill would address that gap by establishing a defined planning framework with measurable targets and a reporting cycle.

3.2 Structure and scope of the Bill

The Bill is short and contains two operative clauses. Clause 1 inserts a new Article 89ZA into the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. Clause 2 provides for commencement and short title.⁹⁶

3.2.1 Clause 1: Duty to prepare a workforce plan

Clause 1 inserts a new Article 89ZA into the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, placing a duty on the Department of Education to prepare, publish and lay before the Assembly a workforce plan for the IME sector. Under Clause 1(1), the first plan must be published within 12 months of the Article coming into operation. Under Clause 1(2), subsequent plans must be prepared and published at intervals of not more than five years. Under Clause 1(3), the Minister of Education must lay each plan before the Assembly as soon as possible after publication. Under Clause 1(7),

⁹⁶ P Sheehan, [Irish-Medium Education \(Workforce Plan\) Bill \(Bill 28/22-27\) and Explanatory and Financial Memorandum](#) (Northern Ireland Assembly, 3 March 2026).

within 18 months of laying a plan before the Assembly, the Minister must publish a report on its implementation and lay that report before the Assembly.

In preparing the plan, Clause 1(4) requires the Department to consult with representative bodies covering schools, teachers, pupils and their parents as well as Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. Clause 1(4)(c) also permits consultation with such other persons as the Department thinks fit.

3.2.2 Scope of the planning duty

Clause 1(5) sets out five areas the workforce plan must address when prepared by the Department:

- Current and anticipated demands on the workforce;
- the sufficiency of the workforce to meet those demands;
- recruitment, retention and development of the workforce;
- the differing functions of persons within the workforce; and
- the types of settings providing IME.

Together these areas establish a broad planning framework covering demand, supply, workforce development and sector structure. The scope is high-level and the Bill does not prescribe how each area should be addressed or what level of analytical depth would be required. Two aspects of this framework merit closer examination: the term "differing functions" in Clause 1(5)(d), which is considered below and the relationship between the planning scope and the data infrastructure that would be needed to give the requirements practical effect, which is considered in the context of Clause 1(6).

3.2.3 Differing functions of the workforce (Clause 1(5)(d))

Clause 1(5)(d) requires the Department to take into account 'the differing functions of persons within the workforce' when preparing a plan. The term 'differing functions' is not defined in the Bill. The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum provides

examples, including teachers, classroom assistants, SEN staff and school leaders but these are illustrative.⁹⁷

This may be significant in relation to SEN provision. Research evidence documents a shortage of staff with both Irish-language proficiency and the specialist expertise required to meet the SEN needs of Irish-medium pupils, including educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and specialist SEN teachers. Whether a workforce plan prepared under the Bill would be required to address that shortage as a distinct planning requirement is not clear from the legislation as drafted.

The Bill's consultation requirements may continue this uncertainty. The mandatory consultees are Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and representative bodies covering schools, teachers, pupils and their parents. Bodies with specific responsibility for allied professional roles, including speech and language therapy services, are not included. It may be worth exploring during scrutiny whether their absence from the consultee list would affect the quality of any SEN workforce planning undertaken.

3.2.4 How targets will be measured (Clause 1(6))

Clause 1(6) requires the workforce plan to set out measurable targets against which its effectiveness may be assessed. In practice, the utility of any targets set will depend on the availability of reliable data against which to measure them. The non-statutory Welsh in Education Workforce Plan and its accompanying Data Analysis illustrate what this involves in practice.⁹⁸

The Welsh document tracks ITE course enrolments against long-term pupil projection targets, models retention rates over five and ten year periods, maps the pipeline of newly qualified teachers against projected numbers required to meet stated strategic goals and sets targets across a range of distinct workforce categories including supply teachers and subject-specific secondary recruitment.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Clause 1(3), (4) and (5)(d), Irish-Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill (NIA Bill 28/22-27), as introduced 3 March 2026; Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the Irish-Medium Sector (August 2023); A O'Boyle et al., 'Fair? Shared? Supported? Examining Expectations and Realities for Irish-Medium Practitioners', Centre for Language Education Research, Queen's University Belfast (February 2024)

⁹⁸ Welsh Government, [Welsh in Education Workforce Plan: Data Analysis](#) (updated 2024), Welsh Government

⁹⁹ Cited above

These targets are grounded in an established data collection infrastructure drawing on the School Workforce Annual Census, the Education Workforce Council's Register of Education Practitioners and the Teacher Planning and Supply Model.¹⁰⁰ A key finding of the 2024 update to the Welsh Data Analysis is that targets to double secondary ITE enrolment are not being met, a conclusion that was only possible to reach because the data infrastructure existed to measure the position against the stated target.¹⁰¹

Northern Ireland does not, as far as RaiSe has been able to ascertain, have an equivalent data collection framework for the IME workforce. Data collection is therefore a threshold activity that would need to precede meaningful target-setting, and it may be worth exploring during scrutiny whether the Bill should address it as a distinct planning requirement.

4 Review of costs

This section considers key potential financial implications for the “public purse” arising from the Irish-Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill (Bill 28/22-27), as introduced into the Assembly. Before examining those implications directly, it first sets out the public finance context in which the Committee considers the introduced Bill, including a definition of the term “public purse” and a summary of budgetary pressures facing the Department of Education (DE) for the foreseeable. Thereafter, it considers existing Departmental expenditure on Irish-Medium Education, before examining key estimated costs associated with the Bill, as introduced, in particular, those arising from the proposed statutory duties. Included throughout are potential scrutiny points in blue boxes, which Members, including those in the Committee for Education, may wish to draw on.

¹⁰⁰ Welsh Government, [Welsh in Education Workforce Plan: Data Analysis](#) (updated November 2024), Welsh Government; Welsh Government, [School Workforce Annual Census](#), Welsh Government; Education Workforce Council, [Annual Education Workforce Statistics 2025](#), Education Workforce Council.

¹⁰¹ Welsh Government, [Welsh in Education Workforce Plan: Data Analysis](#) (updated November 2024)

When relying on this section, please note:

- Identified key potential public purse implications are not intended to be exhaustive.
- Any discussion of prevailing law or existing legislation is not intended to provide legal advice or opinion, but rather to orient the financial analysis.

4.1 Financial and budgetary context

The Bill, if enacted, would place a new statutory obligation on the Department of Education at a time of acute budgetary pressure across Northern Ireland departments. The Department of Education is facing particularly significant financial constraints, with the Minister for Education describing the allocations set out in the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 as "undeliverable" and the required savings as "simply not achievable." The Department's own assessment that absorption of the Bill's duties within existing capacity is unlikely must be understood in that context.

A detailed summary of the budgetary developments relevant to this assessment, from February 2024 to the time of writing, is set out in the Appendix. Readers may wish to refer to that material when considering the Department's cost estimates and its assessment of its capacity to fulfil the Bill's duties without additional resource or reprioritisation.

4.2 Existing DE expenditure on Irish-Medium Education

For broader context-setting regarding the scale of DE spending within the IME sector, **Table 3** below sets out DE targeted IME-specific expenditure for 2024/25 and 2025/26, as provided by the Minister of Education in response to an Assembly Question on 27 March 2026. Those DE figures relate only to expenditure that is additional to the core funding all grant-aided schools receive through the Common

Funding Formula¹⁰². They do not include the IME share of general education budgets, which DE does not disaggregate¹⁰³.

Table 1: DE targeted IME-specific expenditure, 2024/25 and 2025/26

| Expenditure category | 2024/25 | 2025/26 |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|
| CnaG core funding | £764,000 | £786,000 |
| A Fair Start funding to CnaG | £100,000 | £100,000 |
| Irish-Medium Unit Support funding | £121,000 | £121,000 |
| Common Funding — Curricular Support | £1,786,031 | £2,037,750 |
| Common Funding — Unit Administrative Support | £615,426 | £708,719 |
| Gaeltacht Experience (St Mary's University College) | £16,000 | £16,000 |
| Altram (pre-school support and immersion education) | £243,000 | £261,000 |
| Capital expenditure on Irish-medium schools | £4,100,000 | £6,400,000 |
| Total | £7,745,457 | £10,430,469 |

¹⁰² Further information on the operation of the Common Funding Formula is available on DE's [Departmental website](#).

¹⁰³ [AQW 42711/22-27](#). Question tabled on 18 March 2026 and answered on 27 March 2026. The question was tabled by the Bill Sponsor, Pat Sheehan MLA: "To ask the Minister of Education to detail his Department's expenditure on Irish medium education, in each financial year since the return of the institutions in 2024."

Source: Minister of Education, Assembly Written Answer, February 2026.

The significant year-on-year increase from £7.7 million in 2024/25, to £10.4 million in 2025/26, is driven primarily by capital expenditure, which rose from £4.1 million to £6.4 million in those years. The DE reported that the capital figure for 2025/26 includes £1 million provided to Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (InaG), the Irish-Medium School Development Trust. The Common Funding Formula includes two specific factors that provide additional support to Irish-medium schools and units: one relating to curricular support and another to administrative support for Irish-medium units. The DE reported that the operation of those factors is kept under DE review – via appointment by the DE of a “Lead Advisor for IME as part of ongoing curriculum review” and continued communication with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) – and will be examined further as part of the IME Strategy under development in the Department¹⁰⁴.

In response to an Assembly Question on 22 December 2025, the Minister of Education also confirmed that in 2025/26 an additional £360,000 from the Executive’s Early Learning and Childcare funding was allocated to Altram and Irish-medium projects as part of the Pathway Fund. That comprised £45,000 to Altram to provide support and training to Irish-medium pre-school settings, bringing the DE’s total allocation to Altram for this service to £203,000 in 2025/26; and just over £315,000 for Irish-medium Pathway projects, bringing total Pathway funding awarded to Irish-medium Pathway projects in 2025/26 to £472,026. The Education Minister’s Answer noted Irish-medium early years providers will also benefit from thematic funding earmarked for children with additional needs and disabilities, parental engagement programmes and pre-school standardisation, though he did not provide separate figures for the Irish-medium share of those particular allocations¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁴ [AQW 42904/22-27](#). Question tabled on 25 February 2026 and answered on 6 March 2026. Question tabled by Cara Hunter MLA: “To ask the Minister of Education to detail any specific plans and mechanisms in place to ensure that children in Irish medium schools, in full language immersion settings, receive support that is linguistically and pedagogically appropriate.”

¹⁰⁵ [AQW 36296/22-27](#). Question tabled on 26 November 2025 and answered on 22 December 2025. Question tabled by Cathy Mason MLA: “To ask the Minister of Education to detail a breakdown of any investment made directly to the Irish Medium Sector from the £55million allocated by the Executive in 2025-2026, for early learning and childcare.”

This expenditure provides context for the scale of existing public investment in the IME sector and underscores the basis on which the DE is already operating. The Bill, if enacted as introduced, would add a statutory planning obligation on top of existing activity rather than replacing any element of it.

4.3 Key potential public purse implications

This section examines key potential public purse implications arising from the Bill, if enacted as introduced. The analysis draws on DE cost estimates dated January 2026, comparative evidence and RaISe-PFSU analysis.

Following the Bill Sponsor's engagement with the Irish Medium and Integrated Education (IMIE) Team, including the Education Workforce Directorate, the DE provided RaISe with high-level, non-definitive cost estimates of meeting the statutory duties that the Bill would establish if enacted as introduced and therefore DE would enforce¹⁰⁶. Those DE estimates, reproduced in **Table 2** below relate solely to the administrative duties that could arise directly from the Bill proposals: preparing, publishing and reviewing a workforce plan within the defined statutory timetable¹⁰⁷.

The DE estimated that developing a five-year workforce plan would require Departmental staff time of £100,000 to £120,000, based on 0.5 FTE at Grade 7, 1.0 FTE at Deputy Principal and 0.5 FTE at Staff Officer level over a twelve-month period. Those staff costs would cover policy coordination, stakeholder engagement, drafting, governance arrangements, inter-agency working and analytical oversight. It further estimated consultation costs at £1,000 to £8,000 per cycle and research or data commissioning, if required, at a further £5,000 to £20,000. Moreover, it estimated negligible publication costs, at less than £800, reflecting the DE's existing digital communications capacity. Ongoing monitoring and Assembly reporting following publication was estimated by the DE at £5,000 to £15,000 annually; giving a total ongoing cost of £25,000 to £75,000 over a five-year cycle. The total DE

¹⁰⁶ Email received by RaISe from the Irish Medium and Integrated Education team (IMIE) of the Department of Education, based on internal consultation within the DE including with the Education Workforce Directorate, received 22 January 2026.

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that this assessment was undertaken by the DE prior to the introduction of the Bill on 3 March 2026, and communicated to PFSU-RaISe on 22 January 2026.

estimated cost per five-year cycle therefore was £131,000 to £218,500; averaging £26,200 to £43,700 annually for the Department.

Table 2: Overview of DE estimated costs associated with the Bill’s statutory duties, if enacted as introduced - per five-year cycle

| Cost area | Estimated cost - per five-year cycle | Notes |
|---|---|--|
| Staff time (0.5 FTE Grade 7; 1.0 FTE Deputy Principal; 0.5 FTE Staff Officer over 12 months) | £100,000 to £120,000 | Based on DE salary mid-points; covers policy coordination, stakeholder engagement, drafting, governance and analytical oversight |
| Consultation and research (if externally commissioned) | £1,000 to £8,000 | Depends on scope; could be nil, if managed internally |
| Publication costs | Less than £800 (negligible) | Reflects DE’s existing digital communications capacity |
| Ongoing monitoring and Assembly reporting (annual, over five years) | £25,000 to £75,000 | Could reduce, if absorbed into routine reporting |
| Total - per five-year cycle | £131,000 to £218,500 | £26,200 to £43,700 annually |

Source: DE cost estimates, as reported to RaiSe-PFSU on 22 January 2026.

The DE assessed that absorption of this work within the existing capacity of the IMIE Team is unlikely. That Team was described by DE as a small unit with a broad remit: five Departmental staff currently work there, primarily on supporting IME. In January 2026, the DE further stated explicitly that “it is unlikely this work could be absorbed without additional resource or reprioritisation” and that “new funding cannot be

guaranteed”¹⁰⁸. That indicates that neither additional budgetary allocation, nor absorption, could be assumed at this stage.

The Bill’s accompanying Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (EFM) states that the “Bill’s 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”¹⁰⁹.

Note, the DE’s estimates were described to RaiSe-PFSU as “high-level and non-definitive”, and “based on internal consultation – including with the Education Workforce Directorate”¹¹⁰, rather than a detailed business case. The upper estimate of £218,500 per cycle represents a scenario in which consultation and research are externally commissioned, and ongoing monitoring is carried out on a fully resourced basis. The lower estimate of £131,000 represents a more optimistic scenario in which the majority of activities are internally delivered. The actual cost may fall within, at, or potentially beyond those bounds, depending on the eventual scope and approach to consultation and data work.

As outlined earlier in this Paper, research completed by RaiSe indicates that Northern Ireland does not have an equivalent data collection framework for the IME workforce to that used for the Welsh education workforce in Wales. If the Bill was enacted as introduced and thereafter received Royal Assent, further operational and administrative costs could arise in relation to establishing and maintaining a reliable IME workforce-related data collection methodology that could measure performance versus targets under any strategic IME workforce plan. Such a database could require information on IME workforce supply, vacancy rates or teacher destinations. This is something which could merit further consideration alongside the DE cost estimates regarding this Bill, as discussed above.

¹⁰⁸ Email received by PFSU-RaiSe from the Irish Medium and Integrated Education team (IMIE) of the Department of Education, based on internal consultation within the DE including with the Education Workforce Directorate, received 22 January 2026.

¹⁰⁹ Irish-medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill, [NIA Bill 28/22-27 EFM](#), page 4.

¹¹⁰ Email received by PFSU-RaiSe from the Irish Medium and Integrated Education team (IMIE) of the Department of Education, based on internal consultation within the DE including with the Education Workforce Directorate, received 22 January 2026.

As such, Members, including those sitting on the Committee for Education, may wish to consider the following potential scrutiny points:

Potential scrutiny points

1. The DE assessed that absorption of the Bill's duties within existing IMIE Team capacity would be unlikely, and that new funding could not be guaranteed, if the Bill enacted as introduced. If so, then how would the DE propose to resource the statutory planning obligation – for example, would it seek a new budget allocation, reprioritise from existing activity, look to interim resourcing arrangements and or combine a number of those approaches?
2. The introduced Bill requires the first workforce plan to be published within 12 months of any enacted Bill receiving Royal Assent. Given that no new funding is in place or committed, would the 12-month deadline be realistic from DE's perspective? If not, what timeline would DE consider more appropriate?
3. Given that the DE's cost estimates are described as "high-level" and "non-definitive", what level of financial detail would the DE be in a position to provide during the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill? Has the DE considered the resource implications of the Bill across the full range of activities that the statutory planning obligation would require, including data collection and stakeholder consultation?

Even in a scenario where the Bill's duties were absorbed within the existing IMIE Team's capacity without additional budgetary allocation, the public purse implications would **not** be nil. Absorption of net statutory work within a fixed-capacity team necessarily implies displacement or deferral of other existing activities. That represents an "opportunity cost" to the public purse - meaning the value of the work and associated future outcomes not undertaken or delayed as a consequence of redirecting staff time to the statutory planning obligation. For a fuller definition of opportunity costs, see **Insights Box 1** below.

The significance of this observation is compounded by the budgetary context described in sub-section 4.1 of this Paper. The DE is facing some of the most acute financial pressures in its recent history. Moreover, in January 2026, the Education Minister described the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 as “undeliverable” and the proposed savings as “simply not achievable”. Against that backdrop, any diversion of staff capacity from ongoing statutory and operational responsibilities would appear to carry a material opportunity cost, even if no new expenditure would be incurred.

Insights Box 1: Understanding “opportunity costs”

An opportunity cost is an economic concept referring to the value of the next-best alternative foregone when a choice is made – both the resources committed and all benefits that alternative uses would have generated^{111 112 113}.

Example: The DE has assessed that fulfilling the Bill’s statutory planning duties is unlikely to be absorbed within the existing IMIE Team’s capacity “without additional resource or staff reprioritisation”. Whether those duties are met through additional staffing or through the redirection of existing staff time, an opportunity cost arises in either case:

If additional resource is provided: The public funds allocated to the planning duty represent money that could have been deployed elsewhere within the DE’s budget – for example, on frontline Special Educational Needs (SEN) support in Irish-medium settings, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) bursaries, or curriculum resource development for the sector.

¹¹¹ For further discussion defining how opportunity cost represents both the direct financial reallocation of resource and foregone benefits across a range of financial and non-financial outcomes of alternative uses of resources, the reader is referred to the Foundation for Teaching Economics, [Lesson 1: Opportunity Cost](#).

¹¹² Manzini, P., Mariotti, M., Ülkü, L. (2025). “[Choice and Opportunity Costs](#)”, *The Review of Economic Studies*, rdaf101. This paper provides useful modelling and discussion of the full application of the concept of opportunity costs.

¹¹³ The economist John A. List provides useful discussion regarding how one should utilise the concept of opportunity costs to determine the optimum time to take an alternative course of action, particularly in the context of his experience in advising a range of large multinational organisations. This useful application of the concept of opportunity costs is available on his [institutional webpage](#).

If existing staff capacity is redirected: The opportunity cost is the value of IMIE team activities that are displaced or deferred – for example, ongoing policy work, stakeholder engagement or support for Irish-medium schools that would otherwise have been undertaken, including the future benefits of those potential work activities.

The Welsh Government’s Explanatory Memorandum to the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 illustrates this explicitly, classifying: the entire £317,000 cost of its National Framework planning exercise as “Opportunity Cost: £317,000; Additional Cost: £0”. The Memorandum acknowledges that while no new budget line is required, the economic cost of staff time diverted from other priorities is real and material.

Implications: The direct financial cost of the introduced Bill’s planning duties, as estimated by the DE, is modest in absolute terms (£131,000 to £218,500 per five-year cycle). However, the true public purse cost depends on what activities are foregone as a consequence, including all “downstream effects” – meaning the broader chain of economic and social consequences that flow from resource decisions, including the future public benefits that would no longer be realised if activities are displaced or deferred¹¹⁴. Within a Department facing some of the most acute budgetary pressures in its recent history – with the Minister for Education describing the proposed savings required under the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 as “simply not achievable” – the opportunity cost of any additional statutory obligation carries particular weight here. Recognising opportunity costs alongside direct expenditure is therefore essential to a complete assessment of the Bill’s public purse implications.

¹¹⁴ By way of example of how the concept of opportunity cost extends beyond immediate expenditure, effective IME workforce planning, if properly resourced, could set in motion a chain of compounding public benefits. A well-supplied IME workforce – with adequate teachers across all phases, sufficient classroom assistants and appropriate SEN support delivered through Irish – would improve educational outcomes for IME pupils. This matters particularly because the IME sector disproportionately serves pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds: in 2020/21, 44.3% of post-primary IME pupils were entitled to free school meals, compared with 26.8% in English-medium post-primary schools. Improved educational attainment in a high-deprivation cohort has a well-evidenced downstream effect: higher rates of progression to further and higher education, greater workforce participation, improved lifetime earnings, and a reduction in reliance on public services – each of which generates a return to the public purse over time. Conversely, where workforce shortages persist unaddressed – with staff working beyond contracted responsibilities, vacancies filled informally, and SEN needs going unmet or being met later than appropriate – the sector is more likely to generate reactive public expenditure: emergency recruitment, late SEN interventions, and the higher costs associated with addressing educational disadvantage after the fact rather than preventing it.

In addition, it is worth noting that the costs captured in the noted DE estimates relate solely to the administrative duties imposed directly by the Bill, if enacted as introduced. Any interventions identified within a future workforce plan – such as recruitment campaigns, retention incentives, bursaries, new ITE pathways or enhanced SEN provision – would represent further, potentially substantial, costs to the public purse. Those costs would be subject to separate policy development, funding decisions and Executive and/or Assembly scrutiny and do not arise directly from the Bill as introduced. However, the Committee may wish to explore the anticipated scale of such downstream costs, as they represent the policy purpose to which the planning exercise is directed.

As such, Members, including those in the Committee for Education, may wish to consider the following potential scrutiny points in this area:

Potential scrutiny points

4. Even if the Bill's direct administrative duties would be absorbed within existing capacity, that would carry an opportunity cost in terms of the displacement or the deferral of the IMIE Team activities. If so, what activities within the IMIE Team's current work programme would be deprioritised to accommodate the statutory workforce planning obligation under the Bill, if enacted as introduced?
5. The Bill's stated purpose is to improve IME workforce supply. Any future workforce plan produced under the Bill, if enacted as introduced, would be likely to identify areas requiring investment – in teacher training, retention, SEN provision, or other areas. Has the DE provided any indicative assessment of the potential scale of downstream implementation costs that such a workforce plan would generate; and how would those be funded by DE given its existing budgetary pressures?
6. The ITE bursary scheme introduced in September 2025 allocated eight PGCE places annually for the IME Post-Primary Enhancement Programme at a projected cost of £550,240 over five years (2026/27 to 2030/31). This represents one concrete example of the type of intervention that a workforce plan might generate or require to be continued. Has the DE

considered how similar interventions would be funded over the longer term in the context of the Bill's statutory planning cycle?

A distinct but related public purse consideration concerning the data infrastructure that effective workforce planning requires also is relevant here. The introduced Bill – at Clause 1(6) – requires the workforce plan to set out measurable targets against which its effectiveness may be assessed. In practice, the utility of any such specified targets will depend on the availability of reliable and regularly collected data on the IME workforce.

As noted elsewhere in this Paper, Northern Ireland does not currently have an equivalent data collection framework for the IME workforce, as that currently existing for the general teaching workforce or that underpinning the Welsh National Framework. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta's 2023 action plan identified data gaps as a core constraint on effective planning and noted that some vacancy and attrition figures were based on anecdotal evidence rather than verified administrative data. The DE has committed to implementing a monitoring framework for teacher supply and demand across Northern Ireland by the 2026/27 academic year under the TransformED NI Delivery Plan. However, at present it is unclear whether that framework would capture IME-specific data in the granularity required for meaningful target-setting under the introduced Bill¹¹⁵.

Establishing a reliable IME workforce data collection and monitoring methodology – covering teacher supply, vacancy rates, destination data for ITE graduates, retention, SEN staffing and other relevant variables – would represent an additional operational and potentially financial requirement that is not fully captured in the DE's current cost estimates. The academic literature on public sector workforce planning suggests that the absence of continuous data collection materially increases the cost of periodic

¹¹⁵ Further details regarding the full scope of the TransformED strategy are available on the relevant DE [webpage](#).

planning exercises, as baseline data must be gathered from scratch at each cycle, rather than drawing on an established administrative dataset¹¹⁶.

As such, Members, including the Committee for Education, may wish to consider the following potential scrutiny points:

Potential scrutiny points

The Bill requires measurable targets in any workforce plan – Clause 1(6) – but Northern Ireland does not currently have an equivalent data collection framework for the IME workforce. To date, has the DE considered the additional cost of establishing a dedicated data collection infrastructure to support baseline measurement and target-setting under the introduced Bill? If not, what is its view in this regard, if the Bill would be enacted as introduced and later receive Royal Assent? Would such infrastructure be developed as part of the workforce planning process itself, or would it be treated as a pre-condition for meaningful planning?

If the proposed TransformED NI teacher supply monitoring framework - which is to be implemented by 2026/27 - does not capture IME-specific data at the level of granularity required, what additional investment would be needed by DE to address that gap? Has the DE given consideration to this question in the context of the Bill as introduced or in its earlier stages of development, for example, when engaging with the Bill Sponsor?

4.4 Concluding remarks

If enacted as introduced, the Bill would place a statutory duty on the DE to prepare, publish and review a strategic workforce plan for the IME sector on a five-yearly basis, with Assembly-level accountability through a reporting obligation on implementation. The DE has estimated the direct cost of fulfilling those duties as between £131,000 and £218,500 per five-year cycle (£26,200 to £43,700 annually). Relative to the broader scale of Departmental expenditure and to existing IME-

¹¹⁶ Colley, L. and Price, R. (2010). "[Where Have All The Workers Gone? Exploring Public Sector Workforce Planning](#)", *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 69(2): 202-213.

specific spending – which exceeded £10 million in 2025/26 – those direct costs are modest. However, a number of contextual factors are relevant to how those estimates should be understood in the context of scrutinising the introduced Bill.

First, the budgetary context in which the DE is operating is exceptionally constrained. The Minister for Education has described the Finance Minister’s Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 allocations as “undeliverable” and the required savings as “simply not achievable”. Within that context, any additional statutory obligation – however modest in direct cost terms – carries a real opportunity cost, as it would necessarily displace or defer other activities within an already stretched team.

Second, the DE’s own assessment is that absorption within existing capacity is unlikely, and that new funding cannot be guaranteed. The Bill’s EFM states that the Bill Sponsor deems the statutory duties to be worthwhile, regardless of the costs associated with them, due to the potential costs associated with crisis management in the IME sector in the absence of such statutory duties. The gap between these positions has not been resolved and may warrant further exploring when scrutinising the Bill.

Third, even if costs would be fully absorbed, an opportunity cost would remain. The Welsh Government’s treatment of their framework planning costs (£317,000 over ten years) as “opportunity costs”, rather than additional expenditure, provides a useful precedent for how such costs could be recognised. Accepting that framing would not resolve the question of what activities would be displaced; it simply would make explicit that absorption would not be cost-free.

Fourth, the DE’s estimates do not fully capture potential data infrastructure costs. Effective workforce planning against measurable targets requires a reliable baseline dataset, which does not currently exist in an administrative form for the IME sector. Establishing such infrastructure would represent an additional – and not yet costed – requirement.

Finally, and most significantly from a public purse perspective, the costs directly arising from the Bill, if enacted as introduced, would be confined to its planning and reporting duties. The Bill’s policy objective is to improve IME workforce supply over time. Any workforce plan produced under the Bill, if enacted, would generate

recommendations and, potentially, statutory reporting on their implementation. The interventions required to address documented workforce shortages – in teacher training, retention, SEN provision, data systems and curriculum resources – would carry costs of a materially different order. Those costs would not arise directly from the Bill, but would represent the intended downstream consequence of the statutory planning it would establish. Assembly Members, including the Committee for Education, may wish to seek the DE’s indicative assessment of the potential scale of such interventions before concluding its scrutiny of the Bill.

5 Human rights and equality

The Bill Sponsor’s Explanatory and Financial Memorandum states that the Bill is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. The Memorandum references Article 2 of Protocol 1, which protects the right to education and has been interpreted to encompass the right of parents to have their children educated in a manner consistent with their linguistic and cultural identity, and Article 8, which protects the right to respect for private and family life and has been interpreted to include language as an aspect of cultural and personal identity. On that basis, the Bill Sponsor considers that a statutory planning duty directed at supporting the IME workforce is consistent with, and in some respects advances, those Convention rights.¹¹⁷

A formal Equality Impact Assessment has not been undertaken. The Bill Sponsor engaged with the Equality Commission on the outline proposal, which did not identify any potential adverse effects and suggested the Bill may positively affect some groups. 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, and has acknowledged that the Department of Education will be subject to its section 75 obligations when performing the functions the Bill imposes.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland have both indicated support for the Bill on human rights and equality

¹¹⁷ P Sheehan, [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum to the Irish-Medium Education \(Workforce Plan\) Bill \(Bill 28/22-27\)](#) (Northern Ireland Assembly, 3 March 2026), human rights compatibility section.

grounds, reflecting their assessment that statutory planning for the IME workforce is consistent with the rights of Irish-medium pupils and their families under domestic and international human rights frameworks.¹¹⁸

6 Legislative competence

The Bill Sponsor has made a statement under Standing Order 30 that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Education is a transferred matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the Bill amends existing Northern Ireland education legislation.¹¹⁹

7 Conclusion

The Irish-Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill would place a statutory duty on the Department of Education to prepare, publish and review a strategic workforce plan for the Irish-medium education sector. The sector has grown substantially over the past two decades, from 1,602 pupils in 2001/02 to 7,811 pupils across approximately 90 settings in 2025/26, and persistent workforce challenges across all phases and roles are documented in multiple published reports spanning more than a decade. No equivalent strategic planning obligation has been exercised under the existing Article 89 duty and no integrated data collection framework for the IME workforce currently exists.

Of the three comparable jurisdictions examined in this paper, Wales is the only jurisdiction considered in this paper to have placed language-medium workforce planning on a statutory footing through primary legislation. The Republic of Ireland and Scotland have both made sustained investment in language-medium teacher supply through non-statutory workforce planning arrangements without resolving

¹¹⁸ P Sheehan, [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum to the Irish-Medium Education \(Workforce Plan\) Bill](#) (Bill 28/22-27) (Northern Ireland Assembly, 3 March 2026), human rights compatibility section.

¹¹⁹ Education is a transferred matter under Schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Bill amends the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. The Bill Sponsor's statement under Standing Order 30 is contained in P Sheehan, [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum to the Irish-Medium Education \(Workforce Plan\) Bill](#) (Bill 28/22-27) (Northern Ireland Assembly, 3 March 2026).

documented shortages. The full effects of the Welsh approach remain to be observed, as implementation is at an early stage.

The Department of Education has estimated the cost of fulfilling the Bill's duties at £131,000 to £218,500 per five-year cycle and has assessed that absorption within existing capacity is unlikely. No funding has been committed. The Bill Sponsor's Explanatory and Financial Memorandum characterises the duty as falling within the Department's ordinary strategic planning functions. These positions are in tension and the question of how the gap between them would be resolved in practice has not been resolved.

The areas for further consideration set out at the beginning of this paper identify specific provisions and implementation aspects, including the scope of the workforce functions requirement, the adequacy of the SEN provisions and consultee list, the absence of a data collection baseline and the relationship between the Bill and other departmental commitments, that may be worth examining during scrutiny.

8 Appendix

Before considering key public purse implications of the introduced Bill, some essential context-setting information is provided about the broader public finance context. Initially, the term “public purse” is defined in **Insights Box 1**, followed by an overview summarising the challenging budgetary environment within which the DE is currently operating.

Insights Box 1: Definition of the “public purse”

The term public purse refers to taxpayers’ money raised through taxation and other sources of government revenue. Government departments in Northern Ireland are custodians of the public purse and designated Accounting Officers are required to ensure that Minister(s) and their departments appreciate “the need for efficiency, economy, effectiveness and prudence in the administration of public resources, to secure value for public money”¹²⁰ in accordance with public financial management principles¹²¹.

In Northern Ireland, the public purse encompasses the Northern Ireland Block Grant from His Majesty’s (HM) Treasury; revenues raised regionally; and other funding sources. The Northern Ireland Executive is responsible for allocating those monies through the Executive Budget, which it is to do so in line with the financial arrangements under current devolution, including requirements specified in the [Budget Sustainability Plan](#) and the accompanying [Budget Improvement Plan Roadmap](#), which aim to improve Northern Ireland’s public finances, while seeking to balance numerous competing priorities and demands for limited available funding.

If the Bill would be enacted as introduced and receive Royal Assent, then the DE would be responsible for covering costs arising when implementing the Bill, including

¹²⁰ Department of Finance (2023). *Managing Public Money Northern Ireland*, paragraph 2.4.2, page 20.

¹²¹ The standards expected of Accounting Officer’s organisations and wider ministerial and departmental responsibilities and duties expected in relation to the management of public funds are outlined in the *Managing Public Money Northern Ireland* policy, published by the Department of Finance in November 2023. The Accounting Officer, acting within the authority of the Minister(s) to whom they are responsible, must ensure the organisation meets the standards set out in this policy.

the specified statutory duties. At the given time, the DE would do so using its budget and/or seeking additional monies from the Executive.

The central and devolved budgetary contexts remain challenging across the United Kingdom, due to a number of contributory factors that are relevant to Members, including the Committee’s consideration of this Bill. **Table 1** below summarises the most significant developments from February 2024 to the time of writing.

Table 1: Challenging budgetary context - Contributory factors dating from February 2024 to present

| Date | Contributory factor |
|--------------------------|--|
| February 2024 to present | Ongoing work across Northern Ireland Departments to implement the December 2023 political agreement and the related February 2024 funding package, including the Interim Fiscal Framework (May 2024), the Budget Sustainability Plan (October 2024) and the accompanying Budget Improvement Plan Roadmap (December 2024), alongside establishment of the Interim Transformation Board (March 2025). All have aimed to improve Northern Ireland public finances while seeking to balance numerous competing priorities and demands for limited available funding. |
| August 2024 | The Department of Finance (DoF) undertook a 2025-28 Budget Information Gathering Exercise, requesting returns from all Northern Ireland Executive Departments, marking the start of the planning stage in the 2025/26 Northern Ireland Executive Budget cycle. The DoF found that “Departments identified a reported £767 million of unfunded pressures”, as reported to the Assembly on 23 September 2024 ¹²² . |
| October 2024 | The Chancellor’s Autumn Budget 2024 set out some of the multi-year competing pressures facing the United Kingdom Government, potentially adversely impacting the Government’s spending power in certain areas, along with other decisions relating to social security. See RalSe Briefing Paper NIAR-167-2024 , prepared by the Public |

¹²² The full discussion is contained in the [Official Report](#) of Monday 23 September 2024.

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| | Finance Scrutiny Unit (PFSU) for further detailed discussion ¹²³ . |
| December 2024 | <p>Northern Ireland Departmental bids for 2025/26 resource and capital expenditure exceeded the Northern Ireland Budget allocated by the United Kingdom Government to the Executive¹²⁴.</p> <p>Later that month, the 2025/26 Draft Executive Budget and accompanying Written Statement by the Minister for Finance highlighted ongoing “pay and inflationary pressures” and “growing demands” on public services.</p> |
| March 2025 | The Chancellor’s Spring Statement 2025 updated the House of Commons on the United Kingdom economy and public finances. The Statement was accompanied by forecasts in an Economic and Fiscal Outlook from the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR). It also announced a number of policy decisions, which included reforms to the welfare system, increased defence spending and a £3.25 billion Transformation Fund to reform public services ¹²⁵ . |
| 1 April 2025 | <p>DoF officials thereafter explained during a meeting of the Assembly Finance Committee that:</p> <p><i>...on the allocations out of that fund, it will depend on which Whitehall departments get allocations from it so if we don’t get it on the £3.35 billion we’ll get it on the allocations.</i> ¹²⁶</p> |
| 3 April 2025 | The Executive agreed the 2025/26 Executive Budget, which the Minister for Finance described as “setting out a direction of travel” which “clearly prioritises Programme for Government priorities” ¹²⁷ . |

¹²³ PFSU (2024). “Chancellor’s Autumn Budget 2024: initial considerations for Northern Ireland”, [RaISe Briefing Paper NIAR-167-2024](#), 26 November.

¹²⁴ This was reported by the Minister of Finance in a [Written Statement](#) on 19 December 2024, and explained in the [Final Budget 2025-26 Factsheet](#).

¹²⁵ It is important to note that this represents a central government development, as the Northern Ireland Executive Budget is a sub-cycle within the United Kingdom Government’s Budget cycle. Further details of the Transformation Fund can be found in the Chancellor’s [Spring Statement 2025](#).

¹²⁶ Further details of the discussion are available in the [Official Report: Minutes of Evidence](#) from the Committee for Finance meeting on Tuesday, 1 April 2025.

¹²⁷ Contained within the Minister of Finance’s [Written Statement](#) to the Assembly concerning Public Expenditure Final Budget 2025-26 on Thursday, 3 April 2025.

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| 4 April 2025 | The context significantly changed when the President of the United States of America (USA) announced substantial trade tariffs, which were followed by: plummeting stock markets across the globe; a collapsing American bond market; the subsequent 9 April 90-day pause on some new USA tariffs; other countries similar pause and further consideration of retaliatory tariff introduction; and, an international trade war arising between the USA and China. |
| 8 May 2025 | A non-binding trade deal was agreed between the USA and United Kingdom Governments. The general terms of the new trade deal were subsequently published in the UK-US Economic Prosperity Deal (EPD). The EPD is non-binding, meaning that further negotiations to work through the details of the deal are on-going. |
| 24 June 2025 | The DoF published its 2025/26 Budget Factsheet , setting out the Executive's spending plans for the one-year period from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026. |
| 3 October 2025 | The Minister of Finance provided a Written Statement detailing HM Treasury Funding Available 2026-2029/30. |
| 26 November 2025 | The Chancellor's Autumn Budget 2025 detailed the United Kingdom Government's resource spending plans up to 2028/29 and capital plans up to 2029/30. |
| 6 January 2026 | <p>The Minister of Finance published the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 (not Executive agreed) and announced an eight-week consultation on the draft.</p> <p>The Minister for Education responded to the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30¹²⁸, stating:</p> <p><i>While I acknowledge the significant challenges involved in setting a budget, it is important to be clear: even if I was prepared to accept the devastating cuts implicit in this draft, as a practical matter, such a budget would be undeliverable. A budget must be more than figures on paper; it must be deliverable in reality.</i></p> <p>The Minister continued:</p> <p><i>Under the proposed allocations, my Department would be required to make savings of approximately</i></p> |

¹²⁸ These quotes are taken from the response in the form of a [Written Statement](#) to the Assembly by the DE on 6 January 2025.

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| | <i>£826 million in 2026-27, £1.01 billion in 2027-28, and £1.15 billion in 2028-29. These levels of reduction are simply not achievable.</i> |
| 11 February 2026 | <p>HM Treasury agreed a reserve claim for the Northern Ireland Executive, to provide £400 million for 2025/26, which is to be repaid over three years¹²⁹.</p> <p>On the same day, the Minister of Finance confirmed that the £400 million would be allocated as follows (as agreed by the Executive)¹³⁰:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Education (DE): £214.6 million • Department of Health (DoH): £185.4 million |
| 3 March 2026 | <p>The Chancellor delivered the Spring Forecast 2026.</p> <p>Later that day, in an Oral Statement to the Assembly, the Minister of Finance confirmed additional £390 million Barnett consequentials across Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL) over the next three-year period, comprising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource DEL: £380 million • Capital DEL: £9 million |
| 16 April 2026 | <p>The Northern Ireland Executive announced that they wish to meet with the Prime Minister. First Minister, Michelle O’Neill stated that the wider budget picture was “stark” and that things were “very much at breaking point”. The First Minister continued:</p> <p><i>We, as an Executive today, decided that we want to meet with Keir Starmer. We’re making a direct appeal to the British Prime Minister to meet with us in a cross-party delegation, because the budget realities that we face are so challenging and so dire and so difficult that he needs to listen to the concerns that all of us are expressing on behalf of the people that we collectively serve.</i></p> <p>The Finance Minister added:</p> <p><i>To achieve the ambition of the Budget, it’s going to take an injection of investment from the British</i></p> |

¹²⁹ [Statement by the DoF](#), “£400 million reserve claim allocation agreed”, 11 February 2026.

¹³⁰ [Written Statement](#) from the Minister of Finance to the Assembly, 11 February 2026.

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| | <i>Government...The challenges [we] face cannot be met with what the Executive has available to it</i> ¹³¹ . |
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Source: RaSe-PFSU (April 2026), drawing on publicly available budget documents and Assembly records.

As described in **Table 1**, the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 was published on 6 January 2026, proposing DE allocations summarised in **Table 2** below.

Table 2: Proposed DE Budget outcome, 2026-29, £ millions

| | 2026-27 | 2027-28 | 2028-29 | 2029-30 |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Resource DEL | 3,244.6 | 3,313.0 | 3,393.1 | N/A |
| Capital DEL | 355.2 | 283.7 | 291.4 | 290.9 |
| Total | 3,599.8 | 3,596.7 | 3,684.5 | 290.9 |

Source: DoF, [Draft Budget 2026-2029/30](#), published 6 January 2026.

In January 2026, the Education Minister unambiguously responded to the Finance Minister’s Draft Budget 2026-2029/30, stating it presented “devasting cuts”. In a Written Statement to the Assembly, he indicated the DE would be required to save approximately £826 million in 2026-27, £1.01 billion in 2027-28 and £1.15 billion in 2028-29, as outlined in **Table 1** above. The Minister characterised those required savings as “simply not achievable”¹³². All relevant considerations when assessing key potential public purse implications for the introduced Bill, as considered below at sub-section 4.3.

¹³¹ Quotes taken from [reporting of the press conference](#) held by the Northern Ireland Executive on Thursday 16 April 2026.

¹³² [Written Statement](#) to the Assembly by the Education Minister on 6 January 2025.

Note, the “reserve claim”¹³³ of £400 million agreed by His Majesty’s (HM) Treasury in February 2026 and £390 million of additional Barnett consequentials detailed in **Table 1** above jointly provide some partial mitigation in this regard. Of the reserve claim sum, £214.6 million has been allocated to the DE. However, that total allocation addresses pre-existing DE pressures rather than creating new headroom for the Department. DE’s overall position therefore remains acutely constrained for the foreseeable future.

Considering existing and future DE budgetary pressures is important context-setting to appropriately consider key potential public purse implications from the Bill, if enacted as introduced. Amongst those implications would be any “absorbed costs” for the Department – meaning any that DE would address within existing Departmental capacity. On 22 January 2026, the Department assessed that that would not be the case; rather, additional resources or reprioritisation would be required when implementing such a Bill¹³⁴.

¹³³ A “reserve claim” is a mechanism under the [Statement of Funding Policy](#) – published by HM Treasury – whereby a devolved government may request additional in-year funding from HM Treasury’s central reserve when it faces exceptional pressures that cannot be met from its existing block grant. The most recent Statement of Funding policy framework was updated and published in June 2025. The relevant reserve claim was confirmed by HM Treasury on 11 February; see Department of Finance [Written Statement](#), 11 February 2026.

¹³⁴ This was communicated via email, received by RaISe from the Irish Medium and Integrated Education team (IMIE) of the Department of Education, based on internal consultation within the DE including with the Education Workforce Directorate; received 22 January 2026. It should be noted that this assessment was undertaken prior to the introduction of the Bill on 3 March 2026.