



**Briefing Paper for Belfast City Council on POBAL's Research
Further and Higher Education, Training and Employment Experience
of past pupils of Irish Medium Education in Belfast
1970s to the present**

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Why this research?

There is a lack of base line data regarding the education, training, and employment status of former pupils of Irish Medium schools in Belfast (and elsewhere), in spite of the fact that it is now more than 45 years since its inception in the city. In 2018, POBAL carried out research with funding from Belfast City Council under its Capacity Building programme, to provide a valuable information resource for educationalists, government bodies, Irish language groups, training providers and others. We hope that it will help to build capacity and strengthen ongoing work in service provision for the whole community of Belfast, including opportunities for forward planning, building the local labour market and matching capacity with employment opportunities.

Terms of Reference

Irish Medium education has grown and developed in the city since its earliest days in 1971. We determined that our research would encompass as much of that experience as possible from among the first children to receive their formal education through Irish right to the present. There are now eight Irish Medium schools in the Belfast City Council area, including one post-primary school, Coláiste Feirste. Currently the number of children enrolled in Irish medium primary schools in the former BELB area stands at 1205. A further 326 pupils attend two primary schools outside this area, Scoil Na Fuiseoige (141 pupils) and Gaelscoil Eanna (185 pupils), making an overall total of 1531 children currently enrolled in Irish Medium primary schools.

Research conclusions

The research reflects the development of Irish Medium education in the city in general, as well as the growth of numbers of children attending IM primary schools. There is obvious demand for continuity beyond primary education, with strong uptake of IM post primary education. Clearly, the emerging population of young people who have received their education through Irish represent a skills resource

for the current and future labour market, and a dynamic part of the city's diversity. As such, the research highlights the opportunities for Belfast City Council and other government bodies with responsibilities for economic development, good relations and community planning to improve and develop services inclusive of the Irish speaking community, on a city-wide basis.

Past pupils of Irish Medium education within the current Belfast City Council area have been resident in many parts of the city, and indeed beyond its boundaries, travelling to avail of Irish Medium education within the city's schools. Whilst post code alone is not a reliable indicator of the full range of socio-economic factors, many of those attending IM schools in the past 45 years have lived in areas of recognised multiple disadvantage, and all of the schools themselves are located in such areas.

The status of the language and of Irish Medium education has changed in positive ways in the last 45 years. A sense of ability and confidence emerges from much of the responses to the research, Nonetheless there is also an awareness of marginalisation and exclusion from the mainstream. The research highlights the concern of respondents at the lack of legislative protection for Irish and the paucity of Irish language services and visibility in their localities. It appears likely that in areas of multiple deprivation, where demand for support services is generally higher, the lack of such services through Irish impacts more deeply. Respondents are overwhelming in their call for more services and more support for Irish speakers and for the 'normalisation' of the public use of the language through legislation, increased visibility and new and improved services. Belfast City Council has recently supported the adoption of Irish language legislation and will also appoint an Irish language officer in due course. In its community planning role, it also has an opportunity to ensure that a wide range of public services are fit-for-purpose and able to meet the needs of school leavers from IM education and their families.

Respondents indicate a wide range of employment experience. Our research reveals professionals, civil servants, administrators, retailers, artists, IT and digital specialists, youth workers, teachers, hospitality workers, health professionals and more. There is a high percentage of Third Level education and qualifications in an extensive range of specialisms and areas of life. However, in the past very few courses have been offered

through the medium of Irish and the choice remains extremely limited even at the present time. In general, degree and diploma courses in Irish language / literature, sometimes with an additional specialism such as Business Studies, or post graduate courses in Translation or other language-related areas such as Language Planning, are among the only Third Level courses taught through Irish. Respondents also highlight the importance of B.Ed and PGCE Initial Teacher Education places through Irish in St Mary's University College.

Respondents have also undertaken a limited range of training courses and obtained qualifications through Irish offered by the organisation Gaelchúrsaí /Forbairt Feirste. It appears however that, 45 years after the opening of the first bunscoil in Belfast, no other training or skills provider in the city offers a range of courses through Irish to Belfast's cohort of Irish Medium school leavers. In order to better support the growing diversity of the city, Belfast City Council, through its capacity building, economic development and community planning initiatives should encourage relevant government departments and Third Level institutions to carry out an audit of training needs through Irish and support development of new courses to meet emerging markets.

The majority of respondents to the research (51.6%) are currently employed in settings where the main language of the workplace is Irish. They, along with some of the 40% who did not work in predominantly Irish speaking environments, cited using the language with colleagues (84.4%), managers (58.3%), owners of companies (28.9%), customers (68%) and Irish language groups (71.1%). This shows not only a very high level of ongoing use of Irish in the workplace from past pupils, it also gives a flavour of the range of opportunities for people carrying out their day to day business to come into contact with the Irish language. Of the small number of people who said they did not use Irish in the workplace (16 respondents), 72.7% said they would like to. They indicated that among those initiatives which would help them to do so would be greater visibility of the language, positive workplace policies, awareness-raising that Irish speakers were available in particular roles to encourage users to ask for services through Irish, conversation classes and language support materials and social events in the workplace for those wishing to learn. Significantly, when asked if they would like to work through the medium of Irish in future, 122 people (83.6% of those who responded) said that they would.

Use of Irish among respondents is not however confined to the workplace. We asked if respondents used Irish either often or occasionally in their personal lives. 94% said that they did. Very high percentages (86.6%) stated that they used the language with friends, on social media (69.1%) and with either their children (41.6%) or their parents (44.3%). There is no doubt that the Irish language is a living part of the vibrancy of the city and that this presents opportunities for Belfast City Council and others to continue to develop initiatives, policies and practices that support a full range of services and provision for all sections of the community.