



**Draft Programme for Government 2016-2021 consultation
Response: Altram: guth na luathbhlianta (voice of the early years)
December 2016**



1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper is a response by Altram - the organisation representing the Irish medium early years care and education sector in Northern Ireland - to the consultation document issued by the Northern Ireland Executive in November 2016 on the draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2016-2021. Throughout this response, Altram has used the terms 'Irish medium' and 'Irish immersion' interchangeably. Immersion bilunagual education has been defined as: 'Schooling where some or most subject content is taught through a second language. Pupils in immersion are usually native speakers of a majority language, and the teaching is carefully structured to their needs'. (Baker, C, 2000, The Care and Education of Young Bilinguals, p 175).
- 1.2. Information on Altram's aims, objectives and work within and for the Irish immersion early years sector is attached at Appendix One.
- 1.3. Altram welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation.



2. Overview of Irish medium education

2.1 The Irish medium sector is growing, developing and thriving as parents recognise the benefits of bilingualism including:

- Wider communication (extended family, community, national links, employment)
- Literacy in two languages
- Broader enculturation
- Greater tolerance and less racism
- Thinking benefits (e.g. creativity, sensitivity to communication)
- Raised self esteem
- Security in identity
- Increased curricular achievement
- Ease in learning a third language
- Economic and employment benefits

(Baker, C, 2000, *The Care and Education of Young Bilinguals*, p 11). Many of these such as greater tolerance and strong economic benefits are key drivers throughout the draft Programme for Government 2016-2021.

2.2 In a monolingual society, Irish immersion education is one of the few opportunities for children from monolingual families – particularly in areas of disadvantage - to develop fluency in a second language. Only a small percentage of parents of children in Irish immersion education are Irish speakers.

2.3 Irish medium early years' settings are disproportionately located in areas of disadvantage - 21 of the 34 Sure Start areas contain an Irish medium setting and some contain more than one.



2.4 The first Irish-medium pre-school in the north was established in Belfast in 1978. By 1994, the number had risen to 11. During 2015-2016 academic year the figures were:

Early years settings

The sector is made up of 61 groups across the region, including crèche and parent and toddler projects, playgroups, preschool and afterschool projects.

Primary schools

Schools: 28

Irish medium units within primary schools: 8

Secondary schools

Schools: 2

Irish medium units within secondary schools: 3

Number of children attending Irish medium early years settings: 1157

Number of children attending Irish medium primary schools: 3665

Number of children attending Irish medium secondary education: 818

2.5 The Irish-medium preschool and early years sector faces some challenges common to the English-medium sector. This includes the recent (April 2016) introduction of a compulsory new early years qualification – the CQV level 5 – which is expensive (£1,800) and early years staff are often having to self finance to attend. It is based on a monolingual template with no reference at all to immersion pedagogy.

2.6 In addition, there are a number of additional challenges which are more challenging in Irish-medium, which can have a significant impact on the sector's ability to deliver. They include a frequent failure to appropriately factor-in the needs of the sector in policy changes or initiatives or in policy guidance material or documentation - a lack of knowledge or awareness about Irish-medium within interfacing or support agencies. This is reflected in the current draft PfG 2016-2021 which includes no reference to Irish immersion education. The greatest challenge relates to issues of accreditation and training where the minimum standards framework is based entirely.

2.7 Altram has pioneered an immersion certificate in partnership with the North-West Regional College and Ulster University which is currently being reviewed.

2.8 Altram is hoping to develop a State of the Sector report into Irish medium early years education which would identify an appropriate training framework for the sector taking cognisance of the above issues.



3. Overview of Altram response to the draft Programme for Government 2016-2021 consultation

3.1 Altram welcomes the consultation document as a positive attempt by the Northern Ireland Executive to formulate a coherent policy to improve personal, social and economic outcomes for local people and to contribute to building a stronger, healthier, more prosperous society.

3.2 Altram welcomes the focus on outcomes with clear indicators – backed up by robust delivery plans - which will make it easier to measure delivery of the PfG 2016-2021.

3.3 Altram is concerned that the document contains no reference to Irish medium early years care and education in Northern Ireland.

3.4 Altram regrets that the document contains no reference to an Irish Language Act to develop and nurture the Irish language and provide legislative protection. The Northern Ireland Executive PfG 2011-2015 contained a 'strategy for the Irish language' as a key building block under Priority Four - Building a Strong and Shared Community. This is absent from the draft PfG 2016-2021.

3.5 Altram recognises that production and implementation of a robust PfG 2016-2021 with measurable targets and outcomes, which has the support of key stakeholders, including Northern Ireland's Irish language community and the early years sector, will make a positive contribution to meeting:

- Ongoing demand for quality, affordable, accessible early years' care, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas in the north of Ireland where Irish medium early years' settings are disproportionately to be found. 21 of the 34 Sure Start areas contain an Irish medium setting and some contain more than one.



- Languages for the Future (Department of Education) recommendations:
 - 2.1 'That pupils have the opportunity to study at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue from the earliest possible age.....'
 - 2.2 That the teaching and learning of languages in pre-primary/nursery provision be encouraged.
 - 11.2. That the provisions of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, ratified by the government of the United Kingdom, are fully applied and that, as an officially recognised indigenous language on an equal footing with Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, Irish should be afforded the full status and privileges that such standing entails.'
- The requirement imposed on the Executive by the St Andrew's Agreement Act 2006 'to protect and enhance the development of the Irish language'.
- The DCAL draft Irish Language Strategy 2012 requirement, which identifies 'family transmission' as the first of six key areas for action where real progress can be made to protect, enhance and develop the Irish language.
- Together Building a United Community (TBUC): Key Priority 4: Our Cultural Expression: '...we are committed to developing an open and tolerant society in which everyone is free to mark and celebrate their identity, or indeed identities, in a peaceful and respectful manner'.
- Recommendations from the Centre for Effectiveness's 2014 strategy – Prevention and early intervention in children and young people's lives: Ten years of learning that: 'transitions throughout children's lives – from infancy to young childhood – need to be planned and managed in advance. School policies should identify responsibility for creating formal and informal links between early years settings, schools and parents in order to support children in these transitions'.

This list gives a flavour of many different areas on which Irish medium early years provision impacts.



4. How Irish medium early years can contribute to delivery of Programme for Government 2016-2021

4.1 Draft Programme for Government Indicator 14: % of children at appropriate stage of development in their immediate pre-school year:

4.1.1 More and more information continues to become available from local and global sources about the long-term benefits of quality early years services, to the economic and social development of individuals and their communities.

4.1.2 Immersion education produces positive outcomes listed in 2.1, helping to develop children's social, communication, cognitive and creative skills in their immediate pre-school year.

4.1.3 The advantages of having more than one language have also now been well documented in international research, as has the fact that acquiring a second language at an early age can bring even more in the way of long-term personal, social and economic benefits.

4.1.4 Quality Irish-language immersion early years care and education has the potential to deliver the above benefits and the sector in the north of Ireland has many years experience in providing the relevant services. These points have been addressed in Languages for the Future – Northern Ireland Languages Strategy, a report produced by an expert working group for the Department of Education in September 2012. The report reflected on the international prioritisation of second language acquisition, noted the positive, unique contribution of the Irish medium sector to second language acquisition and set out recommendations for a Northern Ireland Languages Strategy.



4.2 Draft Programme for Government Indicator 9: % of the population who believe their cultural identity is respected by society

4.2.1 TBUC states that: ‘...we recognise that cultural identity and expression can have significant community relations impacts both between the two main traditions here and within the context of increasing diversity’. A healthy Irish language sector is a key expression of cultural identity and expression for Irish speakers and learners. Underlying principles for this strategy include respect; tolerance; intrer-dependence; inclusion and diversity, all of which a healthy and sufficiently resourced Irish language community can deliver and promote.

4.3 Draft Programme for Government Indicator 10: A Respect Index

4.3.1: Altram supports the development of a Respect Index and believes this will provide a framework to create a more welcoming, inclusive and tolerant society which will embrace linguistic and cultural diversity in all its forms. This indicator will help to deliver key outcomes including:

- We are shared society that respects diversity and
- We are a confident, welcoming, outward looking society

4.3.2: As evidenced throughout this document, supporting the Irish language will help to deliver on key agreements such as the St. Andrew’s Agreement aimed at dealing with the past and moving Northern Ireland toward a more cohesive, united and shared society. The TBUC strategy outlines a vision of a society where ‘cultural expression is celebrated and embraced’. Recognition, use and promotion of the Irish language is key to this vision being realised.



4.4 Draft Programme for Government Indicator 27: % engaging in arts/cultural activities in the past year

4.4.1: Altram supports and promotes Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits'. Altram welcomes this indicator and the overarching outcome committing to; '...an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential'.

4.4.2 Altram has delivered numerous resources and training to encourage and foster learning through creative activity in Irish medium early years settings. Over the past year, this has included the development of a quality resource: Ceol Leat! (Sing Along!) encouraging focused language learning through poetry; music and visual art.

4.4.3 The Irish medium early years sector recognises the cross cutting and multi layered benefits of engaging in creative activity. An OECD report (OECD 2013 Art for Art's Sake? The Impact of Arts Education: Winner, Goldstein and Vincent-Lancrin, 2013) outlines in the introduction: '...In knowledge-based societies, innovation is a key engine of economic growth, and arts education is increasingly considered as a means to foster the skills and attitudes that innovation requires, beyond and above artistic skills and cultural sensitivity. It is clear that the arts have a key role in developing an important creative faculty within innovation-based societies.



5. Programme for Government 2016-2021 Recommendations Altram recommends that:

5.1 Altram welcomes the fact that wellbeing is placed at the centre of the draft PfG 2016-2021 – the overarching purpose of the PfG is to improve: ‘wellbeing for all – by tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth. Altram welcomes the move away from GDP as a measure of societal progress. Altram recommends that a definition for wellbeing is developed as part of the document as well as an outline of how this will be achieved who will be responsible for monitoring this.

5.2 Altram is listed as a delivery partner within Indicator 15: Improve Child Development as a community/voluntary delivery partner to assist the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver this indicator

5.3 That the Irish medium early years sector is referenced as a unique sector with specific outcomes within Indicator 15: Improve Child Development

5.4 That relevant forthcoming strategies are brought forward as a matter of urgency to strengthen delivery and impact of the Programme for Government 2016-2021 such as the Childcare Strategy and the Children and Young People’s Strategy

5.5 The Northern Ireland Executive, in considering the development of policy and programmes relating to early years care and education in Northern Ireland, should have due regard to the undertakings in respect of language (and the Irish language in particular) which the UK Government and NI Executive have entered into, particularly since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. These involve commitments at United Nations, European and national levels. Altram recommends that the PfG 2016-2021 commits to the development of an Irish Language Act/Strategy to protect and nurture the Irish language within the north. Further detail of the relevant policy framework can be found at Appendix Two.

5.6 That the programme for Government ensures a co-ordinated approach to early childhood intervention and development.



Appendix 1

Altram - The Early Years Irish Language Immersion Support Organisation

Background

1. Altram was founded in 1990 by preschools in Armagh, Belfast, Derry and Newry. It is the only support organisation in Northern Ireland qualified, experienced and actively providing early years specialist advice, training, development information and support to the Irish medium early years statutory and voluntary sector. It also represents the sector on various statutory and funding bodies and advises central government as necessary. Altram receives core funding from the Department of Education and funding for early years specialist posts from Childcare Partnerships. It also obtains project support from a variety of sources.
2. Altram's objectives are
 - To help deliver quality early years care and education services as widely as possible to meet need and demand,
 - To do so through Irish in a full-immersion context, as a major contribution to developing children's Irish language skills, and as an introduction to full-immersion primary school provision,
 - To contribute to Irish-medium care and education as a cornerstone of an Irish-speaking community.



3. Altram's services include:-

- Regional outreach early years specialist support, including curricular advice and hands-on support for Irish medium statutory nurseries and nursery classes, early years Family Support centres, non-statutory pre-school groups, PSEEP groups, Sure Start Programmes for Two Year Olds;
- Three training cluster days annually (delivered at two separate venues) for staff of Irish medium PEAGs, preschools and early years across the north;
- Development and delivery of relevant immersion education programmes
- Accredited child protection training and Access NI child protection registration;
- Information service on managing and delivering IM early years projects and programmes;
- Support for development of new IM Early Years projects;
- Management and capacity-build support e.g. up-to-date guidelines for project committees;
- Responses to relevant consultations
- Production of Irish language resources e.g. books, for the sector;
- Provision of high quality materials for play resource development;
- Toy & Book Library (Western & Eastern Health Boards' Childcare Partnerships).
- Representation on statutory and funding bodies;
- Planned research into outcomes, including linguistic outcomes, in Irish medium settings

4. Policy context in which Altram operates

Throughout its development Altram has been guided by the research, strategic and operational objectives of its major partners in the statutory and voluntary/community sectors. Over time the following have been relevant:

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Children First – Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy: Policy Statement -1999
- Review of Children First – Report – 2005
- Our Children & Young People - Our Pledge: Strategy 2006-2016 – 2006
- Review of Irish Medium Education – DE Report – January 2009
- Families Matter – Regional Family and Parenting Strategy - March 2009
- Sure Start Programme for Two Year Olds: ETI Evaluation – June 2010
- Early Years (0-6) Strategy – June 2010 - December 2012
- ETI Chief Inspector's Report - 2008 – 2010
- Development of Children's Language & Communication in Pre-School Settings funded by Department of Education – ETI Evaluation – Feb. 2011
- Child Care Partnership Plan 2011-2014
- Learning to Learn – Draft Strategy – DE 2012



Funding and structures

5. Altram is presently core-funded solely by the Department of Education and the Childcare Partnership and operates as part of an all-Ireland early years' network.
6. Altram runs two regional offices, in Belfast and Derry. It has four full-time and one part time staff in Belfast and two full-time staff in Derry. The team includes four full-time early years specialists, one in the Western Board area, two covering the Eastern, Northern and Southern Boards and the fourth acting as Regional Irish Medium Early Years Programme Support Specialist.

Altram Representation

7. Altram represents the Irish Immersion sector on Northern Ireland statutory funding bodies, policy development and programme delivery organisations and lobby groups. It is currently represented on the following bodies:
 - Childcare Partnerships
 - PEAG Boards
 - Early Years Regional Strategic Funding Panel
 - SureStart
 - Local area childcare forums
 - Keeping Safe Co-ordinators
 - Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (the DE NDPB representing IM education)
 - Education and Training Inspectorate
 - Early Intervention Professional Development Knowledge and Skills Framework



Altram has also been represented on the previous advisory groups:

- Early Years (0-6) Strategy - Regional Reference Groups
- Early Years (0-6) Strategy- Stakeholder Advisory Group
- PlayBoard YESIP Project

9. Altram regularly contributes on behalf of the Irish medium early years sector to relevant statutory consultation exercises and provided input to the DHSSPS standards document “*Childminding and Day Care for Children under the age of 12.*”

Characteristics of the Irish medium early years care & education sector

10. Parental choice and involvement

There has been a tremendous growth of Irish language projects over the last period reflecting parental choice and the high regard for Irish in local communities. Projects were set up by local parents where no early years facilities through Irish existed and parental participation in Irish medium projects is generally high. Parents have been involved in managing and supporting projects and many parents who are women returners have undertaken training and worked in the sector.

11. Social Inclusion and children in need

Projects were set up in areas of high social and economic deprivation which are still experiencing the legacy of the conflict. (Department of Education figures for Free School Meals show that Irish Medium schools have a higher level of dependence on Free School Meals than other sectors.) This underlines the added value to children of receiving high quality play experiences through a second language at an early age and the importance of parental and community involvement in these projects.

12. High quality early years provision through a second language

Irish medium early years projects combine high quality play experiences with immersion in a second language in a unique and innovative way which offers added value to young children. This integration of play and language cannot take place successfully without a large degree of planning and organisation. Staff in Irish medium projects must have a high level of childcare, language and Irish immersion methodology skills to develop quality services. There is also a shortage of relevant materials and staff must often develop their own resources to support the immersion programme.



13. Challenges facing Altram and the early years Irish medium sector

- Lack of adequate long term core funding in recognition of the specialised training, support and developmental services Altram provides to Irish-speaking children, families and Irish-medium providers in the early years' statutory and voluntary sectors.
- Supporting development and delivery of SureStart: Programme for Two Year Olds.
- Need for greater Irish medium early years sector involvement in programmes such as *SureStart*, including the *Programme for Two Year Olds*.
- Obtaining official recognition of the linguistic need for a two-year period of pre-school Irish immersion care and education with related funding.
- The development of Irish-medium Children's Centres.
- Providing support services, including childcare, to families with children in EY Irish immersion settings.
- Lack of a Quality Assurance Scheme targeted at and tailored to specific characteristics of the early years Irish immersion sector
- Recruiting and retaining staff with Irish language and childcare qualifications.
- Supporting development and delivery of quality, accredited immersion training
- Limited infrastructural funding



Appendix 2

Policy context

UK Government Commitments

- **United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 2 and Article 29**

Art. 2: - States parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

Art. 29: - States parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:..... (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values....

- **European Charter for Regional & Minority Languages (Ratified 2001) - Articles 7 and 8 as they relate to pre-school education**

Art. 7: - Objectives and principles

1. In respect of regional or minority languages, within the territories in which such languages are used and according to the situation of each language, the Parties shall base their policies, legislation and practice on the following objectives and principles:

- a. the recognition of the regional or minority languages as an expression of cultural wealth;
- c. the need for resolute action to promote regional or minority languages in order to safeguard them;
- d. the facilitation and/or encouragement of the use of regional or minority languages, in speech and writing, in public and private life;
- f. the provision of appropriate forms and means for the teaching and study of regional or minority languages at all appropriate stages;
- g. the provision of facilities enabling non-speakers of a regional or minority language living in an area where it is used to learn it if they so desire;

4. In determining their policy with regard to regional or minority languages, the Parties shall take into consideration the needs and wishes expressed by the groups which use such languages.

Art. 8: - Education

With regard to education, the Parties undertake, within the territory in which such languages are used, according to the situation of each of these languages, and without prejudice to the teaching of the official language(s) of the State:



- a. i to make available pre-school education in the relevant regional or minority languages; or
 - ii. to make available a substantial part of pre-school education in the relevant regional or minority languages; or
 - iii. to apply one of the measures provided for under i and ii above at least to those pupils whose families so request and whose number is considered sufficient;
(UK Commitment)
- g. to make arrangements to ensure the teaching of the history and the culture which is reflected by the regional or minority language;
 - h. to provide the basic and further training of the teachers required to implement those of paragraphs a. to g. accepted by the Party;

- **Good Friday Agreement – 1998 – Strand 3: Paragraph 3 and Paragraph 4**

Para. 3 - All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.

Para. 4 - In the context of active consideration currently being given to the UK signing the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the British Government will in particular in relation to the Irish language, where appropriate and where people so desire it:

- take resolute action to promote the language;
- facilitate and encourage the use of the language in speech and writing in public and private life where there is appropriate demand;
- seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language;
- make provision for liaising with the Irish language community, representing their views to public authorities and investigating complaints;
- place a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Irish medium education in line with current provision for integrated education;

- **St Andrew's Agreement and St Andrew's Agreement Act – 2006**

'The Government will introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland and work with the incoming Executive to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language'.



- **European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights (adopted 2000),**

The Charter, which was made legally binding by Treaty of Lisbon, does the following

- Art 21 – Prohibits discrimination on grounds of language.
- Art 22 – Places an obligation on the Union to respect linguistic diversity.

- **EU Objectives**

Multilingualism, in the EU's view, is a critical element of ensuring Europe's future competitiveness.

- Within the framework of education and vocational training policy, the EU's objective is for every citizen to master two other languages in addition to his/her mother tongue - the "1+2" policy
- In order to achieve this objective, children are to be taught two additional languages in school from an early age.

NI Executive commitments

- **Programme for Government 2011-2015**

- Makes development of an Irish Language Strategy a key building block of Priority 4 - 'Building a Strong and Shared Community'.

- **Draft Irish Language Strategy 2012 -**

- The draft Strategy issued by DCAL for consultation in 2012 identifies family transmission as the first of six key areas for action where real progress can be made to protect, enhance and develop the Irish language.
- In relation to the Irish-immersion pre-school sector the draft Strategy states:
 - The IME sector has been growing steadily in recent years and this growth looks set to continue.
 - Increased demand should be met.
 - In 2011/12 70 schools/Units were providing IME to over 4,000 children at pre-school, primary and post-primary levels
 - DE should continue to support the development of IME at pre-school level through the provision of PEAGS.
 - Criteria for the enrolment of bilingual/Irish medium pre-schools should be reviewed.
 - Capacity in English medium pre-schooling in a particular area should not deter the opening/development/financing of IME pre-schools.