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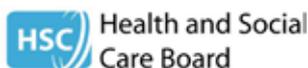
guth na luathbhlianta

# NA LUATHBHLIANTA GAEILGE TUARASCÁIL AR AN EARNÁIL

Scríofa ag Gerry Conway  
Achoimre Fheidhmeach  
Márta 2017

# IRISH-MEDIUM EARLY YEARS STATE OF THE SECTOR REPORT

by Gerry Conway  
Executive Summary  
March 2017



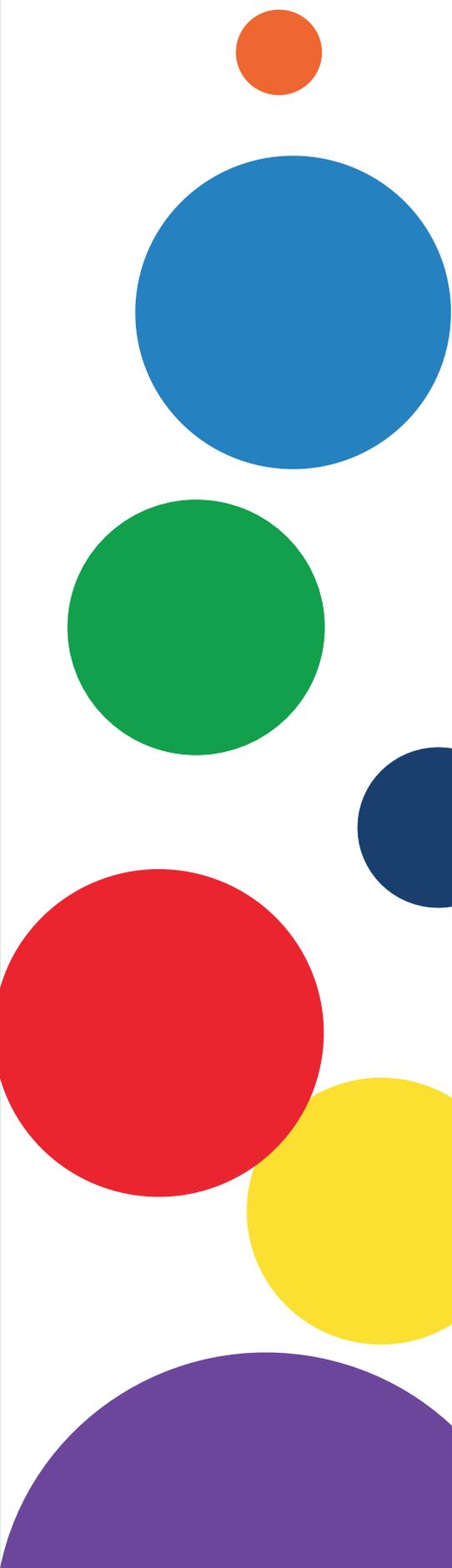


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This Report was prepared by Gerry Conway, KoalaT Consultancy,  
under commission from Altram.



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

**Altram**, founded in 1990, is the lead regional support organisation for Irish-medium early years groups and aims to: (i) ensure the provision of high-quality care and education for young children in an Irish immersion setting and (ii) provide support for parents whose children are in Irish-medium pre-school education.

The organisation is funded by the Department of Education, through Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and by the Health and Social Care Board.

Since its foundation, Altram has developed significant experience in providing direct training and support to practitioners, pioneering the development of a range of training programmes and support resources.

Altram also functions at a strategic level in terms of advocacy for and representation of the sector in policy development and planning activities.

## **Services delivered by Altram**

- A regional support service for Irish-medium early years groups;
- Early Years Specialist support;
- Pre-inspection support;
- Support for new Irish-medium settings/naíonraí;
- In-service training programmes;
- Cluster training days for practitioners;
- Training on curriculum and language themes;
- Curriculum planning for new settings/naíonraí with their staff;
- Training according to Department of Education priorities;
- Annual Conference;
- Safeguarding training;
- Tailored workshops to address identified needs;
- Support and advice to Management Committees;
- The development and provision of Irish language early years resources.

## **Delivery Team**

- Manager
- Regional Capacity Officer
- Three Early Years Specialists covering the entire region
- A regional Irish-medium Early Years Programme Support Specialist (for the Sure Start Developmental Programme for 2 - 3 year olds)
- Administrator

The work of Altram is overseen and managed by a Board consisting of four committed members with a range of relevant skills and experience of the sector. For further details of Altram's work, go to: [www.altram.org](http://www.altram.org).

**KoalaT Consultancy** was commissioned by Altram to undertake the development of a State of the Sector Report in respect of Early Years settings delivering through the medium of the Irish language.

The rationale for this Report is to reflect the current state of the sector through:

- reviewing the impact of the sector;
- identifying the pressures and challenges facing the sector;
- assessing the sustainability of the sector; and
- identifying the support needs within the sector.

The intention has been to review the issues that the Irish medium sector shares with all early years provision but, more critically, to examine the particular challenges of providing a quality early years service in the context of an Irish language, immersion education environment.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The Report has been based on the following activities:

1. A review of the policies and practices affecting the Early Years sector generally and Irish medium sector specifically.
2. An analysis of the current provision in terms of geographic spread, accessibility, quality of provision and physical arrangements of provision.
3. A review of financial resources available to the sector and issues affecting viability and sustainability.
4. An analysis of staffing provision in terms of numbers, qualification, experience and turnover.
5. An identification of the issues affecting staff improvement in terms of:
  - general issues in common with all early years sectors;
  - additional challenges relating to an Irish medium Immersion context.
6. Surveys of staff working within Irish-medium Early Years settings.
7. Surveys of Management Committees with responsibilities for Irish medium Early Years settings.
8. Focus Groups with parents of children attending Irish medium provision, Early Years Specialists in Altram and Practitioners through their existing Cluster Groups.
9. Focus Group with the Board of Altram.
10. Structured Interview with representative(s) of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.
11. Structured Interviews with representatives of the Health and Social Care Trusts who are responsible for the Registration and Inspection of childcare services.
12. Structured Interviews with representatives of the Childcare Partnerships.
13. Structured Interviews with representatives of the Department of Education with responsibility for Early Years Education and for SureStart.

# 3. POLICY REVIEW

The delivery of Early Years and Childcare services through the medium of the Irish language lies within a range of policy drivers that seek to address the needs of children, particularly in their earliest years, through a range of outcome-focused activities.

## 3.1 Draft Programme for Government

Published by the Northern Ireland Executive in October, 2016 for consultation, the draft Programme for Government set out the priorities for government policy and action during that Executive's mandate. It contained a vision for a better future for the population through the articulation of 14 Outcomes and 48 linked Indicators. The key relevant Outcome is:

**We give our children and young people the best start in life.**

One of the key **indicators** for this Outcome will be the percentage of children at the appropriate stage of development in their immediate pre-school year. This Outcome will be achieved by collaborative working within and across sectors with the active involvement of individuals and communities. The requirement for collaboration is enacted in the **Children's Services Cooperation Act 2015** and should underpin the development of services in the future:

*"Every children's authority must, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of its children functions, co-operate with other children's authorities and with other children's service providers in the exercise of those functions." [2. (1)]*

## 3.2 Draft Childcare Strategy

Published by the Department of Education as a Consultation document in July, 2015 this has not yet been finalised. Building on the previous policy document, **Bright Start - Strategic Framework and Key First Actions**, published in 2013, one of its 7 key Objectives is:

*"The development of childcare services that are of high quality, meeting or bettering the current minimum standards and with all staff and managers trained to the appropriate level."*

This underlines the importance of well-qualified and supported staff, with a focus on progressive development and learning, to provide the optimum environment for improving children's outcomes.

The development of a Childcare Strategy is focused on two main beneficiaries:

- (i) Parents (particularly mothers) being able to access the labour market; and
- (ii) Children who benefit from a learning environment in childcare, provided by staff with the requisite training and qualifications.

## 3.3 Early Years Education

The development of both the Pre-School Education Programme across all areas, and of SureStart in areas with a high level of disadvantage, has provided a strong focus for Early Years education during the last 20 years. The Pre-School Education Programme has been a successful development in providing a year of age-appropriate learning to children in the year before

compulsory education. It currently provides approximately 23,000 funded places in a variety of statutory, voluntary, community and private settings. Of these, approximately 1,100 (4.8%) are provided in the Irish-medium sector.

The growth of the SureStart Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds, providing additional support for children in their penultimate preschool year, is acknowledged as an important development, despite its limited level of engagement within SureStart communities. As SureStart is targeted to the 25% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland, and the Developmental Programme is limited in its reach within these communities, its overall impact remains limited but effective where available. Of 138 programmes being delivered across Northern Ireland, 5 (3.6%) are available through the medium of Irish.

In 2013, the Department of Education published an educational policy direction in **Learning to Learn - A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning** acknowledging the importance of pre-school experiences:

- for social, emotional and cognitive development; and
- as a major influence in success at school.

The policy framework, recognising the need for parental engagement and choice, has indicated an overall policy aim that:

**"All children have equal opportunities to achieve their potential through high quality early years education and learning experiences."**

Principles underpinning the planning and delivery of early years education and learning include:

- The early years education and learning needs of all children are the key focus of provision.
- Education and learning begin at birth.
- Children and their families are entitled to high quality, age-appropriate early years education and learning services and opportunities.
- The rights of the child are respected.
- Equality of opportunity and inclusion are essential characteristics of quality early years education and learning.
- Collaborative working among the statutory, voluntary and other relevant sectors and professional bodies will play an important part in securing improved outcomes for children in their early years.

## 3.4 Regulatory Roles and Responsibilities

The services provided within the Irish-medium Early Years sector are subject to regulation under a series of legislative and policy requirements:

a) Under Part XI of the Children (NI) Order, 1995 and the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Daycare for Children under 12 (DHSSPS 2012), providers are subject to Registration and Inspection (annual, planned/unannounced) by the local Health and Social Care Trust. Providers are registered and inspected against 16 **minimum standards** for the provision of a service under the following headings:

- Quality of Care
- Quality of Staffing, Management and Leadership
- Quality of the Physical Environment
- Quality of Monitoring and Evaluation.



In addition, there are policies and procedures required in each setting that are subject to inspection in terms of their availability and use. A recent requirement has been the development of self-evaluation as a means of internal monitoring and planning within a setting in terms of quality improvement.

b) For settings funded by the Education Authority to provide early years education and learning, or in the near future, SureStart services, inspection and quality improvement are the responsibility of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Its key responsibilities are:

- The Inspection of early years settings, designed to provide an evaluation of an organisation's capacity in terms of education training provision and outcomes and in its leadership and management (and their contribution to improvement).
- The dissemination of good and innovative practice through inspection and evaluative work.

The quality of early years services is underpinned by "Curricular Guidance for Pre- School Education" (CCEA 2006) which provides staff with the framework to "review and develop the programmes of learning and to promote good practice." The Education and Training Inspectorate has also published its Inspection and Evaluation Framework in "Effective Practice and Self-Evaluation" (January 2017). This is designed to help organisations or teams to "initiate or continue a process of self-reflection leading to improvement."

### 3.5 Conclusions - Key Themes

Key themes emerge from a review of these policies and policy aspirations that have potential consequences for the Irish medium sector :

#### a) Little reference to or recognition of the Irish-medium sector

The range of relevant policy directions reflects a lack of a strategic recognition of the benefits of the sector and its need for support with the development of pathways towards improvement and excellence. There appears to be a culture within policy- makers and statutory agencies of Irish language immersion education as an add-on to early years education and learning when viewed through the prism of English language provision. Agencies with a responsibility for monitoring services or supporting children in the sector are compromised in their observations and assessments because of a lack of knowledge of the core elements of the approach. This places a burden on the sector to continually advocate and negotiate around their valuable contribution to children's well-being and development.

#### b) Early intervention, especially in the earlier years

The development of Irish-medium Early Years education and learning, particularly in the penultimate pre-school year (2-3 year olds) through SureStart and other locally developed programmes, provides the sector with an opportunity for future development and accessibility.

#### c) Collaborative action across sectors

The Irish-medium sector has been an active participant in a range of planning and delivery partnerships. This places it in a position to shape and influence collaborative action in a way that supports its own aims and objectives, recognising the shared challenges across the sectors while also promoting the specific needs of its own sector.

#### d) Partnership with parents/parental choice

There is a high level of parental support for and engagement in Irish-medium Early Years services. Parents have made a conscious choice, for a number of reasons, to choose this form of provision and present an admirable commitment to its development and to their direct and indirect involvement.

#### e) Delivery in and with communities

Irish-medium education is planned and developed in and with local communities. It regularly links closely with other support services for families with small children and is seen as a strong support service in its own right. It has a clear community ownership and buy-in, providing a positive basis for development.

#### f) Quality of provision based mainly on the quality of staff

Altram has a clear role in relation to promoting and delivering the training and development of those who deliver the services. It seeks to do this within the resources available to it and through the ability to access training and support from Partnerships with which it is involved.

The sector is well-regarded for providing a service rich in second language development through immersion methodology, with outcomes supported by research across the globe. However, the unique challenge of providing appropriate training in Early Years Care and Education with language development and immersion education skills is not supported through a strategic approach to knowledge and skill development.

#### g) An Outcomes-based approach with clear and measurable indicators to track progress

A common thread across all types of early years provision is the move toward an Outcomes Based Accountability framework, through which child well-being can be assessed over time in terms of both individual children and populations of children. SureStart projects (including the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds) operate within an Outcomes framework that measures and records activity and outcomes through the use of an electronic Information System (SureStart Play).

Pre-School settings adopt a less formal approach based on individual planning for each child based on recorded Observation and Assessment, requiring a high level of staff time outside direct contact with children. There is, however, an increasing view that all services should have a measurable and evidenced impact on the well-being of all children and families who access them.

# 4. OVERVIEW OF THE EARLY YEARS SECTOR

There has been an increasing recognition that the learning journey begins in the womb. The work of Suzanne Zeedyk in the UK has promoted the increasing awareness of the neuroscience of early infancy with the understanding that a child's brain development is most active in the first few years of life and can be affected by positive or negative attachment and influences. (See "Sabre-Tooth Tigers and Teddy Bears" by Dr Suzanne Zeedyk)

Early Years Care and Education policy follows this in terms of a number of early years intervention programmes, some available on a universal basis and others in a more targeted way:

- Pre-School education funded by the Department of Education (through the Education Authority).
- The SureStart Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds (available in targeted areas for children considered to need additional support).
- Other penultimate Pre-School programmes in non-SureStart areas, seeking to engage parents and children in age-appropriate learning to support the transition into pre-school.
- Availability of childcare provided by a well-qualified workforce, competent to provide an age-appropriate care and learning experience for children.
- Affordability of childcare provision, given the increasing demands of Standards in relation to staff-child ratios and qualification levels.

## **Key issues affecting the Early Years Care and Education sector:**

- The workforce is generally part-time and among the lowest-paid, despite the important roles that they play. It is, in the main, a female workforce with many necessary tasks and activities carried out through the goodwill of staff members. Workforce planning seeks to make childcare and education a real choice for those suited to it and not just for those who feel that there are no other options.
- Minimum Standards introduced in 2012 set out a requirement for qualification levels for Leaders and Managers, but without a strategic approach to workforce planning and development in a way that was accessible and affordable to the sector.
- In addition to Qualification Standards, the Standards have indicated mandatory training required by Early Years staff (including Safeguarding and First Aid). The Childcare Partnerships provide a comprehensive range of free, short-courses to meet these and other practice-development needs, prioritising the courses available and the accessibility to them. Other training courses are available in local Colleges or from commercial sources.
- Sustainability is a key challenge for most settings and requires careful planning based on demographic intelligence/population trends and awareness of policy and parental priorities.



# 5. OVERVIEW OF THE IRISH MEDIUM EARLY YEARS SECTOR

In general terms, the Irish-medium sector can reflect the same range of challenges faced by the wider Early Years Care and Education sector, of which it is a part. We will look at the shared difficulties and challenges but will also outline additional characteristics of the sector, presenting unique challenges.

## 5.1 Growth of the sector

There has been a significant growth in the provision of Early Years services through the medium of Irish, from the 1990s to the present day. The past five years has seen a concentrated period of development with an increase of 58% from over 760 children attending services in 2012 to nearly 1,200 children in 2017. This excludes the children attending penultimate pre-school provision and daycare. In addition, two new pre-schools are planned to open in September, 2017.

A review of the geographic spread of Irish-medium early years provision shows a concentration of provision in the urban areas of Belfast and Derry and across the rural areas of mid-Ulster and the counties of Armagh and Down. Features of these catchment areas include high levels of deprivation, rurality and communities affected by the Troubles. There remain large parts of the region in which parents do not have access to Irish language provision if they so wish.

According to the information from Altram, there are settings as follows:

- 15 Pre-School (Statutory)
- 29 Pre-School (Voluntary/Community)
- 5 SureStart Developmental Programmes for 2-3 Year Olds
- 12 Penultimate Pre-School Programmes.

In addition, a number of settings provide Stay and Play sessions for children with their parents, a useful way of engaging with parents at an early stage and introducing them to the language to support their children. A small number of settings are exploring the provision of Summer Schemes and After-School and Breakfast Clubs for children in their local communities.

The funding arrangements for the various settings differs significantly.

- Statutory funding is relatively fixed and constant, based on an expected full provision.
- Voluntary and community settings attract funding from the Education Authority on a capitation basis, linked to the number of children attending. Problems arise when the numbers ebb and flow over a number of years, making settings (and staff) vulnerable. This makes it difficult to plan beyond a short-term horizon with any degree of certainty in relation to provision and the quality that can be developed.
- SureStart Developmental Programmes for 2-3 Year Olds are funded by the Department of Education through the HSCB/ Childcare Partnerships
- Penultimate Pre-School programmes are not funded on a statutory basis (and are not subject to any quality assurance). They are only required to register with HSC Trusts if parents are not in attendance and the period for which they provide care for children exceeds two hours in any day.

## 5.2 Immersion Education/Bilingualism

Irish-medium education is a system of language immersion education that, for some children, is a first language experience while, for others, is an immersion language experience. Immersion education has been researched widely across the globe in terms of its impact, both short-term/long-term and direct/indirect. Children are educated, generally in lesser-used or indigenous languages that are not usually the 'language of the home'. We have many examples including;

- French in Canada
- Maori in New Zealand
- Catalan in Spain
- Breton in France
- Welsh in Wales
- Gaelic in Scotland

Most children in Irish-medium Education are from English-speaking homes and this presents some of the additional challenges in the sector. The sector seeks to provide opportunities for children to experience full Immersion Education from Early Years / Pre- School through Primary and into Post-Primary settings.

A review of research indicates evidence of better outcomes for children who have been educated through a language-immersion model.

- **Genesee (1987)** and **Cloud, Genesee & Hamayan (2000)** show that immersion students achieve as well as or better than non-immersion peers on standardised measures of verbal and mathematics skills administered in English.
- **Gallagher & Hanna (2002)**, in a research briefing published by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, indicated that former pupils of Irish-medium schools attained a higher academic standard than might be expected among the general population of the same age group.
- **Cenoz & Valencia (1994)** provided evidence that bilingual students in the Basque country show a greater capacity to learn a third language. This is supported by other studies.
- **Baker & Hornberger (2001)** found that children in French Immersion Programmes in Canada tended to perform better than children in regular programmes on several aspects of English achievement.
- **Cloud, Genesee & Hamayan (2000)** also supported the conclusion that the immersion experience enhances English language development.

Research, supporting the impact of Immersion Education on children's potential outcomes, provides a strong Unique Selling Point for the sector in promoting the value of its contribution to children's educational outcomes.

### 5.3 Compliance with Standards

(i) **The Health and Social Care Trusts** carry out Annual Inspections of the sector against the requirements of the Minimum Standards. In general terms, they express a satisfaction with the levels of compliance. The key issues arising from their Inspections (and these are shared across the early years sectors), include:

- The qualification levels for Leaders not being met. They recognise that the Department of Health has asked them to be flexible in applying this Standard when time-bound plans are in place to meet the requirement.
- Management Committee training needs to be more available and attended.
- Some of the accommodation is in need of repair or replacement.

(ii) **The ETI Chief Inspector's Report, 2014-16** outlined the overall outcomes of Inspections carried out during that period. In general, she was pleased with the overall progress in the settings in terms of their "high level of capacity or capacity to identify and bring about change." 84% of providers were evaluated at this level with 95% of Nursery Schools, 91% of Nursery Units, 79% of Voluntary/Private providers and 76% of Irish Medium settings meeting this high standard.

### 5.4 Workforce

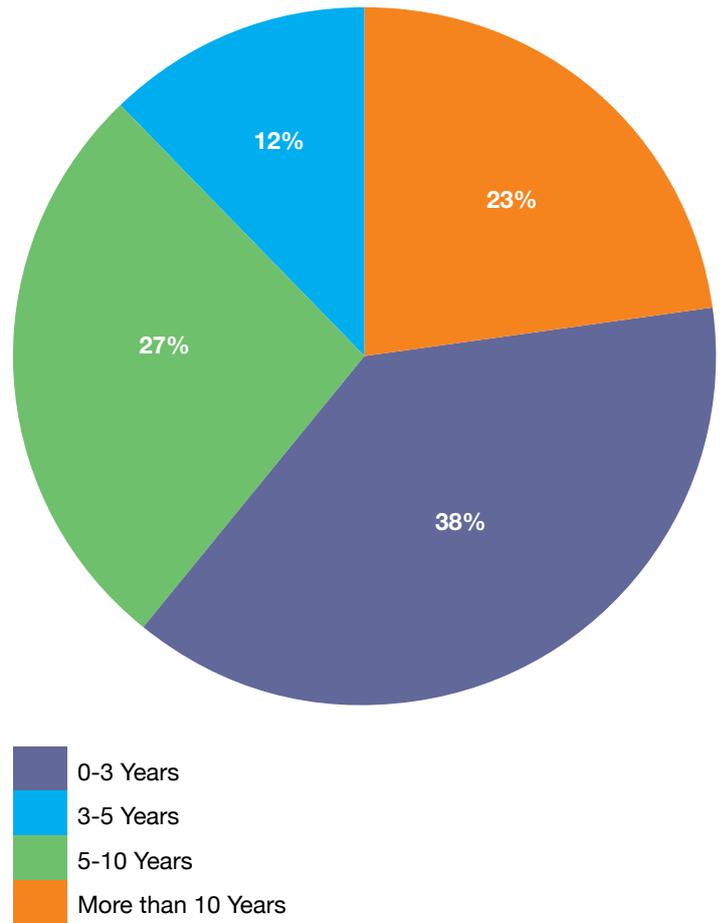
The Irish medium Early Years services are delivered by 165 members of staff, comprising:

- 2 Centre managers/coordinators
- 3 Early Years coordinators
- 57 teacher/leaders
- 103 Early Years /Childcare practitioners

The sector reflects, in many ways, the issues faced by the wider Early Years Care and Education sectors...recruitment of suitable people, qualification levels, continuous improvement and training and retention. An analysis of this cohort of staff members across experience, qualifications and competence in Irish language indicates the variety of challenges faced by the sector in attracting from a small pool of potential recruits, accessing and funding the wide range of competencies required through to retaining those with the highest of qualifications.

A growth of Irish-medium provision in the next few years will challenge the sector in terms of its own workforce planning and development. It may be possible to attract staff with the requisite Early Years and Childcare qualifications but **a more strategic response to language and Immersion training** will be required, possibly fast-tracked over the initial period of employment. There are also issues raised by some staff about their job security on the basis of annual contracts. This reflects the sometimes tenuous and short-term nature of funding in the sector generally but can prove a disincentive to attracting practitioners to the Irish medium sector.

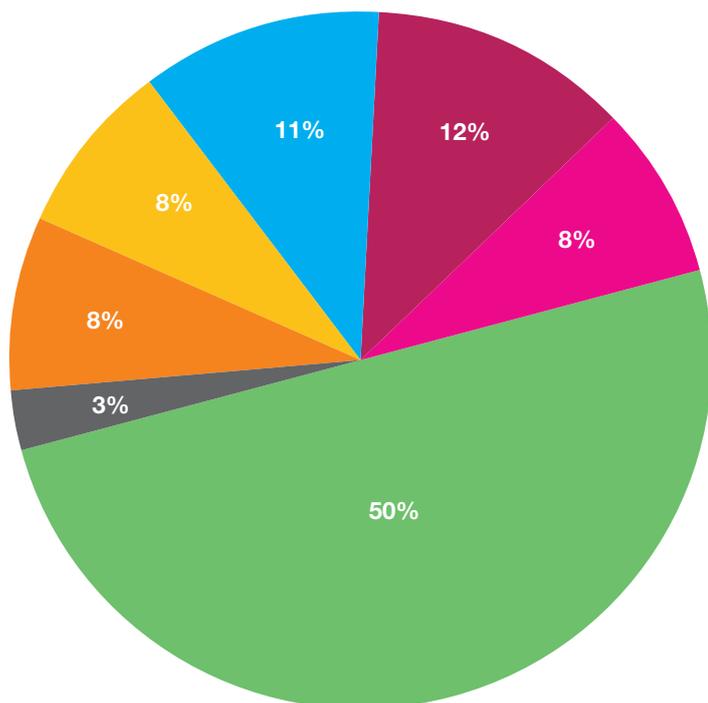
Figure 1: Staff Experience



In terms of experience, the workforce is a relatively inexperienced one with 38% of the staff having less than three years experience. This may be due to the developments in the sector with additional recruitment required to meet the demands of a growing sector.

However, 50% of the workforce have more than five years experience, providing a solid core of experienced staff members.

Figure 2: Staff Qualifications



At one end the qualification spectrum, there are 22% of staff with qualifications at Level 5 or above. Some of the staff with Degree level or post-graduate levels in Education (18% of staff) may, however, use the post as a stepping stone into teaching posts in the Irish medium education sector, when these become available.

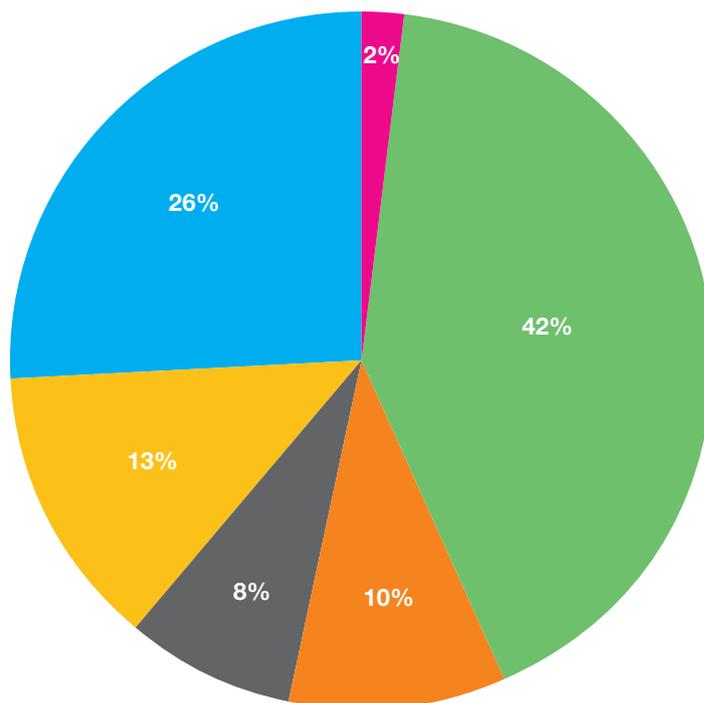
12% of staff members have no recognised qualification for the Early Years and Childcare sector.

50% of staff members are qualified to QCF Level 3 or equivalent.

8% of staff members have identified that they hold another Childcare qualification but it is not possible to determine if it is an equivalent to a QCF qualification.

8 staff members (5%) are currently undertaking a QCF Level 5 qualification.

Figure 3: Managers'/ Teachers'/Leaders' Qualifications

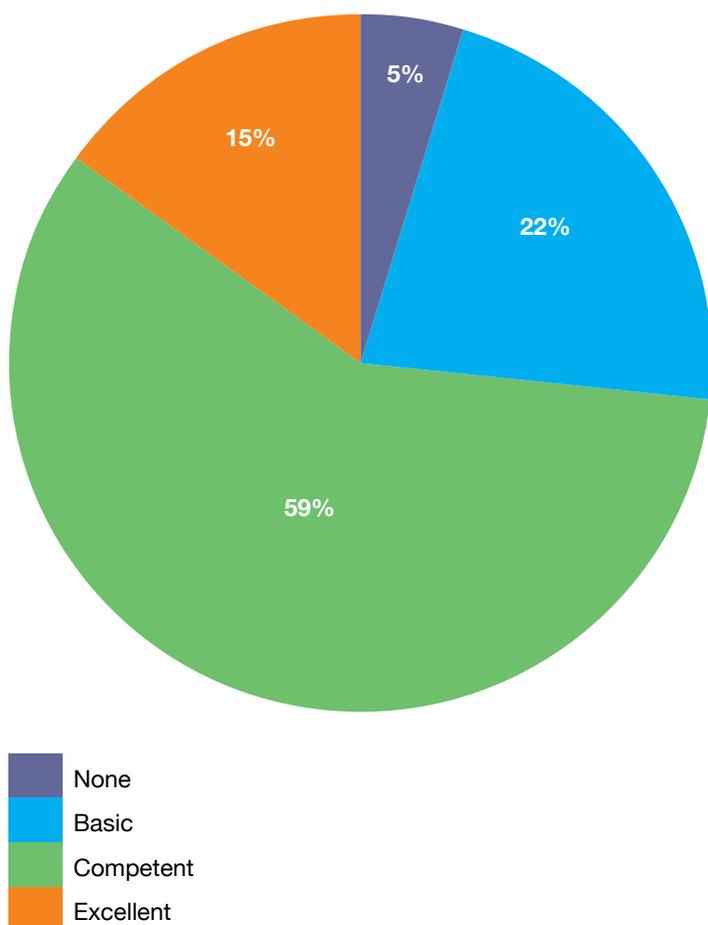


54% of managers, teachers and leaders do not have qualifications that meet the requirements of Minimum Standards (recognising that these were introduced without a clear strategic direction for supporting this requirement).

Those teachers/leaders with Degree or Post-Graduate level qualifications in education may prove vulnerable, from a workforce planning perspective, to potential moves to the statutory sector as jobs become available.

Again, 8 members of staff (5%) are currently undertaking a QCF Level 5 training.

**Figure 4: Staff Language Competence**



The evaluation of practitioner language competence is drawn from the database held by Altram and is based on subjective evaluations by Early Years Specialists and staff members themselves. Although this reflects an attempt by the sector to assess levels of competence, there is no objective mechanism for measuring language capacities in this occupational context. A number of stakeholders feel that the level of language competence has been overstated but needs to be measured against what is appropriate for a competent early years practitioner in an immersion education setting.

It is a clear requirement for a quality language immersion experience that children must be supported by staff with an occupational competence in the language.

The assessment of competence shows a high level of capacity in language competence with 74% of staff being either competent or excellent.

27% of staff have no Irish language or their competence is at a basic level. Language development is critical for these staff members.

5% of staff have little or no Irish language competence but this reflects their recent recruitment and the lower pool of potential staff from whom the sector can recruit. Settings still have to meet the staff-child ratios as required by the regulatory authority i.e. the HSC Trusts.

A major difficulty for the sector is the capacity to recruit staff with the core skills to make the most contribution to children whose parents have chosen Irish language Immersion education. The reality is that there is a smaller pool of staff from which to recruit, considering that competence is required across 3 skill-areas:

1) **Early Years Care and Education** in line with Minimum Standards requirements.

2) **Irish Language** at a level appropriate to the occupational requirements of the sector.

3) **Immersion Education** characterised by:

- A lack of systematic training for staff members and their trainers/support staff in Irish medium Immersion methodology;
- A lack of references and guidance in statutory Guidance documents;
- Regulatory staff having little or no training/guidance to enable them to assess the quality of Irish medium Immersion provision and to make informed judgement outside the context of Early Years Care and Education.

This also has implications for the training and development of staff across all the skill-areas, not just in terms of capacity but also because of a lack of understanding and appreciation of the challenges in addressing these needs. Access to the shared training in Early Years Care and Education is relatively straightforward. Training and development in Irish language and Immersion education is relatively undeveloped with a lower level of competent training capacity. There is a smaller cohort of trainers and less expertise at this stage of the sector's development. A strategic approach to this will be required in terms of developing an infrastructure with sufficient levels of expertise, a research capacity and the ability to deliver cost-effectively across a small but geographically dispersed workforce.

**Key issues affecting the Irish-medium Early Years sector:**

The Irish-medium Early Years sector is affected by the key issues relating to the wider Early Years sector but experiences additional unique challenges if it is to improve the quality of service to which it aspires:

- The continued growth of the sector must be strategically planned at a local level in line with parental wishes, population trends and developments in Irish Medium education at all levels. This will require a robust workforce planning process to address the need for well-qualified, trained and supported pool of staff.
- A lack of understanding of immersion education and the evidenced benefits for improved educational outcomes. This results in a lack of recognition and inclusion in policy documents and a restricted assessment by agencies charged with monitoring standards.
- The need to develop a systematic framework for training in immersion methodology both at a foundation level but also in terms of continuous development for staff members in the sector.
- The need to identify occupational competence standards in terms of language skills and immersion methodology, recognising the additional knowledge and skills. Programmes and resources exist but they require funding support for further development and accreditation.





# 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Irish-medium Early Years sector is a thriving and vibrant provider of Early Years Irish medium care and education services in most areas of its delivery. It has grown exponentially since the sector was last reviewed in 2013, providing quality, affordable and accessible early years care and education, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas where Irish medium early years settings are disproportionately located. 21 of the 39 Sure Start areas (which cover the region's top 25% most deprived areas) contain an Irish medium setting and some contain more than one.

As noted, the sector shares many of the difficulties of the wider Early Years sector but with a few identified significant challenges associated with its own unique characteristics.

It has been acknowledged that children in Irish-medium Early Years settings are receiving an enhanced service — an immersion education with the opportunity to develop key language skills at a very young age in addition to good-quality child care and education.

The settings contribute to a vibrant Irish language community throughout the region. Irish medium early years settings are the corner stone for this community and lay a strong foundation for a healthy Irish medium education sector.

Irish-medium early years immersion education is well placed to promote the strongly evidenced positive educational outcomes associated with Immersion education. It provides a key introduction to the Irish medium journey for parents and children with no previous background in or experience of the sector.

**Given the strong academic, social and cultural outcomes for children** within immersion education environments (evidenced internationally), it is essential that children accessing Irish medium early years settings are doing so in a secure, well-resourced sector with clear progression routes. They should have access to a sector with a strong quality-improvement culture which potential funders can recognise and support and which will be a foundation for improved outcomes.

To ensure that this happens, the Key Recommendations of this Report must be realised.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the outcomes of the policy review and engagement with stakeholders, the following Key Recommendations are made:

1. A costed and time-bound Workforce Development and Training Plan, with clearly defined targets, should be developed by Altram and agreed with partners, funders and regulatory authorities. This will enable a more strategic approach by all to the provision of a skilled, qualified and developing workforce across all areas of Early Years Care & Education, Irish Language and Immersion education methodology. The Plan should include:

- a) An agreed targeted approach to the development of Leadership qualifications (QCF Level 5), enabling the sector to meet its regulatory requirements within an acceptable time-frame;
- b) The development of occupational standards in respect of the level of Irish language competence required by an early years educator;
- c) The development of a systematic framework for progressive training in immersion methodology;
- d) The production of accredited training programmes in language competence (appropriate to the needs of the sector) and immersion methodology with a delivery plan across the workforce. Altram should explore the design of accredited training using modular programmes and delivery through distance-learning models;
- e) The development of a Quality Accreditation Scheme in relation to Irish-medium Immersion education that could help to embed a culture of progressive learning and development and to provide a promotional focus for parents;
- f) Progress in the development of well-qualified support and training capacity available to Altram, building on the strengths of the existing Early Years Specialists. Their role is central to a culture of progressive workforce development and quality improvement. Consideration should be given to their training and developmental needs to maximise their contribution;
- g) A commitment to workforce training and development from Management Committees, by monitoring and supporting their arrangements for staff release and financial support.

2. Altram should develop a Workforce Strategy for the sector addressing future workforce requirements, recruitment of staff, terms of employment and other issues raised through the engagement process as a way of making the sector an “employer of choice.”

3. Altram, with its strategic partners, should develop a Sustainability Framework, seeking to attract parents and children to the sector, based on:

a) a promotional strategy building on the evidenced benefits of Immersion education on educational outcomes for children;

b) improved and proactive local planning using demographic intelligence/population trends to ensure that demand for Irish-medium is maximised; and

c) consideration of integrated planning to include other support services for children and their parents based on a social economy model. Family support and childcare services are family-oriented and will help the sector to:

- engage with children and their parents at the earliest opportunity; provide parental support; and
- establish potential funding streams outside of a dependency on statutory funding/ grant-aid.

4. The sector should develop a Communications strategy addressing the need to:

a) Ensure that there is a wide understanding of Immersion education and methodology among regulatory authorities and professional support staff e.g. Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists , etc. to enable their roles to be exercised mindful of the context of the Irish-medium settings;

b) Liaise regularly with Regulatory and Inspection staff from ETI and the HSC Trusts to support improvement in areas identified through the Inspection process.

5. Altram should consider the need for objective research into factors that contribute to positive outcomes for children in Irish medium Early Years settings, with particular emphasis on language acquisition, including the comparison between statutory and voluntary/community settings.

6. Altram and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta should seek to identify, clarify and reach agreement on their respective roles and responsibilities with the development of a pathway to effective partnership.

7. There should be a review of the arrangements for supporting parents with their children’s language development including access to language classes and resources.

8. Altram should develop Guidance on the Roles and Responsibilities of Management Committees and develop a training strategy to ensure appropriate governance arrangements.

9. Altram, with its strategic partners, should undertake an audit of the accommodation in which Irish-medium services are provided, to assess its fitness for purpose, potential life-span and maintenance requirements to support planning for appropriate actions to address any deficits/needs.



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