

E.R.

FROM: P CARVILL

DATE: 25 May 1994

cc Mr Hill
Mr Holmes
Mr Wallace
Mr Watkins
Mrs Jendoubi
Dr McCormick
Mr Peover
Mr Smith
Mr Woods
Mr Jackson

Minister

(*Amer Bailey*
attached.)

IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

1. I attach the report of the review of policy on Irish medium education. Stephen Peover has produced a comprehensive and well argued survey of the issues and arguments in this difficult and sensitive area. He was well placed to do so, because he writes as someone who has an extensive personal knowledge of the Irish language movement; but you will see that he also brought objectivity and a strong logic to the task. I think that he is to be congratulated on its production. While I attach a summary (at Annex A), I would commend the report as a whole to you, and in particular Chapters 1 and 5.

2. The report has been the subject of considerable discussion within the Department. Not everyone would agree with all of his conclusions, and in some respects it takes a more forward position than most of us would be comfortable with. But all of us feel that it has very usefully clarified the issues, and that his analysis gives a basis and a context for policy decisions.

Background

3. By way of background, it is worth setting out briefly our present practice, and the main issues arising.

4. We have three grant-aided Irish medium primary schools, with a total of 675 pupils. Normal practice, for controlled and maintained schools, is to look for a minimum enrolment of 200 for a new urban primary school and 100 in a rural area. The lower number reflect the dispersed nature of a rural catchment area, although higher numbers are obviously desirable. For Irish medium and

integrated schools we accept 100 in both rural and urban areas which equates to an annual intake of 14 or 15 pupils, and, in practice, each of the grant-aided Irish medium schools now has more than 100 pupils. For secondary schools, we normally look for at least 600 pupils; but we (reluctantly) accept 300 in a rural area and we have again read this across into the GMI sector; by extension, 300 is the minimum target we have contemplated for an Irish medium secondary school.

5. Comparisons with RoI, Scotland, and Wales are not as straightforward as is sometimes made out, but in terms of target enrolments RoI looks for a target of 140 pupils (in both urban and rural areas) before they will support a new primary school, and for 400 pupils for a new secondary school. In Scotland (where the provision is made by public authorities rather than by voluntary bodies) there are no free-standing Gaelic medium primary or secondary schools, only small units attached to ordinary schools; and no secondary provision at all in Gaelic beyond Key Stage 3. Our target enrolment requirements for both primary and secondary schools are thus considerably lower than the corresponding requirements in RoI; and the objective of an 11 to 16 Irish medium secondary school is a more ambitious one than has yet been achieved in Scotland. There are other aspects of RoI and Scottish practice which are more favourable to such schools (especially in the arrangements for early day funding, which in practical terms is much more important to the schools concerned); but in terms of enrolment targets it is clear that we have not been unduly demanding.

6. The main issues dealt with in the report circle round the questions of whether our enrolment requirements should be relaxed or modified in any way; whether we should introduce early day funding arrangements to help new schools establish their potential viability; and the future of Irish medium secondary education.

Policy review

7. There are some areas of existing policy where the review concludes that there is no case for change. In particular:

- (a) No special priority should be given to Irish medium nursery

education, and there is no reason to feel obliged to support Irish language immersion classes for pre-school children.

(b) The existing viability criteria for free-standing urban Irish medium primary schools should be maintained, though there is scope for supporting the development of units.

(c) The only case for special "early day" funding arrangements for Irish medium primary schools, would be on the basis of a political decision by Government actively to promote Irish-medium education, ie a policy - akin to that for integrated schools - to encourage and facilitate new developments: in the absence of such an initiative, the existing policy of responding to demonstrably sustained demand should continue.

8. These recommendations in part reflect a presumption that general government policy on Irish language issues will continue to be to respond to initiatives put forward by others on their merits, but not to move to a policy of actively promoting a bilingual society. Proponents of Irish medium schools often draw comparisons with the support given to integrated schools, and argue that they too should be given exactly the same sort of assistance. The reason for the difference is that government policy, backed up by a statutory duty on the Department, is to promote integrated education: policy in regard to Irish medium education is only to be responsive to parental demand, where circumstances can be shown to warrant this. The Irish medium schools would of course wish to see a much more promotional policy applied to them too.

9. This difference shows up most clearly in the question of "early day funding". For new integrated schools, we are prepared to make a judgement about the school's likely viability on the basis of the number of advance applications which it musters. Obviously we have to assess whether these are all firm and genuine applications; but subject to this, and to the requisite denominational mix, we will fund a new school from its opening day. We do not however pay capital grant until the school has established itself. This early day arrangement was a product of the 1989 Education Reform Order, which made special provision for such assistance; previously, an integrated school did not qualify for support until it had demonstrated its viability through actual

admissions sustained over several years. For new Irish medium primary schools, we (unlike RoI - which is another source of grievance) continue to require the school to demonstrate a sustained level of admissions - at least two years - before accepting that it should be grant-aided. This partly reflects the different legislative provisions, and partly the greater uncertainty about the medium and long term demand for Irish medium places. Irish medium lobbyists would naturally like to see similar "early day" arrangements; but, as noted above, this is not supported by the policy review, nor would I wish to suggest that we should make any change.

10. There are also some areas of possible policy development which have found general support within the Department, eg:

- (a) There would be advantage (to us as well as to the schools) in encouraging the promoters of Irish medium schools to consider units attached to maintained primary or secondary schools (as at Steelstown in Derry), or Irish language streams for individual subjects within secondary or grammar schools, rather than full self-sufficiency, at least in the first instance. This - which would be in line with policy and practice in Scotland - could ease some of the curricular as well as the financial difficulties of new Irish medium developments; but it falls short of the total immersion policy which Irish medium proponents generally pursue.
- (b) Such units should be permitted to have differential admissions criteria than the school as a whole, to reflect the wider catchment area from which they would have to draw.
- (c) A unit should have a minimum target enrolment of 60 (so as to be able to support at least 3 Irish speaking teachers). This is smaller than would be acceptable for a free-standing school: but the unit would be able to draw on the physical and curricular resources of the school as a whole. While less than ideal educationally, this seems the only practicable way of allowing Irish medium primary education to develop outside the few areas where demand may be sufficient to justify a free-standing school.

- (d) An inspection of the existing (independent) Irish medium nursery units, which is already being arranged, should usefully clarify how far they are simply language immersion classes and how far they incorporate basic nursery education principles and practices.
- (e) There would be advantages in more regular but entirely informal liaison meetings between relevant officials in the Department and the Principals of the grant-aided schools, as a means of keeping in touch with developments and emerging concerns.

Satellite units

11. The report also suggests that we might assist new developments by allowing existing schools to sponsor small (anything from 6 pupils upwards) "satellite units" - geographically detached by up to, say, two miles; physically self-contained; but still under the management of a "parent" grant-aided school. The intention would be that the unit would be the nucleus for a future school, but would operate under the umbrella of the existing school, thus attracting grant-aid and therefore able to provide a more secure and better managed educational environment for the children involved. It would operate in this way until such time as it was big enough (ie annual intakes of 14 or 15 pupils) to qualify for grant-aided status in its own right. The report acknowledges that the circumstances in which such units might come into existence might be rare, but there is one actual case in respect of which an outstanding development scheme proposal has still to be decided.

12. Most of us find this concept a somewhat artificial one. It is questionable how such a split site operation could be genuinely regarded as a single entity, especially if complete separation is the objective from the outset. While it has some practical benefits, including access to the Irish medium expertise and materials of its parent school, it is arguably largely a device to give early day funding by an alternative route. Somewhat similar objections arise in relation to the current SELB proposal for a split site secondary school in Portadown and Lurgan; and the same considerations caused us to turn down the WELB's proposals for split site schools as a response to the problem of non-viable controlled secondary schools in Fermanagh. Admittedly in those instances the distances involved were greater, and a

distinction could therefore be drawn on that basis, but most of us feel that much the same practical difficulties would arise. However, it is not necessary to take a view in principle at this stage; the arguments can be fully addressed on their merits when the development scheme proposal is brought forward.

Primary schools

13. The report suggests that in circumstances (eg the non-availability of a willing "parent" school) where it proves impossible to provide an Irish medium unit, but where there is good reason to expect a demand sufficient to merit such a unit (ie 60 pupils) then we should be prepared, exceptionally, to agree a free-standing school for 60 pupils (rather than the normal minimum of 100). We have considered this recommendation, which the report itself points out is subject to any views on the intrinsic educational acceptability of three teacher schools. On this latter aspect, Mr Wallace has commented as follows:

"I see considerable difficulty for any 3-teacher school, particularly because of the inevitability of multiple age groups, the problems of covering the range of curriculum required by the NIC (even after its modification), and the limitations of restricted peer-group interaction. Such difficulties would be exacerbated in an Irish-medium school, but they are not confined to those schools. They extend to integrated schools also, and indeed to any new school.

When we bring new schools into the grant-aided sector, we should do so with the confidence that they will add strength to the communities they serve. 3-teacher schools would not."

An additional factor is that we are separately mounting an exercise to encourage rationalisation of small primary schools except in areas where the travelling requirement made their retention unavoidable: it would not be helpful to be seen to be prepared to accept such small Irish-medium schools.

14. I therefore recommend that we make no change in our existing viability criteria for primary schools.

Secondary Schools

15. The most difficult issue addressed in the review is the question of Irish medium secondary education. As you know, we have a case in point: the Meanscoil Feirste, which continues to press its case for maintained status. The school now has only some 37 pupils: this may increase to a total of about 75 in September, and there is the potential (on the basis of the numbers coming through from the feeder primary schools) for this to grow by perhaps 45 to 50 p.a. over the next few years. But it will be September 1997 at the earliest before it might hope to attract viable intakes, and on any reckoning it will continue to be a very small school for the foreseeable future. The recommendation in the review is that we should move now to find a way of giving at least a limited form of maintained status to the Meanscoil. The aim would be help it to build up its numbers to the point where it would begin to meet the minimum viability criteria.

16. This recommendation is based in large part on the political arguments:

- (a) Support for Irish medium primary education has been a useful demonstration of the government's support for nationalist cultural identity, both at home and abroad.
- (b) Arguably it has also helped to de-politicise the Irish language movement, by avoiding any danger of the movement being identified with or hijacked by militant republicanism.
- (c) The primary school provision has prospered, and is now approaching the stage where pupils should soon be leaving the primary schools in sufficient numbers to support a small secondary school. We now have a chance to demonstrate that we are prepared to be supportive, by helping the secondary school through this difficult transitional period; and politically there is much more to gain than to lose by taking this risk.

17. There are also educational and administrative arguments:

- (a) The promoters of the school see it as a natural and inevitable

consequence of the decision to support Irish medium primary schools. They regard it as letting the primary pupils down if they have to switch to English medium education at age 11.

(b) They also view Irish medium schools as directly equivalent, on a smaller scale, to the controlled, maintained and integrated sectors: they argue that in the same way as we are prepared to provide a new controlled or maintained school in response to parental preferences, so too should we give equally ready support to a parental preference for Irish medium education. In this sense they view support as an entitlement, subject only to there being a real prospect of achieving the minimum enrolment levels.

(c) The Irish medium secondary school is in a uniquely difficult position. It can only draw from the Irish medium primary schools, and these are still building up to their full steady-state output. In the meantime they cannot possibly provide sufficient pupils to enable the secondary school to meet the minimum viability criteria; but in a few years time it may well on present trends, be able to attract the 60 pupils per year which it needs for a 300 LTE. The interim period will at best be very difficult for the Meanscoil, and may prove impossible; and is not only a strain on the parents but a constraint on the quality of what the school can offer its pupils.

18. As you will see from the review report, Stephen finds these arguments convincing. I confess that I, and others with whom this has been discussed within the Department, are less sure.

19. You will have your own views on the political aspects. Certainly there is the potential for the government to give a further demonstration of its willingness to acknowledge cultural diversity, which has an obvious attractiveness. But it should not be forgotten that in supporting Irish medium education, we are not reflecting and recognising a pre-existing linguistic diversity, but helping groups who wish to create one ab initio. With very few exceptions, these children do not come from Irish speaking homes, and none will grow up in or leave to live in an Irish-speaking society. My own view is that the dividing line between recognising diversity and entrenching divisions is a

fine one in this instance. And the question we are addressing is not whether the Government should give any support for Irish medium education, but whether we should make a special effort to ensure that secondary as well as primary education is guaranteed, as an automatic follow-on from the primary provision.

20. It is the educational and financial aspects which I find most questionable. In particular:

(a) It is not necessarily in the best interests of the young people concerned that they should be kept in an Irish language immersion environment right up to age 16 (and indeed beyond if - as the school seems to envisage - they would ultimately aim to provide post-16 courses). They will after all have to live and work - and make use of whatever qualifications they gain - in an English speaking world. And any 300 pupil mixed-ability secondary school will find it difficult to provide its pupils with the range and quality of educational experiences that we would wish: to attempt to do so through a particular linguistic policy is to impose an additional constraint. The problem is not so much that there is any demonstrable educational disadvantage associated with bi-lingual education as such; it is rather that in practice it may make it ~~more~~ difficult for the school leavers to "hit the ground running" when they move into employment or higher education, and that it will almost certainly limit their range of choice of studies and qualifications. Again it is worth recalling that in Scotland there is no corresponding provision beyond Key Stage 3.

(b) Parental preference is not the only consideration. The essential question is what price it is reasonable for public funds to pay ~~in~~ order to meet that preference. Nor is it the case that all preferences are of equal weight. It is quite possible to accept that a parental preference based on a right of conscience - eg for a child to attend a school of an appropriate religious ethos - should wherever possible be supported, without according the same degree of priority to a linguistic preference. We would not, for instance, regard a parental preference for single sex (or mixed) education as justifying making special provision, and linguistic preferences could be viewed

in the same light.

- (c) Parents do of course choose schools for a variety of reasons, and the desire for the transmission of religious values is not easily disentangled from the transmission of cultural values generally. But in my view the analogy with the controlled/maintained sectoral split is a false one: the only reason we support a Catholic maintained sector which duplicates the controlled sector is because of the religious dimension; whereas there is no question of fundamental rights of conscience being undermined if Irish medium education does not carry through from the primary to the secondary sector.
- (d) By the end of Key Stage 2 the Irish medium primary school should have succeeded in its objective of making its children proficient in Irish. While there may be a parental desire to allow the children to continue to extend their usage of the Irish language, the basic provision will have been made, and in this sense the government has delivered its commitment. There is no actual need (and some disadvantages) to go further.
- (e) The costs of supporting an Irish medium secondary school could be quite substantial, especially if all the practical difficulties are to be overcome.

21. The cost issue is worth a close look. The Meanscoil hopes to have a long term enrolment of at least 300, which is the minimum we would regard as educationally and financially viable. But 300 is much smaller than is desirable, and the unit costs are high. We should not get this out of proportion: in absolute terms the sums involved will be limited by the fact that the school is always going to be quite small. But the sums involved are still quite substantial.

22. The total recurrent budget of a 300 pupil secondary school could be expected to be about £775,000 p.a. This of course is not all additional expenditure: if the pupils were accommodated at other schools they would still attract funding. Under the BELB LMS scheme 300 marginal pupils in secondary schools would attract funding of about £610,000, so the net additional cost

would be £165,000 per annum. There would also be extra costs, eg of curriculum support, relating to the specifically Irish medium aspects of the school. For the Irish medium primary schools, BELB has been allocated an extra £40,000 p.a. to contribute to the production of suitable curriculum materials in Irish. The corresponding costs at post-primary level would be at least as great, and probably higher.

23. There would also be capital cost implications. The existing Meanscoil premises are far from suitable. In the short term a site could probably be obtained and temporary classrooms put up for perhaps £2 million; but a secondary school needs specialist facilities, and sooner or later a purpose built school would be called for. Permanent premises for a 300 pupil secondary school might be expected to cost about £4.6 million, plus VAT. We are already committed in principle to providing new premises for the existing Irish medium primary schools - sooner or later - at a likely cost of at least £3.5 million, and more may well be in the pipeline.

24. The essential question is therefore whether these costs are justified by the benefits. In purely educational and administrative terms my judgement would be that they are not. The costs and complexities of a secondary school are inevitably higher than those of a primary school, and to me it seems entirely justifiable to take this into account in deciding whether or not to support an Irish medium secondary school. Another factor is that to admit an Irish medium secondary school into the maintained sector implies a long term commitment from which it would be difficult to withdraw. On present trends, it requires optimistic, though by no means impossible, assumptions about the proportions of children who would transfer from Irish medium primary schools in order that the school would actually - in perhaps five years time - reach even the 300 LTE which we have set as the very minimum for viability. On more pessimistic assumptions, the LTE could be lower, and per capita costs would rise. In any other comparable case, a school would be closed and the pupils moved elsewhere. For the pupils at this school, that would be a major disruption. Again this is an argument for being cautious before locking ourselves into a relationship with the school as a maintained school.

25. There is also the question of precedent, and of comparisons with integrated schools:

- (a) If, in effect, we concede early day funding for a new secondary school, why not also for a new primary school? It might be held to be in marked contrast with our more cautious approach in respect of new Irish medium primary schools (see paragraph 9 above). It might be argued that the secondary school demonstrates its future viability by the evidence of the enrolment trends in its feeder primary schools; but a primary school could similarly claim evidence of parental intentions from Irish medium nursery enrolments.
- (b) In comparison with integrated schools, we could be held to be setting a higher target for them than for Irish medium, in that we require evidence of a viable level of applications and admissions from the outset, whereas in the case of the Meanscoil it is evident that that level will not and cannot be reached for several years at least. The analogy is far from perfect, because an integrated secondary school can and will draw from a wide range of primary schools, which the Meanscoil cannot; but if - hypothetically - the only foreseeable source of admissions to a planned integrated secondary school in an area were from the existing integrated primary schools, then at the very least we would have to question the good sense of funding the secondary school until and unless the primary schools were producing sufficient numbers of "feeder" pupils. We also require the promoters of an integrated secondary school to have a suitable long-term site on which the new school will be based. There is no intrinsic reason for a more promotional policy in regard to Irish medium schools.
- (c) If we move from requiring evidence of current enrolments and applications at a viable level to a policy of accepting potential enrolments and applications, then we would need to be clear how far below viability we are prepared to go and how far into the future we are prepared to extrapolate. It would be difficult to draw a clear line.

26. One issue runs through much of the above argumentation: whether Irish medium education is a moral entitlement, akin to denominational provision, which in practice we do not question; or whether it is a more discretionary

provision. I believe that it should be seen as discretionary; and I would not accept that simply by virtue of having decided to support it at primary level we should feel any obligation to follow through into the secondary sector - especially as the numbers involved are going to be (at best) at the lower margins of viability for as far ahead as we can see. If an Irish medium secondary school is properly seen as purely optional expenditure, then educationally it would not be either high priority or value for money. It would be easier to justify if the parents concerned were seeking to have an existing maintained secondary or grammar school provide an Irish-medium stream for some subjects, which would be both much less expensive and much less risky. That, though, would have to be a matter between them and the school; and it is not the path which the Meanscoil has chosen to follow. But there is no strong educational justification for diverting significant resources into the creation of a free-standing Irish medium secondary school.

Curriculum and Examinations

27. Another factor is that recognition of the Meanscoil as a grant-aided school would mean that it would have to deliver the statutory curriculum to all its pupils. The question of the availability of suitable curriculum materials etc would then arise. Present policy, in relation to primary schools, has been to expect the Irish medium teacher to work from the English texts of programmes of study etc; to offer a limited amount of special help for the development of Irish-medium curriculum materials for use by pupils; and to make available translation of any materials (such as assessment tests, or transfer procedure tests) which have to be used by pupils. In the case of a secondary school there is of course a need for a much greater range of curriculum materials and texts. The only ready source of such materials would be in RoI, and these have not been produced with the Northern Ireland curriculum in mind. It is not clear just what would be involved by way of adaptation or extension of these materials, but it is likely that quite a bit of work would be needed.

28. Similarly, there would undoubtedly be a demand for special arrangements for the provision of examinations at age 16 through the medium of Irish. The very small numbers involved yearly would make this an unattractive commercial proposition for examining bodies, and we would be called upon to fund or underwrite the cost of providing and marking such examinations in a range of

subjects. At a minimum, additional resources would be required to commission CCEA to provide parallel Irish-language papers for GCSE examinations, but there would be pressure also to help provide vocational examinations through the national examining bodies, to suit the likely ability range of the school. This, relative to the number of pupils involved annually, would be expensive. One alternative would be to require the school to offer GCSE and other examinations in English only. This would be consistent with the need to demonstrate proficiency in the language they will subsequently encounter in work, on training schemes, in FE colleges or in A-level study in other schools. However, it would undoubtedly be argued that this could disadvantage pupils, for example, in technical and scientific subjects, in the use of specialised terminology, and that it failed to demonstrate the parity of esteem and of treatment which the Irish medium schools claim as an entitlement.

29. The logical conclusion (and one that I do not regard as unjustifiable in principle, though perhaps not politically) that follows from the above comments is that we should not feel obliged, or be prepared, to accept a free-standing Irish-medium school for grant-aid at all; or - and in practice this would probably amount to the same thing - that we should offer no dispensation from the normal viability requirements. But it is not necessary to go that far in order to conclude that we should not take any special measures to support or assist the Meanscoil in the immediate future. That again is the view of most of those of us who have discussed the issue: ie that we should wait until the school has clearly demonstrated its ability to achieve and to sustain viable intake levels in practice before we would even consider it for maintained status. However, as you will see from the report, it is certainly possible to take a different view of these issues. The Meanscoil itself will argue that without some interim support they are unlikely to survive: and the more pupils they attract in the meantime, the greater the financial pressures they face in trying to cope with them. We do not know to what extent external fund-raising sources are open to them: but if they are reliant on parental contributions they may well face a difficult period. If they do collapse, the blame will no doubt be laid at our doorstep. That could be politically damaging; and you may feel that from this point of view, and because of the sensitivity of Irish language issues generally, the political benefits of bailing out the Meanscoil in themselves justify the financial costs; in which case the educational arguments are less relevant.

Political considerations

30. We have asked Central Secretariat - who have the lead responsibility on Irish language issues generally - for comments on the political implications. Mr Watkins' response (at Annex B) is attached (in slightly edited form). You will see that he argues quite strongly that for political reasons full support should be given now to the Meanscoil.

Interim funding

31. Most of the above discussion is in "all or nothing" terms, but there is also the question of a half-way house which might tide the school over for the next few years while it establishes itself. If, for political reasons, you did feel that at least some interim assistance should be made available to the school, but did not wish to commit us to accepting it as a grant-aided school at this stage, then it would be necessary to consider how that would be achieved. DENI, as you know from our exchanges with Buddy Bear, has no power to pay grants to an independent school. The only possibility that we can see is that CCRU, as the unit responsible for assistance to Irish language activities generally, might directly or indirectly (eg via the Ultach Trust) make some funds available. That would at least enable the school to continue to function for the next few years; and would avoid the long term commitment that maintained status would imply: the risk would continue to be carried by the school's supporters. I would therefore prefer that if the school is to be given any short term help then it should be through CCRU; however you will see from paragraph 8 of Annex B that Mr Watkins' rejects this option, both on grounds of affordability and on the basis that there would be more political benefit from DENI taking the school into the grant-aided sector.

32. We stand ready to discuss as and when you wish to do so.



P CARVILL

REVIEW OF IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION: SUMMARYPAPER 1THE CONTEXT FOR A REVIEW

1. Government policy on Irish-medium (IM) education must be seen as part of a broader debate on the recognition of cultural identity and diversity in Northern Ireland. Language issues have a symbolic importance for many nationalists; they have thus been a significant element in the Anglo-Irish agenda.

2. Support for IM education has sometimes been presented as a human rights issue, but it cannot properly be seen as akin to the treatment of ethnic minorities or minority languages in other countries:

- the number of people using Irish as a means of communication or even having full fluency in Irish is extremely small;
- there is no geographical Irish language community;
- the main aim of language activists in NI is not to preserve an Irish speaking community but to create one.

3. The only case for support for the Irish language is in terms of its symbolic significance to a large section of the community here. Among many nationalists there is an underlying sympathy for the idea of the language revival movement, even though this is not usually translated into action. The use of Irish is also seen as a political statement and a reaction against the political structures under which NI is governed. Support for Irish language activities generally - of which education is only a part - gives evidence of the Government's willingness to accommodate nationalist traditions.

REVIEW OF IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

PAPER 2

GENERAL EDUCATIONAL POLICY ISSUES

1. The general principle is that children should be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents, so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure. Parental wishes eg on the religious ethos of schools, or on integrated education, have shaped the provision of education in NI. This has created an expectation that similar support will be forthcoming to proposals for other preferred forms of provision, such as IM schools.
2. In the case of IM education, we already fund 3 IM primary schools; but to date we have refused grant-aid to a secondary school. Lobbyists have pointed to the success of the primary schools as justifying a more generous approach by Government; and argued for similar support to that provided for Welsh and Gallic by LEAs in Wales and Scotland.
3. The main criteria used to assess proposals for new schools are enrolments, educational standards, standards of the premises, and cost-effectiveness. Educational standards and standards of the premises are also relevant if an independent school seeks to become grant-aided. Their application to IM schools can be contentious: in particular the schools tend to see concerns about educational standards as offensive, and they are hostile to any suggestion that cost considerations should be a major factor in deciding whether to develop this sector.
4. There is room for difference of view - but little firm evidence - about the educational effects of bilingual education in a monolingual society. It can be argued that it will act as a barrier to the achievement of high standards of English; as a diversion from other languages deemed more worthwhile; and possible lack of suitability for other than the brightest pupils. Conversely, it can be argued that, irrespective of its

educational merits, support for bilingual education (currently £750,000 per year) provides dividends in terms of relationships between the Government and the nationalist community.

6. Stability in demand for IM education is an uncertain factor. The political and social circumstances of NI have undoubtedly engendered a significant amount of the demand from parents motivated by cultural and political considerations. Political stability and the creation of a pluralist society might serve to reduce the perceived need for such gestures. Parental attitudes are also likely to be influenced by their perception of the quality of the education provided by the IM schools. There is no evidence yet that any plateau of demand has been reached and in the longer term such demand may become self-fuelling if the aim of creating an Irish speaking community begins to be achieved.

REVIEW OF IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

PAPER 3

NURSERY EDUCATION

1. IM primary schools require all children seeking admission to have a minimum of one year's attendance at a nursery to obtain some semiformal language teaching. This is regarded by the primary schools as an essential and integral part of the preparation for the Key Stage 1 programme and they argue that nursery provision should therefore attract grant-aid. There are currently 18 nurseries operating in NI, 13 of which are in Belfast. They attract no grant-aid from DENI, but can make use of schemes such as ACE.
2. There is some doubt whether IM nurseries - seen as language immersion classes - provide appropriate educational experiences for very young children. This is disputed by the nurseries, who believe that they also have a developmental purpose. It would therefore be useful to arrange for an inspection of one or more nurseries to provide up-to-date advice on practice in those schools.
3. There is no strong case for public funds going into the provision of pre-school language classes. While they serve a compensatory function for the absence of Irish in the home, the onus must be on parents to accept the circumstances, and any limitations of the sector in which they place their children, and to prepare them appropriately. Subject to the resolution of doubts over the educational experience which they offer, they would be treated on their merits in competition with other nursery projects; but there is no case for giving them a special priority.

REVIEW OF IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

PAPER 4

PRIMARY SECTOR EDUCATION ISSUES

1. There are currently 7 IM primary schools in Northern Ireland with a total enrolment of 713 at October 1993, ranging from 371 at the Bunscoil Phobal Feirste to 6 at the Bunscoil an tSleibe Dhuibh in Whiterock.
2. Normally we would regard 200 pupils as the minimum acceptable enrolment for a grant-aided primary school in an urban area, but in rural areas we accept that 100 may be as much as a scattered population can produce. However, for IM (and integrated) schools we are prepared to accept 100 in both urban and rural areas in recognition of the dispersed catchment areas. IM schools argue that the rural figure is still too high a target.
3. It is difficult to estimate the growth potential of the IM primary sector. Growth will be dependent on parental preference, but the extent to which Government supports new school projects will also be important: those schools which received maintained status have in practice expanded. There is however no definitive means of assessing the extent of any as yet unexpressed demand for IM education.
4. The main policy options are:

To Maintain Existing Policy

4.1 Existing policy has gone a considerable way to acknowledging the special circumstances of IM schools. However, it is less generous than policies in Scotland and Wales, and therefore attracts criticism; and it does involve difficulties for parents who want to establish IM schools and who are dependent on private fund-raising. While tenable, therefore, existing policy will continue to generate criticism; it may also mean that the children of the parents who are promoting new IM schools may be placed in relatively

unsatisfactory independent schools.

Adopt a "units-only" policy for the future

4.2 There are a number of advantages in this option, particularly the speed at which they can be established, the avoidance of a financial burden on parents, and the facility to remove them if demand falls. Units or streams within ordinary schools is in fact the norm in Scotland. Conversely, this option is opposed by IM interests, since they consider that it does not provide the environment of language immersion which they seek. In practice it would also tie the IM movement to the Catholic maintained sector; and it would not always be possible to find a sympathetic host school. A "units only" approach would also have to provide for units to evolve into free-standing schools when their enrolments justify it.

A mixed policy of units and free-standing schools

4.3 This would be consistent with current policy and has the advantage of flexibility. However, it raises the question of when a unit or a school is more appropriate, and viability criteria for each. This is a complex issue, in which ability to deliver the NI curriculum and the difficulties of combined age group teaching are important factors. These considerations point to a minimum enrolment for a stream or unit such as to sustain 3 teachers, which equates to enrolment of at least 9-10 pupils per annum and an eventual total enrolment of 60-70.

Change in the viability criteria for schools

4.4 The reduction of the LTE for urban IM schools was welcomed by language interests, but they now in consequence argue for a still lower threshold for rural schools. They have urged a rural LTE of 60 for a free-standing school - the same minimum enrolment suggested in the previous option for a unit. A possible compromise between the Department's position and the demands of the language interests might therefore be (assuming the educational acceptability of 3 teacher schools) to establish a normal minimum viability criterion of 100 for all schools with a declared preference for units where this level could not be achieved, unless there were insurmountable practical difficulties, in

which case a LTE of 60 would be acceptable.

Change in the Standard of Proof of Viability

4.5 The manner in which viability criteria are applied is also an important aspect. In the Republic of Ireland, the LTE applied is higher, (a minimum of 140 for an IM primary school) but the standard of proof lower ie. one years enrolment of 20. This qualifies the school for recurrent, but not capital funding. Integrated schools in NI receive similar treatment, but an IM school is required to sustain a viable level of admissions over 2 or 3 years before it can receive maintained status, so in practice its period as an independent school is unlikely to be shorter than 5 or 6 years.

Arrangements for Early Day Funding

4.6 Early day funding could take a number of forms but the most frequently proposed is partial funding whereby the Department would cover all or part of the recurrent costs of a school during the period in which a school is establishing its viability. IM interests argue that this would be analogous to the treatment of new integrated schools. These do receive full recurrent funding once we are satisfied - on the basis of numbers of applications, not necessarily actual enrolments - that they are likely to attract sufficient numbers for long-term viability, but no capital grants until this is demonstrated in practice. This is done in part on foot of the statutory requirement that the Department shall "encourage and facilitate" integrated education; there is of course no similar provision or policy in respect of Irish medium education. If it were desired to adopt such a policy towards IM schools, some primary legislation would probably be necessary. However, this would pre-suppose a change in general government policy towards Irish language issues, to a more proactive and supportive role: ie encouraging and facilitating the use and development of the Irish language generally. In the absence of such a general initiative, there seems no case for any new measures in the education sector to give special help to the promotion of new IM schools.

Satellite units

4.7 One radical variant of the concept of units, which has already been proposed in the case of the IM primary school at Twinbrook, is for the creation of a satellite unit: physically detached from but under the same management as the parent school. Ultimately the unit would be intended to evolve into a separate school; but in the short term it would benefit from the grant-aided status of its parent school and thus attract funding ab initio. This could be seen as having many of the advantages of an ordinary unit; but it could also be viewed simply as a device to get round the normal viability criteria and get early day funding by a different route. In practice the option has probably only a very limited application, and will depend on the attitudes of host schools. It does however represent a possible middle course between a reactive and a promotional policy. If it were to be adopted, however, certain financial and logistic issues would have to be addressed, eg how to ensure that any such unit is effectively managed and that targets for viability are both attainable and achieved within a certain period.

Irish Medium Units

5. The successful development of IM schools has to date been in a few areas - where the socio-political context has provided favourable circumstances. Outside these areas, it is likely that any development of IM will best be in the form of units or streams in English Medium schools (as was initially the case in Derry). There are considerable attractions in this approach, but IM interests are generally unenthusiastic about this approach, on the grounds that it does not provide the full immersion environment which they seek. There are also some practical issues, relating to the arrangements for the involvement of IM interests in the management of such units, but these could probably be overcome if the promoters of IM education actually wished to pursue this option.

Summary

6. In the absence of early day funding, units will offer financial

advantages and may be the only practical option in some areas, notwithstanding the reservations of IM interests. A policy comprising both schools and units with the existing viability criterion for schools but a lower threshold for units is worth considering. This would be an evolution of existing policy. To go further and provide for easier entry to maintained status would be more radical, and would be anomalous in the absence of a shift in broader Government policy towards a more promotional attitude to the use of the Irish language.

SECONDARY EDUCATION

1. The only (independent) IM secondary school in NI is Meanscoil Feirste, which started in 1991 and now has an enrolment of 37 pupils. It hopes to attract 40 more in September 1994. The Meanscoil has sought and been refused maintained status, partly on the grounds of its existing and projected enrolments, which suggested that it would be at least 1996/97 before the school could hope to achieve the intake of 60 pupils necessary to provide the minimum required LTE of 300.

Rationale for IM Secondary Education

2. A number of arguments are advanced in support of IM secondary education:

- Parental Choice: responding to a growth in demand for IM education at primary level which will extend into secondary education;
- Policy Consistency: consistency with decisions to fund IM education at primary level in NI and with practice and policy in Scotland and Wales;
- Educational Continuity: the danger of disadvantage to children taught through the medium of Irish in primary school who have to transfer to English-Medium secondary schools;

3. The disadvantages of IM secondary education are seen as:

- Educational Disadvantage: secondary education has to prepare young people for adult and working life and a concentration on the Irish language may not be an appropriate way of doing this;
- Practical problems: there are problems facing IM education in

delivering the statutory NI curriculum at secondary level in terms of: the availability of specialist teachers; the availability of teaching and learning resources, both at primary and secondary level; assessment and examinations, including the possible provision of examination papers in Irish for comparatively small numbers of pupils. As an independent school, the Meanscoil does not have to meet statutory curriculum requirements, but these would apply if it became grant-aided. In practice it is seeking to follow the full curriculum.

4. There are four main options for a response to IM secondary education:

- to refuse in principle to fund any IM secondary school;
- to apply the existing viability criteria;
- to accept only secondary streams or units;
- to grant-aid Meanscoil Feirste from September 1994.

(i) Refusal of support in principle on the grounds of educational disadvantage or disproportionate cost would be controversial. There is no experience; and therefore no firm evidence, about disadvantage; and it would be argued that it was inconsistent to invoke a principle of cost effectiveness which has not constrained the development of other sectors of education, nor prevented the grant-aiding of the IM primary schools.

It would have to be based on a view that IM education is intrinsically less worthy of support than Catholic schools or integrated schools, and this would be regarded as discriminatory by IM interests.

(ii) The retention of the existing viability criteria would be a straightforward option, but in practice it will be unhelpful to the Meanscoil, which for purely financial reasons may or may not survive long enough to achieve viability. There is also the question of the

standard of proof, ie at some stage should we be prepared to accept that an IM secondary school has adequately demonstrated its potential ability to attract future intake levels which would be consistent with a viable LTE? Or should we continue to insist on such intake levels actually being achieved as a pre-requisite for grant-aid?

- (iii) Streams and Units While this is the preferred option in Scotland and Wales, there is no evidence of any commitment by existing secondary schools to foster such a development. However, only Belfast has the potential for a free standing school, so any IM secondary provision eg in Derry would need to be made through units. This would be a matter for discussion with the maintained school authorities.

(iv) Maintained Status for Meanscoil Feirste

This could be achieved by relaxing the standards of proof, as discussed above and accepting that it has demonstrated sufficient potential viability to merit support. It would be both appropriate in itself and perhaps the only way of preventing financial pressures forcing the closure of the Meanscoil.

PAPER 6

FUNDING AND PLANNING MECHANISMS

1. Irish language activities receive funding from a variety of sources both voluntary and governmental, which gives rise to questions of consistency and of the scope for providing funding from alternative sources for schools before they achieve maintained status.
2. There appears to be inconsistency between the criteria used for ACE funding and that for BAT programmes, in that the former, but not the latter, can substitute for funds which could be made available from the mainstream. A more flexible policy for BAT funding might relieve some of the pressure to ease the criteria for maintained status.
3. As an alternative to mainstream funding, arms-length seed funding through a non-standard route, such as the Ultach Trust, could be considered.
4. There has been criticism of the Government's failure to plan adequately for the development of IM education, particularly in its perceived failure to foresee and plan for the implication of giving maintained status to a number of IM primary schools. The creation of a semi-formal mechanism for liaison between schools and the Department could be considered. The umbrella body, Gaeloiliuint, provides one possible model, or alternatively, regular meetings between the Principals of the 3 grant-aided IM primaries might be used to identify and resolve issues.

COMMENTS BY CENTRAL SECRETARIAT

1. Central Secretariat's interest in Irish medium education derives from our overall policy locus on fostering respect for, and mutual appreciation of, the diverse cultural traditions in Northern Ireland and our concern for the relationship between the nationalist minority and the Government. Increasingly, in recent years, these two areas of interest have intersected in "identity issues" - ie, the various means by which the Government is attempting to give expression to the cultural and political distinctiveness of the nationalist community, thus demonstrating our respect and esteem for that community and its traditions. (This is not to ignore the unionist community and its traditions, but in relation to the Irish language, they are not our prevalent interest). I suggest that the submission to the Minister might with advantage be placed in this wider context. The symbolism of the Meanscoil gives it much greater significance and the political consequences of the Government assisting, or refusing to assist, the school at this time need to be carefully weighed.

Political Dimensions of Irish Language Education

2. The active Irish language community (ie, those who regularly speak Irish and/or encourage their children to become fully bilingual) is certainly a much smaller group than the 142,000 people who registered in the last census that they had some knowledge of the language. They are, however, an extremely vocal group and are regarded with considerable sympathy by the nationalist community generally, even by those who would not wish to speak the language themselves. The Irish language has a symbolic significance for nationalists which should not be under-estimated. Of course, unlike Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, there are no geographical areas where Irish is the language of an indigenous population. This undermines some of the criticisms often made by lobbyists in comparing Government expenditure on the Irish language in Northern Ireland with the position in Scotland and Wales. However, that is not to concede that Irish can simply be equated with any other non-English language. The historic thread of indigenous use was, in some areas, broken only in recent

generations. Nationalists would point to the hostile attitude of the old stormont Government as an important factor in erasing that historic continuity.

They would also cite the fact that, only a few hours drive from Belfast, Irish is still spoken as an indigenous language; the making of that point immediately highlights the political dimension to this issue. A useful comparison might be made with the position of the Welsh language in South Wales, an area where Welsh has not been spoken as the indigenous language for several generations, but where a minority of enthusiasts enjoy the support of the educational system for Welsh medium schools.

3. The Irish language lobby in Northern Ireland is a diverse grouping. Its objectives vary, but the most responsible elements would tend to highlight education and the media as the areas where Government support is most crucial. Education in particular is also an area where the expression of the Irish linguistic identity is least likely to intrude upon the sensitivities of the majority population. Under the impetus of the IGC, we have been examining in recent months the range of identity issues on which concessions to nationalists might be feasible. In very many of these, such as state symbolism, the zero sum equation applies. A concession to the nationalist identity would be viewed by many unionists as detracting from or threatening their own position. That is not the case in education, which is regarded as essentially a matter for the individuals, families and communities concerned. It therefore has obvious attractions for those of us attempting to identify positive gestures towards the nationalist community which do not automatically raise the hackles of unionists.

4. The comparison with the position of grant maintained integrated schools is a continuous source of grievance to proponents of Irish language education. The State has traditionally recognised the right of parents to send their children to schools which will educate them in their own religious preferences and has facilitated the exercise of that right through financial assistance to those schools. Hence, the Catholic maintained sector and the controlled sector reflect the religious identities of the two main sections of the community. Access to integrated education is not seen as a right of conscience in the same way. The majority of parents sending their children to GMI schools would probably define themselves as Christians of whatever denomination and their principal motivation in choosing that form of education is based on their

attitude towards Northern Ireland society rather than their religious views. This is an issue of parental choice and the Government has decided to be more accommodating towards one form of parental choice (integrated education) than to another (Irish medium education). As you put it in your draft minute, not all preferences are of equal weight; but the Government must justify the weightings which it attaches to these two forms of choice. And the current political debate of and pressure for recognition of communal as well as humane rights will not make the differentiation we have hitherto followed any easier to defend.

5. Your Minister will also be aware of the pressure HMG is under from the Irish in particular (but can expect also from the SDLP either in the course of political dialogue or, on negative assumptions, in the absence of political dialogue) to find means of giving operational weight and meaning to concepts of parity of esteem. We will face acute pressure for a Bill of Rights, including communal rights, which Ministers may wish to embrace anyway (though the technical difficulties are enormous). I myself would much prefer to show now, without the obligations otherwise thrust upon us, that we have our own agenda and initiative in this field based on a generous assessment of minority identity. I would therefore wish to see us taking the more liberal stance enjoined by Mr Peover and to give more space to arguments of affirmation action in favour of Irish medium schools.

6. The reality at this time is that the Meanscoil will go out of existence, if Government funding is not made available in the relatively near future. If assistance is provided, the probability is that the school will meet the DENI viability criteria in due course. The implications of denying early assistance for the Government's standing with the Irish language lobby and, indeed, the nationalist community generally, would be negative. Defending inaction on the grounds of mathematical viability criteria would be difficult, given the evidence on pages 60-61 of Mr Peover's report that those criteria offer scope for some latitude. We were struck by his reference to the large number of secondary schools in Northern Ireland where total enrolment falls below the threshold which DENI is asking the Meanscoil to aim for. Some, indeed, have enrolments of less than 100 pupils. The Ministerial speech and associated press notice of 13 May has drawn public attention to such schools. Defending a strict adherence to the rules on viability criteria is likely to be more

difficult than it appears prima facie and it might be advisable to forewarn the Minister about this.* It seems to me that the notion of affirmation action could well be deployed in this case.

Administrative and Educational Aspects

7. As I mentioned above, my comments relate mostly to the political dimension of the issue, but your minute raises one or two administrative and educational points which are worthy of further note. At paras 21-23 you attempt to assess the likely long term costs of granting the Meanscoil maintained status. Included in these, is an anticipation of capital expenditure on a purpose build school, "sooner or later". I wonder if this is a costing factor taken into account when policy on GMI status was being developed. Without harder evidence on the intentions of the promoters in this respect and an indication of when such expenditure might be incurred (next century?) the inclusion of this factor may be open to question.

Interim Funding

8. You invited comment on the suggestion that interim funding for the Meanscoil might come from CCRU or the Ultach Trust, but provided no cost estimates of what this might entail. I am fairly certain that it would far extend CCRU's annual budget for Irish language cultural activities (currently £380k and fully committed) and I am sure the same would be true of the Ultach Trust. The DENI budget, of course, dwarfs both funding sources and seems by far the more appropriate source of Government funding, direct or indirect. But it would seem to me of rather great importance in any case that funding should be seen to come from DENI, reflecting the Department's embrace of Irish medium education, rather than as something extra and ephemeral grafted on to an otherwise reluctant Department.

* Comment by DENI: There is a difference between continuing to support schools which have fallen below a viability threshold but which have not yet been closed (or which it may not be possible to close), and deliberately creating a very small school. The existing schools were intended to be viable when they were established.

9. Incidentally, the contrast between the initial funding of the Meanscoil and the integrated schools in the 1980s, drawn by Mr Peover at page 61, para 25(c), of his report is striking. The proponents of integrated schools had access to funds from the Nuffield Foundation, while the Meanscoil parents, from one of the most disadvantaged areas in Western Europe, have had to raise resources by their own efforts. The collapse of their initiative, which would be the inevitable consequence of a failure to provide DENI funding in the near future, will reinforce the culture of grievance in West Belfast and confirm the sense of alienation from the Government felt by many of its residents.

10. As you have gathered from the above, for essentially political reasons, I would incline more towards Mr Peover's conclusions on the question of the future of the Meanscoil, in preference to the advice which you propose to put to the Minister.

[Signed DJW]

D J WATKINS