

DE/2026-040 – Freedom of Information Request

Request:

Please provide copies of all records held by the Department of Education relating to the planning, development, or consideration of Irish-medium post-primary provision in North Belfast for the period 1 January 2011 to the present.

This request includes, but is not limited to, the following categories of records:

1. Plans, policy papers, strategy documents, feasibility studies, briefing papers, reports, and internal analyses relating to the establishment or development of an Irish-medium post-primary school in North Belfast.
2. All documents relating to any Development Proposal (DP) concerning Irish-medium post-primary provision in North Belfast, including draft proposals, internal advice, consultations, assessments, and correspondence relating to such proposals.
3. All submissions, briefing papers, ministerial advice notes, and associated documentation prepared for or provided to any Minister of Education relating to Irish-medium post-primary provision in North Belfast.
4. All correspondence, including emails, letters, meeting minutes, file notes, and briefing notes, between the Department of Education and Coláiste Feirste relating to the planning, development, or provision of Irish-medium post-primary education in North Belfast.
5. All correspondence, including emails, letters, meeting minutes, file notes, and briefing notes, between the Department of Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta relating to Irish-medium post-primary provision in North Belfast.
6. All correspondence, including emails, letters, meeting minutes, file notes, and briefing notes, between the Department of Education and the Education Authority relating to the planning or development of Irish-medium post-primary provision in North Belfast.

Department Response:

I refer to your email letter dated 8 March 2026 to the Department, in which you asked

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I am writing to request information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Please provide copies of all records held by the Department of Education relating to the planning, development, or consideration of Irish-medium post-primary provision in North Belfast for the period 1 January 2011 to the present.

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1. Plans, policy papers, strategy documents, feasibility studies, briefing papers, reports, and internal analyses relating to the establishment or development of an Irish-medium post-primary school in North Belfast.
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All correspondence, including emails, letters, meeting minutes, file notes, and briefing notes, between the Department of Education and the Education Authority relating to the planning or development of Irish-medium post-primary provision in North Belfast.

Where possible, I would prefer to receive this information in electronic format. If any part of this request exceeds the appropriate cost limit under the Act, I would be grateful if you could advise me so that the scope of the request may be refined. I understand that under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, a response should be issued within 20 working days.

Under certain conditions, the Department has the right to refuse to respond to a request for information. I can confirm that the Department holds some of the information requested, however in this instance, Section 12(1) of the FOI Act provides that the Department is not obliged to comply with your request for information as the estimated cost of compliance exceeds the appropriate limit of £600. Annex A provides further information regarding this exemption.

Preliminary searches in the Department identified in excess of 1300 records that may fall within the scope of your request. On average at an estimated 2 minutes per record to review and extract, this equates to approximately 2600 minutes (43 hours and 20 minutes), at a rate of £25 per hour, giving a cost of £1,080 which exceeds the appropriate statutory limit.

Estimated Cost of Compliance

Only the activities permitted under the FOI Fees Regulations were included (determining whether information is held; locating, retrieving and extracting information). While the cost limit has been exceeded, under Section 16 of the FOI

Act, the Department has a duty to provide advice and assistance to enable you to refine your request to reduce the cost of compliance. For example,

1. Reduce the Timeframe

The current timeframe (2011–present) is extremely broad. A more manageable period might be:

- The last 2 years
- The last 5 years
- A specified period surrounding a known Development Proposal (e.g., 2018–2020)

2. Focus on a Single Category of Record

Rather than “all records,” you may wish to select one category, such as:

Documents relating specifically to Development Proposal 590 (as this Development Proposal did reference the aspiration of a separate site in North Belfast)

Documents held by one specified directorate (e.g., Area Planning or Investment and Infrastructure Directorate)

However, as you noted in your request that you would wish to refine its scope should any part exceed the appropriate cost limit, I would be grateful if you could now consider narrowing the terms of your request in order to bring it within the statutory limit.

If you wish to redefine your request or discuss our decision not to proceed with your request, please contact the Area Planning team by email – DEAreaPlanning@educationni.gov.uk . Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications. However submission of a refined request would be treated as a new request, and considered in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, including consideration of relevant Part II exemptions