

Written Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly

Funding for Irish-medium Education

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Minister of Education

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Introduction

I wish to update Members and correct some factual inaccuracies in relation to a £6 million Capital DEL allocation to my Department, which has been the subject of some media coverage.

On *Good Morning Ulster* today, Pat Sheehan MLA claimed that I had “driven a coach and horses through the rules around funding, and earmarked funding in particular” by not allocating this funding to Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta. He contrasted this with the £43 million of earmarked funding that I returned to the Executive over the last two financial years.

Earmarked Funding

Unfortunately for Mr Sheehan (but unsurprisingly), his comparison is fundamentally flawed as the £43 million in question was genuinely earmarked funding; the £6 million Capital DEL allocation was in practice not.

Mr Sheehan is correct in asserting that I returned £43million of earmarked funding to the Department of Finance in the last two years – funding that was earmarked for the Strule Shared Education Campus, Fresh Start projects and Public Sector Transformation and the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. That funding was specifically earmarked, monitored and reported against and, therefore, any unspent amounts had to be returned to the Department of Finance rather than being utilised against other pressures within my Department.

By contrast, capital funding received through the December monitoring process was not in practice provided by the Department of Finance as earmarked funding. Such allocations are not separately monitored, reported upon or returned if unspent. That has been the long-established practice across government. To suggest otherwise is inconsistent with how in-year capital monitoring allocations have always operated.

I note that, with the exception of a small number of explicitly ringfenced Executive programmes, general departmental capital budgets are not earmarked for specific purposes. Rather Departments manage hundreds of millions of pounds of capital

expenditure across a complex portfolio of projects, and prioritisation decisions are routinely taken to ensure the best outcomes for pupils and the taxpayer.

Applying artificial earmarking to late-year monitoring allocations generated by underspends elsewhere in the block would be illogical and impractical, particularly when those allocations represent only a very small proportion of a department's overall capital budget. Such an approach would constrain prudent financial management, reduce flexibility and increase the risk of Executive-wide underspends. That is precisely why the Department of Finance does not in practice monitor these funds in that manner.

Public sector capital expenditure is managed on the basis of affordability, deliverability and value for money. Across government, capital budgets are routinely managed at programme and portfolio level to respond to changing delivery profiles, procurement timelines, contractual milestones and construction-sector realities.

Precise monthly expenditure on major capital projects cannot be forecast with complete accuracy, particularly given variables such as procurement timelines, weather conditions, contractor performance, planning issues, supply-chain pressures and inflationary impacts. As a result, a significant degree of flexibility in regard to allocations is essential if departments are to maximise expenditure and minimise underspend. Historically, that same flexibility has applied in practice to Capital DEL allocations received through monitoring rounds.

December 2025 Earmarked Funding

It is also important to set out the facts of this particular case.

My Department did not originally bid for funding for Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta in the December monitoring round. Our recommended capital bids totalled £18.4 million and reflected the Department's highest priority and most immediate capital pressures at that time.

Subsequently, my Department was approached by Department of Finance officials to advise that a further £6 million of funding was available. As is often the case late in the financial year, identifying opportunities to utilise additional capital funding before year-end can be challenging for the Department of Finance and it is likely that any bid then submitted by my Department would have been successful.

My officials therefore submitted a bid at pace on the basis that Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta had identified longer-term funding requirements and that, crucially, given the late stage of the financial year, it could, as a third-party organisation operating a trust fund, utilise end-year flexibility in managing the funding.

Following the monitoring round allocations, officials engaged with the Department of Finance throughout December and early January to explore whether Project Bank Accounts could provide end-year flexibility to utilise funding on existing school infrastructure projects already on site and under contractual commitment. The objective was to ensure funding was spent on the highest-priority scheme across the education estate, and simultaneously to reduce pressures on the overstretched 2026-27 capital budget. On 5 January 2026, my Department received approval from the Department of Finance to utilise this mechanism.

In light of that approval, and having considered official advice, I concluded that available capital resources should, wherever possible, be directed towards the Department's highest-priority projects already in contract and actively delivering educational infrastructure.

These schemes represented immediate and legally committed expenditure. In addition, this approach reduced future-year budget pressures at a time when capital resources across government remain extremely constrained.

While I was aware of the funding pressures facing Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta, I considered it appropriate to balance these against competing demands. Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta is not an Arm's Length Body of my Department and the funding in question was not intended to be utilised immediately on projects that were shovel-ready or contractually committed. Rather, the majority of funding would have remained within a trust fund pending future deployment. In addition, much of its funding is used to support proposed schools which are not yet publicly funded.

By contrast, the alternative use of the funding supported live construction projects in publicly funded schools, delivering immediate and tangible benefits for children and young people.

Accordingly, I allocated £1 million to Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta to provide organisational stability and demonstrate continued support for the delivery of Irish-medium education, while prioritising the remainder of capital funding towards schemes already under delivery.

I believe this was the most balanced, evidence-based and responsible course of action available reflecting both my statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education and my responsibility to ensure that scarce public capital is directed towards the highest-priority, most deliverable and best-value projects.

Support for Irish-Medium Education

Finally, I remain committed to supporting Irish-medium education within the resources available to my Department and in the context of competing statutory and budgetary priorities.

Lontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta performs one role in supporting the development of emerging schools and has received periodic capital funding from the Department for that purpose. However, the vast majority of Irish-medium capital and resource funding provided by my Department does not involve Lontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta.

Indeed, over the last decade my Department has directly invested more than £60 million in Irish-medium school capital projects.

Let us be clear this is not a question of overall funding for Irish-medium education but funding for a very specific organisation, with one role in the development of such education.

In the 2025-6 financial year, my Department invested over £8 million pounds of capital funding in Irish-medium education.

Currently, substantial works at four Irish-medium primary schools, with estimated costs in excess of £13.2m, are in planning; a future project is at pre-tender stage with an estimated value of £10m and another project, valued at £4.5m, is at site identification stage. The projected spend on minor works in the planning stage for Irish medium schools is circa £31m.

In addition since I came into office, I have:

- Provided an additional £2.75m funding to Irish-medium schools and units last year and an additional £2.9m this year.
- Increased the Irish-medium Accommodation Fund by £2.4 million.
- Introduced a new Irish-medium education Initial Teacher Education bursary scheme.

- Supported 43 Irish-medium early years settings and almost 1,000 funded pre-school places.
- Announced £472,000 of Irish-medium early years funding.
- Provided £300,000 to Fóram na nÓg for Irish-medium youth provision.
- Invested £100,000 to continue the Scoil Spreagtha scheme.
- Appointed an Irish-medium primary principal to act as a lead educational advisor on curriculum reform - the first role of its type in the Department.
- Supported research informed conferences on immersion pedagogy and Irish-language oracy via the Making Best Practice, Common Practice programme.
- Provided funding to IME schools for Teacher Professional Learning.
- Piloted Irish-medium numeracy assessments.

I will continue to consider future support for InaG where resources allow and where such support can be balanced appropriately against the many competing pressures facing the education capital budget, including Irish-medium school projects, special educational needs provision, and essential maintenance works, many of which have already been restricted to emergency interventions only.

However, I do not believe it would be responsible to divert scarce capital funding away from pupils and schools, including publicly funded Irish-medium schools, and into a trust fund where significant sums could remain unspent for an extended period.

On this issue Sinn Féin is deliberately engaged in faux outrage in an attempt to manufacture grievance, when there is none. The facts are clear and the investment I have made into Irish-medium education demonstrates my support for this sector within education. My record of delivery is evident and stands in stark contrast to the non-delivery of Sinn Féin run departments.

Paul Givan

Minister of Education