



The Royal Belfast Academical Institution

Inchmarlo

Pre-Proposal Consultation

2026

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Section One

Background and Proposal



Proposal



To admit girls to Inchmarlo Preparatory Department, commencing August 2028, or earlier.

Section 1: Background and Proposal

Governance, origins and location

- 1.1 Inchmarlo Preparatory Department is governed by the Board of Governors of The Royal Belfast Academical Institution (RBAI), which provides strategic oversight. The Head Teacher provides leadership, acting in a similar way to a Principal in a grant-aided primary school.
- 1.2 RBAI is a Voluntary B Grammar school for boys, situated in the City Centre. Inchmarlo is the preparatory department of the main school. It was founded in 1917 at 106 Marlborough Park North, Belfast. The first headmaster was John Seymour, who presided over its move, in 1935, to the current site in Cranmore Park. The preparatory department kept the name Inchmarlo.

Vision and Values

- 1.3 Inchmarlo inspires boys through academic excellence, outdoor learning, creativity and strong values, in supporting surroundings. The core values are excellence, respect, participation; these values are woven into every aspect of school life, from the classroom to the sports field, the music room to the playground.

Curriculum and Cross-Curricular Skills

- 1.4 The prep follows the NI Curriculum and notes the major strategic review of the NI educational curriculum published in June 2025. Entitled “A Foundation for the Future: Developing Capabilities Through a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum in NI”. It was led by renowned educationalist Lucy Crehan. This was the first such review in almost 20 years and outlined a number of areas for reform, which will form the basis of a new curriculum going forward. It also noted a new aim and objectives.

Aim	To support young people to develop their capabilities by equipping them with appropriate knowledge, skills and experiences, enabling them to have real choices and empowering them to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives.
Objectives	To support each young person to develop as: • An individual • A contributor to society • A contributor to the economy and the environment • A lifelong learner

All schools will have to adjust to the new curriculum. This places more pressure on smaller schools with less time and resources to apply it.

Literacy, Numeracy and ICT are integral to the learning from pre prep to P7, embedded in World Around Us, Forest Schools, Big Writing and preparation for transfer (SEAG).

1.5 Staffing and Class Configuration

Staffing levels at Inchmarlo Preparatory Department have remained stable over the last decade and continue to reflect the school's commitment to providing a high-quality educational experience for all pupils.

- The department currently employs eight full-time teaching staff from Pre-Prep through to Year 7.
- The Head of Preparatory Department fulfils a full-time teaching role, teaching five days per week.
- A part-time Music Teacher, who teaches two days per week across the school.
- Staffing structures have remained largely unchanged over the period.
- The current staffing model ensures that pupils benefit from specialist expertise, consistent pastoral care and high-quality teaching across all year groups.
- In addition to 8.4 FTE teachers, there are 2 general classroom assistants and 7 SEN classroom assistants.

Summary of Inchmarlo Preparatory Department Staffing 2017/18 to 2026/27

Staff	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27
FT teachers	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
PT teacher: Music (2 days)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total Staff	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Total FTE	8.4	8.4	8.4	8.4	8.4	8.4	8.4	8.4	8.4	8.4
Head of Prep (also 5-day week teacher)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Enrolment (Pre-Prep to P7)	150	152	152	152	128	116	110	116	120	106

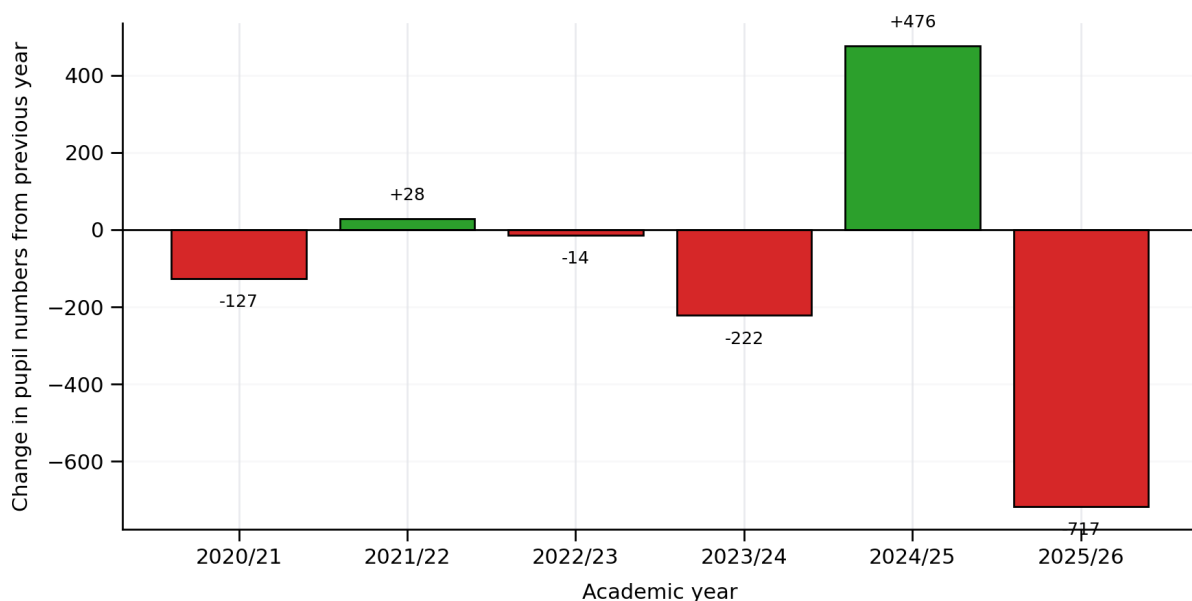
- **Notes:** Staffing has remained consistent over the period: eight full-time teachers (Pre-Prep teacher included), supported by one part-time Music Teacher for two days per week. The Head of Preparatory Department is included within the full-time teaching staff and fulfils a five-day teaching role. Total FTE assumes the two-day Music role is equivalent to 0.4 FTE.

1.6 SEN Provision

In 2025/26, Inchmarlo has 7 children with Special Education Needs (SEN) statements.

1.7 Enrolment Trends

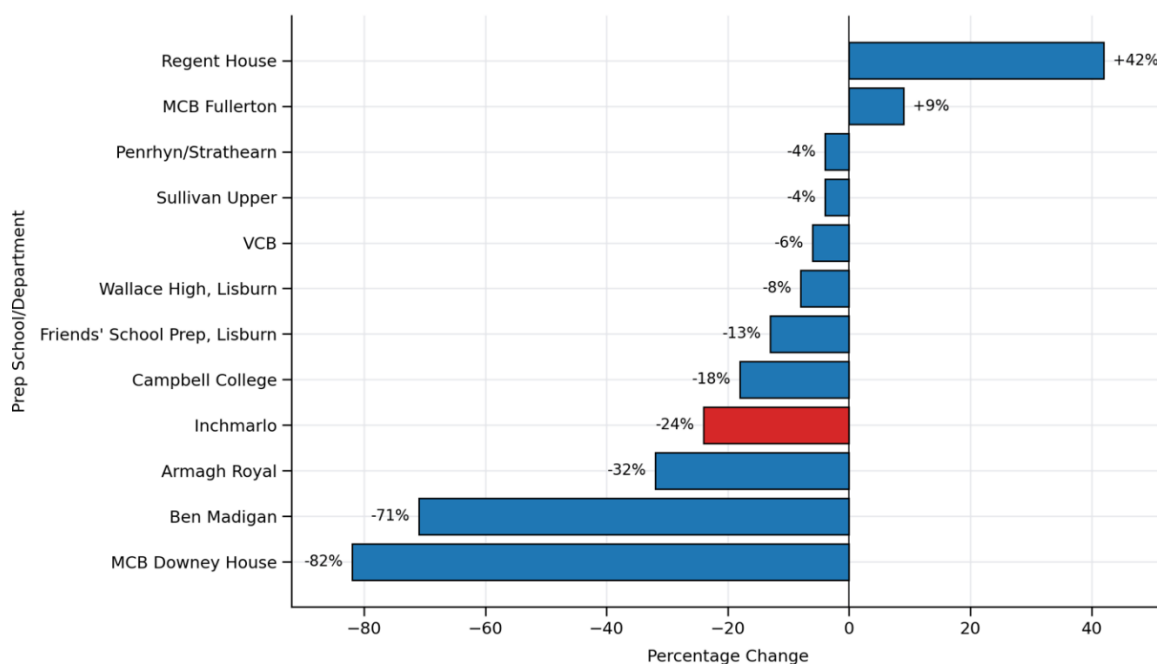
Enrolment trends for Inchmarlo and the average primary school, highlight a reduction in pupil numbers with the most significant decline from the prep departments of the voluntary schools in Belfast.



The positive and negative bar chart illustrates the year-on-year change in overall enrolment across Belfast primary schools between 2019/20 and 2025/26. Green bars indicate years in which pupil numbers increased compared to the previous academic year, whilst red bars represent years in which enrolment declined.

The data shows that Belfast primary school enrolment has remained relatively stable over the seven-year period, although there has been a slight overall decline.

Overall enrolment decreased from **29,256 pupils in 2019/20** to **28,680 pupils in 2025/26**, a net reduction of **576 pupils**, equivalent to approximately **2.0%** over the period. Whilst annual fluctuations are evident, the long-term trend suggests a gradual decline in the primary school-aged population in Belfast. This pattern is consistent with wider demographic trends, including lower birth rates and changing population distribution across urban areas.



The Percentage Change from AY19/20 to AY24/25 chart shows how enrolment has changed at each preparatory school over the six-year period.

Key findings

- Most schools experienced a decline in enrolment, indicating a broader downward trend across the preparatory sector.
- Overall enrolment across all schools fell by 17%.
- Inchmarlo's enrolment decreased by 24%, which is a larger decline than the sector average.
- The most significant reductions were:
 - MCB Downey House: -82%
 - Ben Madigan: -71%
 - Armagh Royal: -32%
- Two schools recorded growth:
 - Regent House: +42%
 - MCB Fullerton: +9%
- Several schools remained relatively stable, with changes of less than 10%, including VCB (-6%), Penrhyn/Strathearn (-4%), and Sullivan Upper (-4%).

The data indicates that declining enrolment has been a widespread issue across Northern Ireland preparatory schools during this period. While Inchmarlo has experienced a notable reduction in pupil numbers, its decline is not unique and is considerably less severe than the declines seen at some other schools. The data also demonstrates that growth remains possible, as evidenced by Regent House and MCB Fullerton, suggesting that local factors and strategic decisions can influence enrolment outcomes despite wider sector pressures.

Impact of VAT

1.8 In 2024, the Autumn Budget announced the imposition of VAT (@20%) on private school fees from 1 January 2025. In doing so, the Labour government fulfilled a publicly stated

commitment and expected that the net effective VAT rate would be 15% (after offsetting). The Office for Budgetary Responsibility (OBR) forecast the policy would result in around 35,000 fewer private school pupils by the end of 2029/2030.

In January 2023, there were 1,750 independent (private) schools in England. By January 2025 this had fallen by 5.5% to 1,653 schools. The Independent School's Council (ISC) polled 1,150 private schools*, which showed that there were 16,696 fewer students in September 2025 compared to a year earlier. Equating to a drop of 3.6% with girls' schools (4.5% down) worse off than boys' schools (2.7%). The figures are likely to be an underestimate as 81 private schools were believed to have closed between July 2024 and September 2025.

There are an estimated 556,000 pupils in private schools, with slightly more boys (282,000) than girls (274,000). The ISC believes the government has under-estimated the impact of VAT on pupil numbers, as they note a drop of 24,929 pupils between September 2023 and September 2025.

The English Department for Education's own research found that between January 2024 and January 2025 independent schools were down 5.9% at age 4, and down 5% at age 7, which was over twice the decline shown in state primary schools over the same period. According to the ISC, overall prep school numbers in England fell by 4.6% compared to 2.9% for senior schools.

Based on the experience noted in England, there could be an initial drop of at least 6% in Year 1 enrolments. Many parents of prep-school pupils will have noted a significant rise in fees over the last few years due to fewer pupil enrolments, cost of living/inflation rises, and VAT amongst other factors. Any future fee increases must be considered in this context.

The Proposal

- 1.9 The Board of Governors, who keep the enrolment at Inchmarlo under review, met in November 2025 to consider the options to maintain and develop the long term stability and sustainability of the prep department. The Board of Governors considered several options to be explored, with a sub group to be appointed. The recommended options were put forward for consultation with parents and staff on Tuesday 25 November 2025.

The Department of Education (DE) Circular, 2017/09 and DGP Oct 2024 Guidance on the Publication of a Development Proposal, has been considered in the preparation of this proposal. In this instance, the statutory planning authority is the Education Authority (EA), the school managing authority is the Board of Governors of The Royal Belfast Academical Institution and the sectoral body is the Governing Bodies Association (GBA).

Section 6 of DE Circular 2024 provides guidance on the “Need for a Development Proposal”. This section sets out the rationale for bringing forward a Development Proposal, referring to situations in which the proposed action appears to represent a Significant Change in Character and Size of a school. Sections 8.1 and 8.4 provide further guidance on this matter. The Preparatory Department of a Voluntary Grammar School is not a grant-aided primary school. Section 5.11 Post Primary Schools, includes reference, at point viii., to a proposal “to open or close a preparatory department attached to a grammar school”.

In arriving at their decision, the Governors have considered evidence that demonstrates, despite concerted efforts to promote the school, a steady and consistent decline in enrolments. The Governors have also considered the contextual framework of the provision of primary school spaces within the Greater Belfast area and the wider trend of falling enrolments within the broader preparatory school sector.

The Governors are mindful of the increasing deficits at both the main school and a worsening financial position in the preparatory department. Independently prepared and reviewed forecasts clearly demonstrate that the financial position of the preparatory department is not sustainable. The deficits experienced are expected to increase. The Governors have concluded that the preparatory department is not financially sustainable and in the absence of significant funding being made available, it is prudent to consider other options to the current provision.

Given the fundamental risks to both educational and financial viability, which currently exist, the Governors propose:

“To maintain Inchmarlo Preparatory Department and to admit girls in August 2028.”

Section Two

Sustainability Assessment



Section 2: Sustainability Assessment

This chapter assesses the school's ongoing sustainability.

Sustainable Schools Policy - Policy background and sustainability criteria

- 2.1 On 14 January 2009, the Minister for Education launched "Schools for the Future – A Policy for Sustainable Schools" (2009 Policy). In February 2022 DENI subsequently published "A Policy for Sustainable Schools-User Guide" (Sustainable Guide). This was followed by EA's "Planning for Sustainable Provision: Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027" (2022 SAP) in June 2022.
- 2.2 The 2009 Policy followed on from the Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education (the Bain Report) published in December 2006. The Bain report focused on the quality of children's education. It highlighted the need for schools to be viable in both educational and financial terms and made specific recommendations as follows:

"The policy for sustainable schools should ensure that all schools are sustainable in terms of the quality of the educational experience of children, enrolment trends, financial position, school leadership and management, accessibility, and the strength of their links to the community."

"The sustainable schools' policy should ensure that regardless of the financial position of a school or the services it provides, it is not considered viable if the quality and breadth of the education it provides is less than satisfactory."

(Bain Report, 2009)

- 2.3 The Bain Report also noted the minimum (not optimal) enrolment thresholds for primary schools. For urban schools ("Belfast/Derry City Council areas") the minimum intake for recurrent funding was 15 per year (12 in rural/other areas), with 20 per year (15 in rural/other areas) the minimum threshold intake for capital funder (per Table 4.1, p23 2009 Policy).
- 2.4 The 2009 Policy also set out 6 qualitative and quantitative sustainability criteria.
1. Quality of the educational experience
 2. Stable enrolment trends
 3. Sound financial position
 4. School leadership and management
 5. Accessibility
 6. Strength of links to the local community
- 2.5 At the outset of the 2022 SDP, it reiterated the need for a broad and balanced curriculum, and for educationally and financially viable schools. In doing so, it reaffirmed the sustainability criteria.

Area Planning:

Aim

The aim of Area Planning is to ensure that all primary and post-primary pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their educational needs in a school that is educationally and financially viable and sustainable.

Vision

All children will have access to a high-quality educational experience, through a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their needs, in educationally and financially viable schools, within a diverse system of education.

Mission

Focus on improving the quality of educational provision for all pupils. To do this Area Planning will:

- Address school provision which is not educationally and/or financially sustainable;
- Explore realistic, innovative, shared and collaborative solutions with a view to ensuring there is a viable and sustainable level of quality educational provision;
- Aim to find solutions which deliver sustainable education provision in rural areas;
- Address issues and challenges specific to local areas, by ensuring there are sufficient places which may result in increasing places in some areas while reducing places in others.

Providing a network of viable and sustainable schools that are of the right type, the right size, located in the right place at the right time with a focus on raising standards.

Sustainability Criteria Indicators

2.6 Each sustainability criterion was given a series of indicators, with primary school indicators below:

Sustainability Criteria	Sustainability Indicators
Quality of Educational Experience	a) Attainment levels of pupils b) No more than 2 composite year groups in a single classroom at primary level. c) There are 4 teachers at a primary school. d) The ability of a school to cater for children with Special Educational Needs. e) The standards and the quality of teaching and learning at the school. f) The range of curricular and extra-curricular activities available for children. g) The quality of the physical environment for learning and teaching. h) The quality of, and arrangements for pastoral care.
Stable Enrolment Trends	a) The enrolment trends in the school in the past 3 years and projected demand in the area. b) Ideally a primary school should have at least 7 classrooms (one for each year group). The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for an urban school should be 140 pupils.
Sound Financial Position	a) The school's annual finances indicate that it can live within its budget. b) The school's financial trends indicate that it will continue to be able to live within its annual budget. c) The school's 3-year financial plans, based upon realistic assumptions indicate that where there is a deficit this can be reduced or recovered.

Sustainability Criteria	Sustainability Indicators
Strong leadership and Management by the Board of Governors and the Principal	a) Governors' views on the school based on quantitative and qualitative. b) Composition of the Board of Governors-skills and experience of Board members and the number of vacancies. c) Management of staff attendance and absenteeism. d) Levels and nature of staff turnover and unfilled vacancies e) Teacher morale. f) Management of curricular and organisational demands on the Principal and staff. g) Ensuring that the resource is available so that the Principal has at least one day per week to attend to leadership and management duties. h) There is a school development plan in place and progress is being made to achieve the plan's aims and objectives. i) Pupil behaviour, expulsions, suspensions, and non-attendance as well as positive behaviours such as involvement in school management (e.g., buddying and mentoring).
Sustainability Criteria	Sustainability Indicators
Accessibility	a) Home to school travel times of less than 30 minutes. b) Distance to another suitable primary school. c) Capacity in nearest schools.
Strong Links with the Community	a) Degree and quality of parental involvement. b) Number of children in the vicinity attending (and not attending). c) Contribution of the school to the community. d) Presence of other features of provision, eg, nursery or specialist unit. e) Multi-functional use of buildings outside formal education, for example sport, voluntary and community use.

2.7 Quality of Education Experience

- Strong attainment levels with pupils achieving high standards across the curriculum and successfully transitioning to the next stage of education.
- Single form entry structure, ensuring no composite classes and allowing for personalised support and strong pupil-teacher relationships.
- Well-established SEN provision, enabling the school to identify and support pupils with additional needs through targeted interventions and inclusive practice.
- High-quality teaching and learning, characterised by high expectations, effective differentiation and engaging learning experiences.
- Extensive range of curricular and extra-curricular opportunities, including sport, music, drama, STEM, leadership programmes, educational visits and residential experiences.
- High-quality physical environment with well-resourced classrooms, specialist facilities, outdoor learning spaces and excellent sporting provision.
- Outstanding pastoral care arrangements, underpinned by a nurturing ethos, strong home-school partnerships and a commitment to pupil wellbeing.
- Experienced and highly qualified staff team, providing continuity, expertise and consistency in teaching and learning across the school.

2.8 Sound Financial Position

The standalone nature of Inchmarlo, as a prep department, means it cannot benefit from school cost savings with the main school. In addition, the VAT and rising tuition fees are prohibitive or challenging for current and potential families. The costs are exacerbated by low level of government financial support. NI average expenditure per pupil is £3,411 as compared to £9,361 at Inchmarlo. NI average teaching cost per pupil is £2,588 as compared to £5,213 at Inchmarlo.

Inchmarlo had actual deficits of £70,509 in 2024/25 and £138,638 in 2025/26.

Inchmarlo forecasts a deficit of £261,817 in 2026/27. This figure may increase with any further pupil transfers out of the school.

Inchmarlo forecasts indicate over the 4 year period between 2025/26 to 2028/29 the cumulative deficit will be over £1 M.

These deficits are after a rise in tuition fees.

The financial forecasts are outlined in Appendix 3.

2.9 Strong leadership and management by Board of Governors and the Principal

- The Board of Governors is supported in its leadership of the Preparatory Department by the Inchmarlo Management Committee (IMC). There are 31 members of the Board of Governors and 7 Governors on the IMC.
- The Board of Governors appointed a new Headteacher, Mr Moreland, who has been in post since August 2025. There is a very high level of governor, staff and parental confidence in the new Headteacher.

- A robust and rigorous evaluation of the 2022-2025 School Development Plan was undertaken in the 2025/26 academic year, to inform the Action Plan for 2026/27, and 3-Year School Improvement Plan, 2027-2030.

2.10 Accessibility

Inchmarlo attracts boys from a wide spread of postcodes across Belfast and beyond, with a number of families travelling significant distances to enrol their children. Families benefit with VCB Prep juxtapositioned to Inchmarlo, making drop offs and pick ups more manageable. Postcodes for 2025/26 were:

BT9	BT17	BT8	BT27	BT5/6/41
25%	15%	10%	8%	5%

In addition, pupils are admitted from Banbridge, Dromore, Ballyclare, Annalong and Hollywood.

2.11 Strong links with the Community

- Active participation in the Peace Proms programme.
- The department is a member of the 74th Scout Group.
- Regular collaboration with other local schools through musical performances and shared events, including performances at Parliament Buildings, Stormont.
- Participation in a range of local primary school sports leagues and competitions, fostering healthy competition and positive relationships with neighbouring schools.
- School facilities and grounds made available to support community activities, including Instonians hockey and summer schemes such as the Smile Club.
- Annual involvement in community Christmas events, including singing performances that strengthen links with local residents and organisations.
- Strong partnership with the Inchmarlo Parents' Association, which provides invaluable support for school events, fundraising and community-building initiatives.
- Close working relationships with local charities, community groups and educational organisations to enhance learning opportunities for pupils.

Section Three

Area Planning Impact



Section 3: Area Planning Impact

Area planning context for Inchmarlo

Inchmarlo Preparatory Department is situated within South Belfast and should be considered within the wider Belfast and Northern Ireland area-planning context. The key point for Inchmarlo is that wider demographic indicators point to a reducing primary-age population, while local provision continues to include schools with strong demand, established reputation and/or larger scale.

Indicator	Source figure	Impact for Inchmarlo
NI primary enrolment projection	168,036 pupils in 2023/24, projected to 153,878 by 2035	Declining overall demand increases the need for Inchmarlo to maintain a clear distinctive offer.
Belfast LGD births	4,982 births in 2011/12 to 3,827 in 2021/22, a 23% fall	A smaller intake pool is likely to intensify competition for Prep 1 places.
Urban preparatory threshold	140 pupils under the Sustainable Schools Policy	Inchmarlo's June 2025 forecast of 106 pupils places it below the expected urban threshold.
NI average school size	Average of 214 pupils	Inchmarlo is substantially smaller than the NI average, so sustainability evidence must be explicit.
Belfast primary capacity	30,131 enrolments against 35,084 approved enrolments in 2023/24	Surplus capacity in the wider Belfast system adds competitive pressure for parental choice.
SEN provision in Belfast	29 of 93 Belfast primary schools have specialist SEN provision across 70 classes	Inclusion and targeted SEN support are important parts of Inchmarlo's quality narrative, particularly where provision is valued by parents.

Demographic pressure and projected demand

The wider Northern Ireland data shows an overall projected reduction in primary enrolments from 168,036 pupils in 2023/24 to 153,878 by 2035. This matters for Inchmarlo because a smaller demographic base reduces the overall pool of potential pupils and makes parental recruitment, retention and transition planning more strategically important.

Northern Ireland Primary Enrolments: Historical and Projected

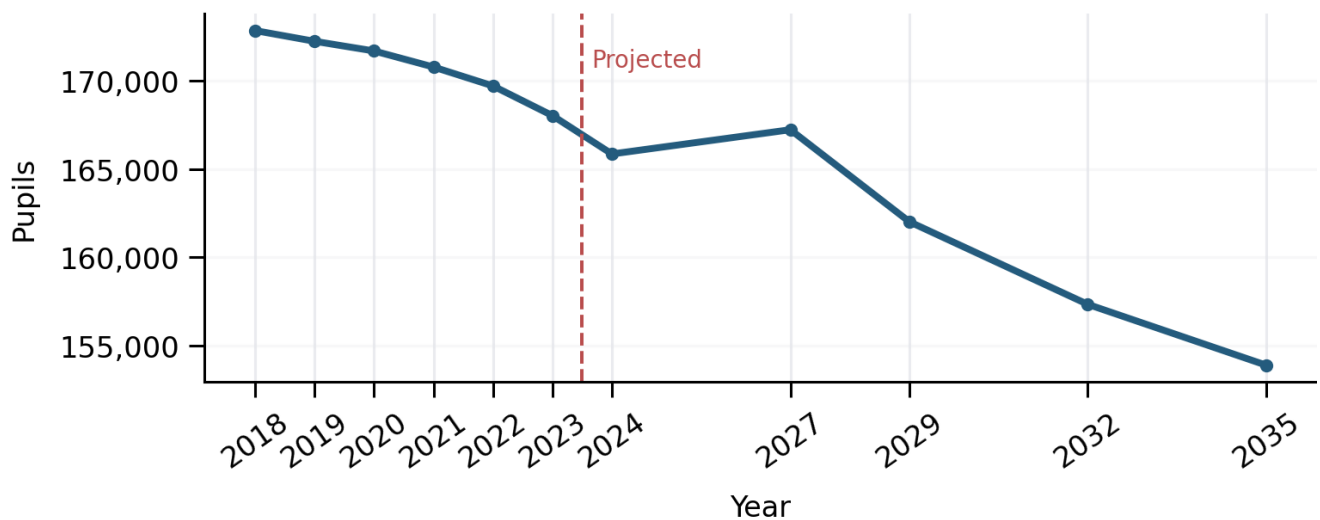


Figure 1: NI primary enrolment trend and projection.

At Belfast City Council level, the same directional pressure is evident. The source document records actual births falling from 4,982 in 2011/12 to 3,827 in 2021/22, which is identified as a 23% fall. This is particularly relevant for Inchmarlo because birth cohorts feed directly into future Prep 1 demand.

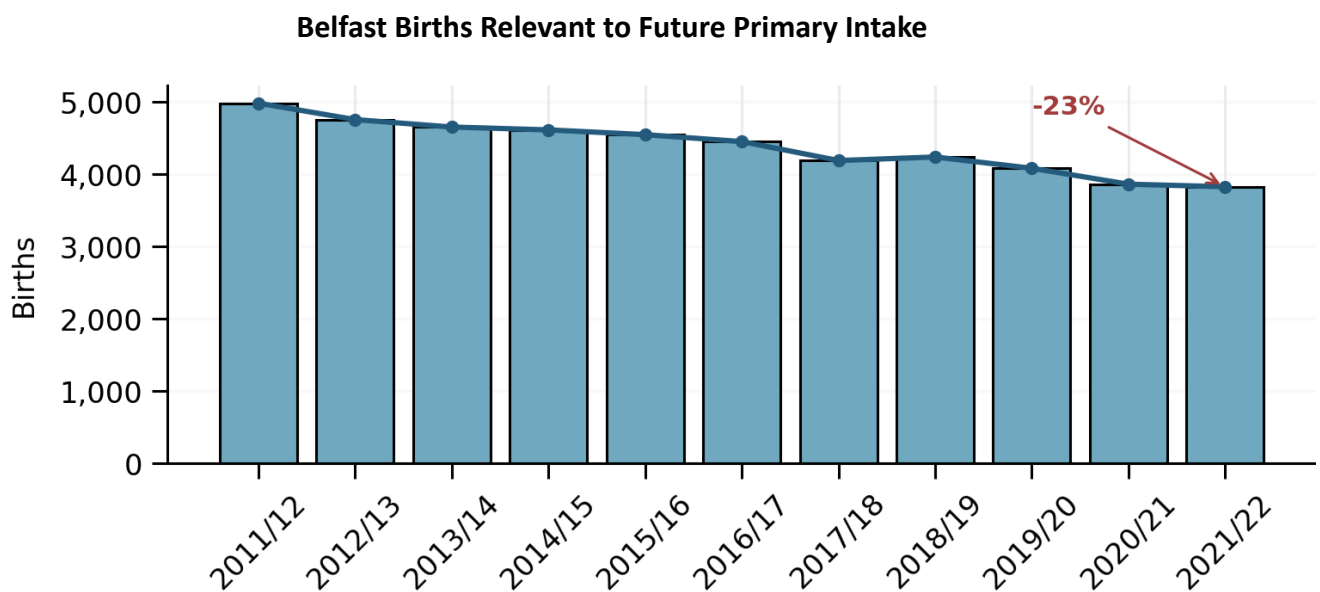


Figure 2: Belfast births by academic birth year.

Sustainability benchmark: Inchmarlo position

Under the Department of Education Sustainable Schools Policy, an urban preparatory school should ideally have at least 140 pupils. The supplied document states that Inchmarlo's June 2025 forecast is 106 pupils. This places Inchmarlo below the benchmark and therefore highlights an area-planning risk that should be addressed through clear evidence of educational quality, efficient staffing and sustained parental demand.

Inchmarlo Enrolment Compared with Key Benchmarks

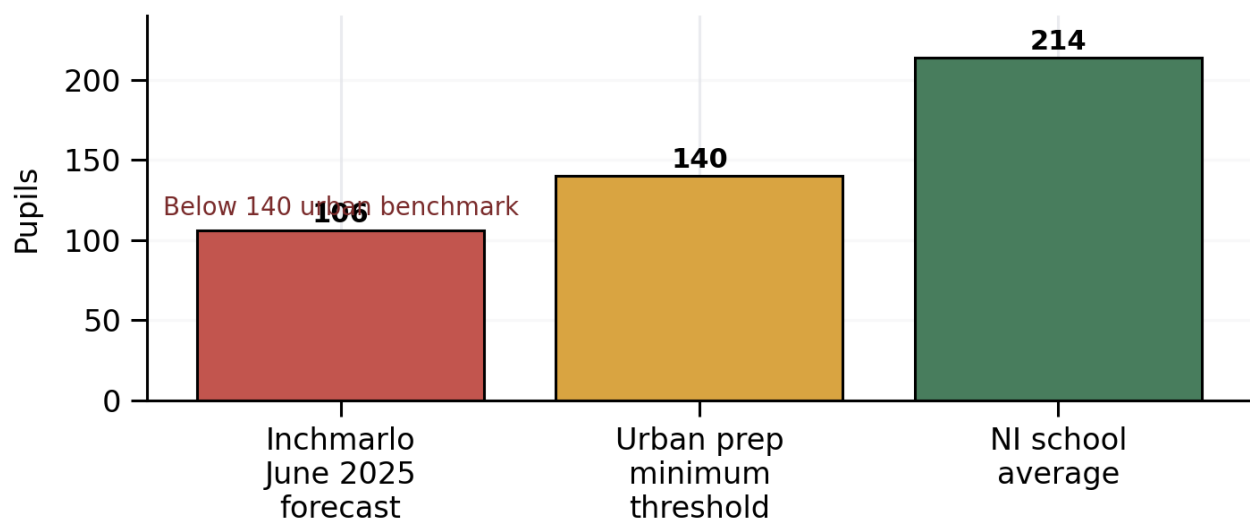


Figure 3: Inchmarlo's current forecast compared with the urban preparatory threshold and NI average school size.

Belfast capacity and competitive context

The Belfast primary profile in the source document records 30,131 enrolments against 35,084 approved enrolments in 2023/24, alongside 4,029 actual admissions against 5,261 approved admissions. The remaining available Year 1 places indicate that Belfast has spare capacity in the primary sector. For Inchmarlo, this means the impact of area planning is experienced through parental choice, competition for first-preference applications and the need to communicate a clearly differentiated preparatory offer.

The source document also notes that nearby schools continue to attract strong first-preference applications and that some competitor schools demonstrate stable or growing demand. The relevance for Inchmarlo is that it must evidence why its single-form preparatory model, pastoral culture, transition pathways, curriculum experience and individualised support provide value within a competitive South Belfast market.

Implications for Inchmarlo

Area-planning issue	Implication for Inchmarlo
Falling demographic base	Maintain a proactive admissions strategy and continue to evidence the value of Inchmarlo's preparatory pathway.
Below urban prep threshold	Address sustainability directly through enrolment planning, efficient staffing, and a clear statement of educational quality.
Surplus Belfast capacity	Sharpen the school's distinctive identity so parents can see why Inchmarlo offers a meaningful alternative to larger local provision.
Competition from high-demand schools	Promote strengths that are difficult for larger settings to replicate, including relationships, individual attention, pupil voice, leadership opportunities and pastoral care.
SEN and inclusion expectations	Ensure the area-planning case describes the quality of SEN identification, support, differentiation and partnership with families.
Small-school organisation	Use single-form entry and composite flexibility as strengths, while demonstrating that staffing, curriculum breadth and safeguarding capacity remain sustainable.

Table 2: Planning implications framed solely for Inchmarlo.

Area planning impact statement

On the basis of the supplied information, the area-planning impact for Inchmarlo is best understood as a sustainability and demand challenge within a declining demographic environment. Inchmarlo's projected enrolment of 106 pupils is below the urban preparatory threshold of 140 pupils and below the NI average school size of 214 pupils. This does not, in itself, determine educational quality, but it does mean that any area-planning assessment should require Inchmarlo to evidence the strength of its provision, its contribution to parental choice and its plans for maintaining viable enrolment.

The Belfast data indicates spare capacity within the primary sector, with actual enrolment and admissions below approved capacity. This creates a competitive admissions environment in which Inchmarlo must ensure that its offer is clearly communicated and strategically positioned.

In conclusion, the planning impact for Inchmarlo is significant but manageable. Inchmarlo's proposal aligns enrolment planning, with high-quality teaching and learning, strong community and parental confidence, robust SEN and pastoral provision, and efficient staffing and resource deployment.

Section Four

Educational Impact



Section 4: Educational Impact

4.1 Introduction

The continuing decline in pupil numbers at Inchmarlo is beginning to undermine the quality and breadth of educational provision.

4.2 Impact of Falling Enrolment Numbers

In a school with low enrolment, it can be challenging to ensure a high-quality educational experience, for example to learn from and value other people's ideas, generate possible solutions and communicate with a sense of audience and purpose. Curriculum guidance from CCEA highlights that self-management (or self-regulation) is important so that pupils can manage their learning in new situations and in the longer term. To do this, they need to experience the different demands of working with peers and children of other age groups, working with friends, and working with other people they might not know and to recognise the different ways they need to adapt to new groupings and their own feelings and achievements in the variety of contexts.

In very small class sizes, it is challenging to ensure that pupils can access these opportunities and even then, they will be limited to a small number of children to work with. Working in larger and different groups during primary school years provides an important foundation for children as they progress to larger post-primary settings. The Sustainable Schools Policy outlines that smaller numbers of children in each year group limits the opportunities for children to work alongside their peers and further opportunities for extra-curricular provision. Ultimately, these restrict opportunities for pupil collaboration, group learning, and social development – elements that are vital to the development of key skills as outlined in the NI Curriculum.

Moreover, extra-curricular provision can be affected, due to the small pool of participants. These programmes are central to the all-round development of children and contribute significantly to school identity, pupil motivation, and well-being.

Staffing models may also come under strain as they seek to deliver a fully enriched curriculum.

All of these impact on the quality of the education offered, which will come under further pressure as enrolments fall to 106 in Inchmarlo.

4.3 The Proposal

The proposal will provide the opportunity for pupils to benefit from a more sustainable prep and one which is better able to provide, and sustain, the wider range of curricular and co-curricular experiences, with greater resources to meet the holistic needs of all pupils.

Section Five

Resource Implications



Section 5: Resource Implications

- 5.1 There are no anticipated staffing changes for teaching and support staff. Access to classroom assistants is approved by the Education Authority.
- 5.2 There will be minimum resource requirements in terms of accommodation to admit girls, including toilet and changing room facilities.
- 5.3 Inchmarlo facilities include 16 classrooms, a modern C2K computer suite, a well-stocked library, an outdoor classroom, a dedicated forest school area and an astro-turf for sports.
- 5.4 The Inchmarlo Parents Association are currently planning to develop a STEAM Lab, using one of the spare classrooms; this will be a superb facility.

Section Six

Options Appraisal



SECTION 6: OPTION APPRAISAL

- 6.1 The Board of Governors of Inchmarlo and Victoria College Belfast have independently considered the education and financial sustainability of preparatory education at their respective schools.
- 6.2 On 18th November 2025, at VCB and RBAI, there were separate meetings of the Boards of Governors to discuss the challenges facing the preparatory departments. The outcome for RBAI was to take forward a strategic plan to explore all options for Inchmarlo, including maintaining the status quo, and collaborating with VCB, to identify viable and sustainable alternative outcomes.
- 6.3 Parents and staff attended a subsequent meeting on 25 November 2025, to be appraised of the facts.
- 6.4 The Board of Governors considered the following options:

a) No change to the current position

In recent years, there has been a proactive and significant PR and marketing campaign to increase enrolment; this included re-opening the pre-prep and appointing a new Head Teacher. These have not led to increased enrolment. Alongside declining demographics and the introduction of VAT on fees from January 2025, the indications are of further falling enrolment numbers.

Due to the decline in enrolment numbers, it is increasingly challenging for Inchmarlo to meet the criteria from the DE Sustainable Schools Policy.

It is not a viable option to maintain the status quo.

b) Increase fees

Based on current projections and to achieve financial sustainability, the average annual fee for parents would have to be increased to £10,709. The VAT at 20% is detrimental to the prep's viability.

c) Change management type

RBAI is a voluntary B school and it is not a viable option to pursue a change of management type, which would require a development proposal to close Inchmarlo.

In order to comply with the requirements of The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, this option would require current provision to be discontinued. Following closure of the school, another managing authority would be required to publish a Development

Proposal, and such a proposal would need to be approved by the Minister of Education. It is not within the power of the Board of Governors of RBAI to consider or implement such a change.

d) Inchmarlo to admit girls

Inchmarlo retained as the Preparatory Department of RBAI and governed by RBAI and the Inchmarlo Management Committee.

The cost/benefits could include:

Inchmarlo based Co-education school option consideration	
Pros	Cons
1. This may improve the financial outturn of Inchmarlo in the event of a significant number of girls transferring to Inchmarlo. 2. Would be familiar and convenient for some parents who have girls, with a son at Inchmarlo. 3. Attractive to parents with boys and girls.	1. Inchmarlo could change to co-education and not attract girls so no improvement in its financial viability (and risk decline in intake of boys). 2. Possibly a need for a substantial rebranding exercise for Inchmarlo. 3. All capital costs would be incurred by Inchmarlo. 4. Development proposal required.

This option is considered viable by the Board of Governors.

Section Seven

Rationale for Proposal



SECTION 7: RATIONALE FOR PROPOSAL

The trend of declining enrolments at Inchmarlo, the declining birth rate in Greater Belfast and beyond, increase in deficits, introduction of VAT and the resulting instability at the prep, demonstrate there is a clear rationale for the proposal.

The proposal to admit girls to Inchmarlo, starting August 2028, at the latest, is identified, by the Board of Governors, as the most viable option to be consulted on regarding the future of provision for the following reasons:

- The increase in fees that would be required to achieve financial stability is considered to be unaffordable to the majority of parents.
- It is not possible to conclude that with higher fees the school would recruit sufficient pupils to achieve educational sustainability.
- Continuation of the current provision – curricular and co-curricular, at Inchmarlo, is neither educationally nor financially viable.
- The proposal aligns with the objective of area planning which is a process through which a network of viable and sustainable schools will be maintained and developed.

Section Eight

Equality Screening



SECTION 8: EQUALITY SCREENING

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: A Guide for Public Authorities advises: The first duty is the Equality of Opportunity duty, which requires public authorities in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between the 9 equality categories of persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependants and persons without.

The Governors are conducting an equality screening exercise in order to identify whether or not their proposal has any major impact on the protected groups within Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The final screening document will be available on request from RBAI when the proposals reach the public objection period stage.

Section Nine

Implementation Plan



SECTION 9: IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Any change in a school/prep department's provision must be presented through the medium of a Development Proposal, as set out in DE's Development Proposal Guidance 2024. RBAI recognises that entering into the formal Development Plan process will create a period of uncertainty and upheaval for pupils, parents and staff alike; and are keen to reach the most appropriate agreed future direct outcome. RBAI will seek formal approval from their Board to commence with the transparent preparation of a Development Plan for Inchmarlo, if and when appropriate.

EANI has indicated that the timeline for a Development Proposal would be circa 18 months and would involve the following:

Stage	Timeline
Pre-publication consultation including age-appropriate consultation with pupils	September 2026
Closing date for pre-publication consultation responses from parents and teachers	8 weeks
Consideration of consultation responses by Governors	November/December 2026
Approval/rejection of Proposal following consideration of outcome of consultation and all relevant factors	December 2026
EANI consultation with affected schools	4-week consultation
EANI noting of Development Proposal	Following EA consultation with affected schools
Development Proposal – 2-month Objection Period/Public Consultation	
Ministerial Consideration and Decision	Post objection period/public consultation – allow for process to complete in 18 months
Transition Planning – Design and implement transition plans for pupils and staff	Concurrent
Final Implementation – enact agreed changes	By August 2028

NB: An Action Plan will also be developed and monitored in line with DE guidance and include ongoing communications with all affected stakeholders to ensure transparency, continuity of learning and staff redeployment support where needed.

This document may be read in conjunction with the VCB document.

PRE-PUBLICATION CONSULTATION

This will be conducted through staff and parent meetings, at Inchmarlo on 15 September 2026 at 6.00 pm. Parents and staff are asked to respond using Google forms; the deadline is 10 November 2026.

Appendices

Financial Plans

Pre-Consultation Response Form



APPENDIX I

(a) Total Enrolment Numbers									
Academic Year	Prep Enrolment								
2018/19	152								
2019/20	152								
2020/21	137								
2021/22	128								
2022/23	116								
2023/24	110								
2024/25	116								
2025/26	106								
2026/27	91								
(b) Enrolment Numbers by Year Group									
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
Pre-Prep						15	7	16	16
P1	23	23	10	8	8	7	17	10	11
P2	20	23	24	9	9	11	9	17	11
P3	17	20	19	24	10	9	11	9	17
P4	25	18	19	19	25	11	13	12	8
P5	24	24	19	22	21	25	17	16	12
P6	19	24	24	21	23	24	25	17	16
P7	24	20	22	25	20	23	24	25	16
	152	152	137	128	116	110	116	106	91

APPENDIX II

FINANCIAL YEAR (1 April - 31 March)	2019/20 £	2020/21 £	2021/22 £	2022/23 £	2023/24 £	2024/25 £	2025/26 £
INCOME							
DE Grants	89,147	92,993	89,865	83,505	73,813	85,441	97,494
Classroom Assistant Grants	47,559	53,196	49,601	76,706	98,390	138,538	148,523
Prep Tuition Fees	643,259	611,036	578,449	550,353	565,750	607,353	608,107
Other Income	59,289	33,204	31,561	29,803	33,481	36,396	47,428
Total Income	839,254	790,429	749,476	740,367	771,434	867,728	901,552
EXPENDITURE							
Staff Costs	624,700	619,768	609,495	586,596	690,680	756,067	845,089
Education Costs	40,247	26,873	29,130	42,549	33,106	27,682	24,327
Premises Costs	84,972	100,821	104,672	101,213	119,791	122,852	126,441
Administration Costs	26,887	40,974	33,953	23,061	25,995	31,636	44,063
Total Expenditure	776,806	788,436	777,250	753,419	869,572	938,237	1,039,920
Surplus/(Deficit) for the Year	62,448	1,993	(27,774)	(13,052)	(98,138)	(70,509)	(138,368)
FEES							
P1-P3	£ 4,010	£ 4,010	£ 4,095	£ 4,300	£ 4,730	£ 5,225	£ 5,600
P4-P7	£ 4,530	£ 4,530	£ 4,625	£ 4,860	£ 5,350	£ 5,900	£ 6,000

APPENDIX III

FINANCIAL YEAR (1 April - 31 March)	2026/27 £	2027/28 £	2028/29 £
INCOME			
DE Grants	89,381	84,470	79,559
Classroom Assistant Grants	133,369	138,037	142,868
Prep Tuition Fees	550,270	535,636	519,630
Other Income	23,866	23,866	23,866
Total Income	796,886	782,009	765,923
EXPENDITURE			
Staff Costs	852,875	882,726	913,621
Education Costs	51,530	53,076	54,668
Premises Costs	120,796	124,420	128,152
Administration Costs	33,502	34,507	35,542
Total Expenditure	1,058,703	1,094,728	1,131,984
(Deficit) for the Year	(261,817)	(312,719)	(366,061)
PROJECTED ENROLMENT NUMBERS	91	86	81
AVERAGE FEES REQUIRED TO BREAKEVEN (including VAT)	£ 10,709	£ 11,838	£ 13,121

APPENDIX IV

FINANCIAL YEAR (1 April - 31 March)	2028/29 £	2029/30 £	2030/31 £
INCOME			
DE Grants	128,669	131,616	134,563
Classroom Assistant Grants	142,868	147,869	153,044
Prep Tuition Fees	840,389	885,423	932,404
Other Income	23,866	23,866	23,866
Total Income	1,135,792	1,188,774	1,243,876
EXPENDITURE			
Staff Costs	913,621	945,598	978,694
Education Costs	88,414	91,066	93,798
Premises Costs	128,152	131,997	135,957
Administration Costs	33,502	34,507	35,542
Total Expenditure	1,163,689	1,203,168	1,243,991
Surplus/(Deficit) for the Year	(27,897)	(14,394)	(115)
Projected Enrolment Inchmarlo	76	74	72
Projected Enrolment Girls	55	60	65
TOTAL PROJECTED ENROLMENT	131	134	137
These projections are extremely sensitive to enrolment numbers			
There is no certainty in respect of the number of girls that may seek admission in 2028			



Inchmarlo Preparatory Department: Development Proposal

Pre-consultation with staff and parents

The following options for the future of Inchmarlo Preparatory Department were considered by the Board of Governors;

- No change to the current provision
- Increasing fees
- Changing the management type of the school
- Change of admissions, to admit girls

The Governors are now seeking your views on the proposal to admit girls to Inchmarlo, August 2028, or earlier.

The closing date for submissions is **10th November, 2026.**

Name *

Short-answer text

Child's Class

- ☐ Pre-Prep
- ☐ P1
- ☐ P2
- ☐ P3
- ☐ P4
- ☐ P5
- ☐ P6
- ☐ P7

Please select below if you are an Inchmarlo member of staff.

☐ Yes

Do you support maintaining Inchmarlo Preparatory Department?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do you agree with the proposal to admit girls, to commence August 2028? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you disagree with the proposal to admit girls, select reasons why. *

☐ Commitment to single sex education

☐ Prefer to pay higher fees to maintain status quo

☐ Disruption to current pupils

☐ Change of tradition/culture

☐ Other:

Please indicate whether you consider this proposal will impact positively or negatively on either Equality of Opportunity or the Promotion of Good Relations in any way. *

	Positive	Negative	I Don't Know/Not Applicable
Between persons of different religious beliefs	☐	☐	☐
Between persons of different political opinion	☐	☐	☐
Between persons of different racial groups	☐	☐	☐
Between persons of different age	☐	☐	☐
Between persons of different marital status	☐	☐	☐
Between persons of different sexual orientation	☐	☐	☐
Between men and women generally	☐	☐	☐
Between persons with a disability and persons without	☐	☐	☐
Between persons with dependants and persons without	☐	☐	☐

Please indicate below whether you are:

- ☐ A parent or guardian of a pupil currently enrolled at Inchmarlo Prep
- ☐ A parent or guardian of a pupil currently enrolled at Inchmarlo Pre-Prep
- ☐ A member of teaching staff currently employed at Inchmarlo
- ☐ A member of support staff employed at Inchmarlo