



Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission

Language Scheme 2020-2023

Under Section 15 of the Official Languages Act, 2003

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Chapter 1 – Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

This second Irish Language Scheme has been prepared under Section 15 of the Official Languages Act 2003 (the 'Act'), by the State Examinations Commission (SEC). Section 11 of the Act provides for the preparation by public bodies of a statutory scheme detailing the services they will provide:

- through the medium of Irish;
- through the medium of English, and;
- through the medium of Irish and English;

and the measures to be adopted to ensure that any service not provided by the body through the medium of the Irish language will be so provided within an agreed timeframe.

In accordance with Section 14(3) of the Act, language schemes remain in force for a period of 3 years or until such time as a new scheme is confirmed by the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, whichever is the later

1.2 Preparation and Content of the Language Scheme

In the preparation of this Scheme, due regard has been given to the Guidelines issued by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. In addition there also has been a comprehensive process of consultation with relevant stakeholders as outlined in this Scheme.

The SEC is guided by the principle that the provision of Irish Language Services should be based on:

- The level of demand for specific services in the Irish Language.
- The importance of a proactive approach to the provision of these services.
- The resources, including human and financial resources, and the capacity of the SEC to develop or access the necessary language capacity.

This scheme complements the principles of our Customer Charter¹. It has been formulated with the intention of ensuring that all relevant obligations under the Act by the SEC will be fully addressed on an incremental basis, through this and future schemes.

This scheme is predicted on all of the commitments in any previous scheme having been implemented.

¹ See <https://www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=cv&sc=in>

1.3 Consultation Process

The State Examinations Commission undertook a public consultation process in the preparation of this Scheme. As required under section 13 of the Act, a notice was published on the State Examinations website and on the website, www.tuairisc.ie. This scheme has been informed by submissions that were received as part of this public consultation process,

In addition, an organisation wide engagement process was also undertaken to inform the development of this Scheme.

1.4 Objectives of the Second Scheme

The State Examinations Commission aims to improve the provision of services through the Irish language within the organisation over the lifetime of the second Scheme. The Scheme builds on the extent to which services are currently available through Irish as a result of the first Scheme. Areas for future enhancement of the provision of services in Irish are identified in the Scheme and include initiatives to make services already available in Irish more visible to the public. The SEC will commit to monitor the demand for Irish language services from the public throughout the course of the Scheme.

1.5 Commencement Date

This scheme has been confirmed by the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. It commences with effect from 21.12.2020 and shall remain in force for a period of three years from this date or until a new scheme has been confirmed by the Minister pursuant to Section 15 of the Act, whichever is later.

Chapter 2 – Review of the First Scheme

In preparation of this Scheme, the State Examinations Commission carried out a review of the organisation's first scheme. The main commitments made in that Scheme related to the SEC's communications with the public. The following commitments were fulfilled apart from the registration and implementation of an Irish Language Domain Name.

- The information and services offered in both languages continues to be offered. These include application forms, examinations papers, corporate publications, recruitment information, instructions to contract personnel and instructions to candidates.
- All advertisements in the national press in both Irish and English.
- A generic email address setup, acht.teangacha@examinations.ie
- Circulars issued to schools made available in Irish and in English. Both the Irish and English versions of new circulates issued to schools are published on the website.
- The majority of static information on the website is currently available in Irish and English.
- Lists of staff capable of providing services through Irish, and who indicated their willingness to do so, has been made available to the Switchboard Operators and Reception staff in the SEC. All staff in the organisation also have access to this list.
- The SEC identified members who wished to be actively involved in offering services through Irish.
- Staff proficient in Irish to deal with queries identified to ensure a quality service for customers who wish to conduct their business in Irish, equal to the standard of service provided through English.
- Reception/switchboard staff can give a basic greeting in Irish if required, and suitable arrangements are in place so that they can put members of the public in touch with whatever office or officer is responsible for offering the service required through Irish. This is achieved by maintaining lists of staff who are available to provide services through Irish for the Switchboard Operators and Reception staff in the SEC.
- The SEC facilitated staff to attend Irish language classes during office hours which were focused on customer service needs.
- A total of 14 staff attended the various levels of Irish Courses from Level 3 to Level 6, which were ran by An GaelChultur between 2017 and 2019. They received their Certificates of achievement in June 2019.

Chapter 3 - Overview of the State Examinations Commission

Chapter 3 provides an overview of:

- the background of the SEC (section 3.1);
- the role of the SEC (section 3.2)
- the mission of the SEC (section 3.3)
- the organisational structure of the SEC (section 3.4); and
- the SEC's customers and stakeholders and how it interfaces with them (section 3.5).

3.1 *The Background of the SEC*

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) is a statutory body under Section 54 of the Education Act, 1998 and was vested by the Minister for Education and Science, on 6th March 2003. The SEC assumed responsibility for the operation of the state certificate examinations from the Department of Education and Science from 2003 onward. Its functions are mandated under the *State Examinations Commission (Establishment) Order 2003* as follows:

- To organise the holding of examinations;
- To ensure the preparation of examination papers and other examination materials;
- To determine procedures in places where examinations are conducted including the supervision of examinations;
- To make arrangements for the marking of work presented for examination;
- To issue the results of examinations;
- To determine procedures to enable the review and appeal of results of examinations at the request of candidates;
- To charge and collect fees for examinations and apply such monies to the carrying out of its functions; and
- To designate places where examinations may be held.

3.2 *The Role of the SEC*

As set out above, the key business activity is the assessment and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state and of certain trade and professional examinations. The SEC is responsible for the operation of all aspects of these examinations including written, oral, aural and practical components and assessed course work in some subjects.

The SEC works in close co-operation with a number of education partners especially the Department of Education and Skills and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The SEC is committed to providing, in co-operation with all of the education partners, an examinations and assessment system that is efficient, fair

and accessible, and to ensuring that the system is operated in an environment of openness, transparency and accountability.

As a body under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills and reporting to the Minister for Education and Skills, the SEC recognises its obligation, under the 1998 Education Act, to provide educational support services through the medium of Irish to recognised schools which provide teaching through Irish and to any other recognised school by request.

3.3 *The Mission of the SEC*

'To provide a high-quality candidate-centred state examinations service.'

3.4 *Organisational Structure of the SEC*

The SEC is a non-departmental public body staffed by civil servants. The five non-executive commissioners have been appointed by the Government on the nomination of the Minister for Education and Skills and will serve for a period of three years. A permanent executive of 168 staff, led by a Chief Executive Officer, supports the Commission.

The SEC comprises three divisions; Operations and Information Technology; Examinations and Assessment; Finance, Corporate Affairs and HR. In addition to the headquarters location in Athlone, Co Westmeath the SEC has regional offices in Galway, Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Roscrea, Mullingar, Waterford and Bandon.

A brief description of each division follows:

3.4.1 *Operations & Information Technology Division*

The Operations Division is responsible for all of the administrative and logistical functions that go into running the examinations and is at the core of the day-to-day activities. The division processes applications for examinations and appeals, arranges for the printing and the packing of the examination papers, recruits examiners and superintendents, approves examination centres and assigns superintendents to these centres, distributes the examination papers and other stationery, distributes examination scripts to examiners, arranges marking conferences, arranges the viewing of scripts, co-ordinates the appeals process, issues the provisional results and examination certificates and has responsibility for the procurement of goods and services.

In addition to the central examinations systems, web-enabled interactive services have been developed which enable candidates to access their examination results, pay their appeal fees and allow external candidates to enter and pay for their examinations on-line. The delivery of the state examinations service is heavily dependent on its in-house designed ICT platform and services. The expertise of its IT

Unit ensures that the SEC remains at the forefront in international examination administrations, through the ongoing maintenance and upgrading of existing systems in line with new and evolving technologies.

3.4.2 Examinations and Assessment Division

The Examinations and Assessment Division is responsible for ensuring the quality and standards of all of the SEC's examinations. This involves taking all necessary actions to maintain the highest standards in each examination subject annually and ensuring compliance with the specified protocols and procedures. The division is also responsible for ensuring that full account is taken of all relevant legislation and guidelines in areas such as equality and special needs in the preparation of the examination papers, in the conduct of the examinations, the marking process and subsequently in the appeals process.

3.4.3 Finance, Corporate Affairs & Human Resources Division

The **Finance Section** sees that all of the operations of the SEC are carried out in the most efficient and cost-effective way possible and that value for money is obtained. The Finance Section is also responsible for all payments made by the SEC. These include fee payments to all contract personnel including drafters, setters, superintendents and examiners. The Finance Section deals with compliance in all matters relating to statutory deductions, e.g. taxation, and sees that all of the financial transactions of the SEC are conducted in accordance with the requirements of public sector financial procedures, subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The **Corporate Affairs** Section supports the business needs of the organisation by ensuring compliance with all central Government commitments and initiatives. The division also provides a number of other services including the Press and Information Office; development and administration of the SEC website; accommodation and services; development of corporate publications and also acts as a secretariat to the Commissioners.

Human Resources Section is responsible for meeting all personnel and human resource requirements, for co-ordinating recruitment and promotion, and planning staff training and development. It also ensures that the organisation promotes and complies with equality legislation and guidelines, and implements central Government HR policy, including family-friendly initiatives.

3.5 Customers and Stakeholders

The SEC has a wide range of customers and stakeholders including:

- Candidates, including former candidates, and their families;
- Schools, school authorities and education providers including principals, teachers, etc.;

- The Education partners including teacher unions, parents representatives and school management bodies;
- The Minister for Education and Skills and his Department;
- The Government, Public Representatives, other Government Departments, Offices and Agencies;
- Voluntary and representative bodies and organisations; and
- Individual members of the public.

A high level overview of how the SEC interfaces with its customers and its customer service priorities is set out in section 3.5.1 and 3.5.2 below.

3.5.1 Customer Service Interfaces

Most of the direct dealings that candidates, or their families, have with the examination system are with schools and other education providers and not with the SEC. Letters, application forms, information booklets and other documentation for the attention of candidates are generally provided through the entering school. It is not until the time of the examination that most candidates will encounter the SEC in the form of the examination superintendent. Some exceptions to this are external candidates who deal directly with the SEC, some candidates applying for reasonable accommodation and candidates making appeals to the two independent appeals boards in operation. As a result, the SEC's day-to-day customers are mainly the education service providers, i.e., principals, teachers, management of schools and staff of other organisations providing examinations.

The following service delivery and information channels are employed

1. Post;
2. E-mail;
3. Telephone;
4. On-line services;
5. Website information;
6. Circulars;
7. Via schools and education providers (school principals, school secretaries, examination aides and organising superintendents all act as agents for the SEC);
8. Face to face in the examination situation;
9. Documents arising from statutory or other obligations (e.g. Strategy Statements, Annual Reports, Customer Charter etc.);
10. Other Publications;
11. Press Releases; and
12. SEC staff attendance at conference, exhibitions and seminars.

3.5.2 Customer Service Priorities

The operation of the examinations and assessment system is a fundamental public service and the significance of the state examinations in the lives of candidates, and their families, cannot be underestimated. All of our stakeholders and customers

expect consistently high standards in the administration and delivery of examinations and assessments and in the way in which we conduct our business generally. The SEC is also actively engaged in ensuring that information in relation to its policies and services is provided promptly and in a variety of formats.

The SEC is committed to the achievement of an excellent service for the public through the implementation of the Quality Customer Service (QCS) initiative. The SEC's QCS programme has been developed in consultation with customers and in partnership with staff.

As an integral part of the national education system the SEC recognises that the main users of its services have an expectation of being able to avail of a service through Irish. There are a number of all-Irish schools, all-Irish units attached to English speaking schools and schools in the Gaeltacht whose needs in this regard are met by an Irish indicator on our database.

We are committed to improving the services provided in Irish and to developing a positive culture that encourages the use of Irish both within the SEC and with our customers. In our Customer Charter we undertake that customers who wish to conduct their business through Irish can do so. In addition the SEC answers correspondence in the language (Irish or English) used in the correspondence received.

Chapter 4 - Assessment of the extent to which services are already available through Irish

This Chapter sets out the 'as is' position within the SEC on:

- Its capacity to provide services through Irish;
- the provision of services in Irish through written documents, online and verbally; and
- the capacity of each section of the SEC to provide a bilingual service.

4.1 Capacity of SEC to provide services through Irish

In its Customer Charter the SEC has made the following commitments to providing services through Irish:

- operate measures to comply with our obligations under the Official Languages Act, 2003;
- continue to provide candidates with the choice of taking their examinations through Irish or English;
- publish key documents, including our Annual Report, in Irish and English.

Although there are no sections in the SEC that work exclusively in Irish, the SEC is committed to ensuring that documentation issued in Irish is of the highest quality. Since its establishment it has continually sought to make a number of significant improvements to its Irish translation and editing service. This includes in particular the recruitment of an Examinations and Assessment Manager with specific responsibility for managing and developing this service and for the provision of advice on the further development of the SEC's capacity for the delivery of services through Irish.

The organisation provides support, on an ongoing basis, to staff who wish to develop their Irish language skills, as part of a wider policy aimed at developing the SEC's internal capability to facilitate those customers who would prefer to conduct their business through Irish. This support has included facilitating attendance by officers at Irish language classes, at week-long immersion courses in the Gaeltacht and by the provision of in-house classes.

4.2 Documents, Online and Verbal Communication

4.2.1 Documents

The following documents are produced in both Irish and in English:

- Statements of Strategy;
- Annual Reports;
- Customer Charter;
- Customer Action Plan;

- Major policy documents. e.g. Preparation of Test Item – Principles and Protocols;
- Circulars and associated forms;
- Manual for Drafters, Setters and Assistant Setters;
- General and Day-to-Day Instructions to Superintendents;
- Various instructions to examiners including booklets and leaflets;
- Candidate Information Booklet;
- Policy consultation documents. e.g. surveys, requests for submissions, etc.
- Press advertisements;
- Marking Schemes for Leaving Certificate subjects*
- Marking Schemes for the following Junior Certificate subjects at higher level only*; History, Geography, French, Business Studies, Science, Mathematics and, at Ordinary Level, Mathematics. The marking scheme is also published in CSPE at common level.

The following documents are produced in English only

- SEC staff Newsletter;
- Internal policy documents;
- Press releases²;
- Marking schemes for Junior Certificate (except Irish and the ones listed above); Chief Examiners Reports (except Irish)

The following documents are produced in Irish only

- Marking schemes Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Irish; and
- Chief Examiner reports for Irish subjects in all examinations;

4.2.2 Examination Papers

At the certificate examinations all candidates have the option of answering in either Irish or English except in the case of the subjects Irish and English and questions in other language subjects where the use of the target language is specified. To this end all examination papers, except as specified, are available in Irish and in English. Candidates are supplied with Irish or English versions as indicated on their entry forms. Candidates who opt to answer through Irish have the right to also be furnished with the English version of the examination paper.

4.2.3 Online

The SEC's website is www.examinations.ie. There is both an English version and an Irish version of the site. The English version is the primary version. There has been an effort to provide as much information as is practicable in both Irish and English on the website. This includes the static information presented in the main body of the

² Although media and other information requests are dealt with in either Irish or English as determined by the requestor, press releases are issued in English only. In general the final text of a release or statement is only finalised and approved very close to issue. The SEC often has to issue statements quickly in response to unforeseen events. The capacity to respond to requests made in Irish does not exist in the Press Office and assistance is obtained from other areas of the SEC or externally sourced as necessary

website and downloads of documents and circulars. However, to date, attention has been focused on the English version of the website and some material presented in English is not available in Irish in either the static information or the downloadable documents. Nonetheless, over half of the material on the site is available in English and Irish.

The online services currently available on the website includes access to current year's examination results; online examination fee payment facility; online appeals payment facility, online external candidate entry facility and online statement of results. The information provided in relation to online services is generally presented bilingually on both the English and Irish versions of the website.

4.2.4 Recruitment of Contract Personnel

All recruitment forms and associated documentation for the positions of written examiner, oral examiner and practical examiner for the Leaving and Junior Certificate examinations are available in Irish and in English. All recruitment forms for the position of superintendent for all examinations are available in Irish and in English.

4.2.5 Assignment of Contract Personnel

On application, potential superintendents must indicate their ability and willingness to conduct their superintending duties in the Irish language. Appointments to schools in Gaeltacht areas, to schools that teach through the Irish language and to schools that have established all-Irish examination centres are made from among those superintendents who have indicated that they have the required level of proficiency in the language.

Examiners are recruited by reference to their subject expertise. Examiners in all subjects are asked at the application stage to indicate their competence and willingness to mark examinations in the Irish language. Assignment of examiners to mark the examinations of candidates who have chosen to complete their examinations in the Irish language is made from among those that the SEC considers have the required level of proficiency in the language.

4.2.6 Switch/Reception

The SEC does not have a full-time receptionist/switch board operator. In the period October to April annually, the duties are filled from a roster of permanent Clerical Officers. The rest of the year, a Temporary Clerical Officer is assigned to the post. To date, proficiency in the Irish language has not been among the selection criteria for the post. Recruitment of Temporary Clerical Officers was conducted by SEC in February 2019. The panel established will last for two years.

4.3 Capacity of Individual Section to Provide a Bi-Lingual Spoken Service

While the provision of written communications in Irish and English by the SEC is at a relatively high level, the development of Irish language skills by staff to facilitate day-to-day interpersonal service delivery is considered to be significantly more difficult.

Whilst all of sections in SEC conduct some element of their work through the medium of Irish in the main this is by providing forms, documents and other written information in Irish. The capacity to provide an immediate response in Irish does not exist in many of the sections of the SEC. A service through Irish is provided by referring queries to staff who have a good level of proficiency in Irish and who can act as a channel of communication between the Section and the individual. The staff with the required level of proficiency may not in all cases be in the section.

The information relating to capacity to provide a service in Irish was determined by a staff survey in 2019 which asked staff to self-assess their level of proficiency. Responses from the survey indicate that the level of competence to deal with administrative and technical issues through Irish is improving.

The language deficits identified will be addressed in the context of staff training and development.

Chapter 5 – Continuation of Existing commitments from First Scheme

The SEC is committed to encouraging the development of Irish language skills across all areas of the Commission to facilitate the progressive development of a quality one-to-one customer service in Irish to meet the demand for such services.

While the provision of written communications in Irish and English by the SEC is at a relatively high level the development of Irish language skills by staff to facilitate day-to-day interpersonal service delivery is considered to be significantly more difficult.

The SEC is in a position to provide a certain level of interpersonal Irish language services based on the current availability of Irish language skills. However, it will take considerable time and effort to increase the small number of staff with sufficient Irish language capability and confidence to delivery Irish language services on an interpersonal level.

Within the above context, this Chapter sets out the specific measures we will take within the life of this Scheme to enhance our services through Irish and to increase the visibility of Irish in our dealings with the public.

In this scheme, the SEC's main focus will be on building on the range of written and electronic means of communication available bilingually and on developing competency amongst its staff to facilitate interpersonal Irish language service delivery on a general level. We will do so within the resources available to us to deliver on the state examinations on behalf of the Minister for Education and Skills. In practice, this means that while the SEC will be in a position to provide much of our documentation in Irish, we may not always be in a position to conduct detailed services or programme specific business through Irish.

We will also seek opportunities for further enhancement in future Schemes.

5.1 Continuation of existing commitments

The following commitments and priorities have been identified with a view to achieving the objective of improving the SEC's Irish language capability and providing a sound basis for future developments.

5.1.1 Fully Bilingual Services

- The information and services currently offered in both languages, as described in Chapter 4, will continue to be offered. These include application forms, examination papers, corporate publications, recruitment information, instructions to contract personnel and instructions to candidates.
- All advertisements in the national press will be in both Irish and English.
- Lists of staff who are capable of providing services through Irish, and who have indicated their willingness to do so, will be made available to the Switchboard Operators and Receptions staff in the SEC. All staff in the organisation will also have access to this list.
- The SEC have and will continue to review its staff in order to identify those members who wish to be actively involved in offering services through Irish.
- Subject to other constraints governing staff placement, the SEC will ensure that at least one staff member in each Division has proficiency in Irish. Where this is not possible, due to a shortage of such staff, formal arrangements will be put in place to ensure that other staff who are proficient in Irish can deal with queries. These arrangements will be reviewed in light of evolving demand. The aim, over this and subsequent schemes, will be to develop a quality service for customers who wish to conduct their business in Irish, equal to the standard of service provided through English.

5.1.2 Website and Online Services

- Circulars will continue to be issued to schools in English and in Irish, and published on the website. The Circulars directory will be audited to ensure that the English and Irish versions of applicable circulars have been published on the website.
- The Irish language domain name will be registered and implemented in light of the re-development of the SEC website.
- All information held on the SEC website will be reviewed in light with the planned re-development. The majority of static information on the website is currently available in Irish and English and the SEC will maintain this coverage at 65%.
- The SEC will ensure that all of its existing on-line interactive services are fully bilingual over the lifetime of this scheme and that any new on-line interactive services are fully bilingual. A bi-lingual on-line Examinations Fee Payment portal was developed and implemented in 2018 which gives access to over 120,000 candidates annually.

5.1.3 *Switch/Reception*

Arrangements are in place so that:

- Reception/switchboard staff may give a basic greeting in Irish, and
- Suitable arrangements are in place so that they can put members of the public in touch with whatever office or officer is responsible for offering the service required through Irish.

This is achieved by maintaining lists of staff who are available to provide services through Irish for the Switchboard Operators and Reception staff in the SEC.

5.1.4 *Training and Development of Staff*

Based on the results of ongoing staff reviews, the SEC will address any training needs identified, within the context of our Training and Development strategy and available resources. The following actions are proposed in order to ensure that both the level and standard of services to the public are improved during the duration of the scheme:

- Staff will be encouraged to participate in Irish language training;
- Irish language classes continue to be arranged by the Training Unit which will be focused on customer service needs;
- The SEC will continue to facilitate staff attending Irish language classes during office hours;
- Advice will be given to staff in relation to the range of high quality Irish Language classes and activities available outside office hours;
- All staff will continue to be provided with a set of best practice guidelines explaining the implications of the Official Languages Act, and setting out ways to enhance the Irish language service;
- All staff will continue to have easy access to information and language resources e.g. guidelines, policies, dictionaries etc.

The SEC will include language awareness as part of both the induction training for new staff and customer service training so as to ensure that staff understand:

- Why a bilingual policy is being implemented;
- The context and background to the policy;
- How the policy will affect their work.

5.1.5 *Press Office*

The vast majority of press releases are currently issued in English only. The SEC has at times, to issue press releases quickly in response to unforeseen events and there would be a delay involved in issuing simultaneous bi-lingual statements. However, other than in those occasions, the SEC undertakes to provide 20% of its press releases in both Irish and English, to be issued simultaneously. In determining which press releases should be included in this, priority will be given to those relating to the Irish language and those announcing new schemes or policy changes. Staff in the press office will be provided with Irish language training to build their capacity (see section 5.1.4).

5.2 New commitments

- 5.2.1 The new Data Protection Area on the SEC website to be fully bi-lingual by the end of the first year of this scheme.
- 5.2.2 As part of the planned re-development of the SEC web-site, all documentation will be reviewed in all sections and translated as required before the end of the current scheme.
- 5.2.3 Static Information on all new on-line services currently being implemented i.e. On-line Fee Payment Portal and Candidate Self-Registration Portal will be fully bi-lingual by the end of the scheme

Chapter 6 – Monitoring and Revision

The Senior Management Group within the SEC will keep the effective operation of the Scheme under review, while ongoing monitoring of service provision and of the level of demand for services through Irish will also be assessed on an annual basis

As part of their overall responsibilities, line managers in sections will monitor the day-to-day implementation of the Scheme within their own areas.

Future customer surveys will continue to include questions in relation to satisfaction with the provision of services in Irish and the demand for these services.

An update on progress on the implementation of this Scheme and its effectiveness will be published annually.

Chapter 7 – Publication of this Scheme

The contents of this Scheme, together with its commitments and provisions, will be publicised to the general public by means of circulation to appropriate agencies and public bodies.

A copy of this scheme, when agreed, will be forwarded to Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga.