

**Department of Foreign Affairs**

**Scheme under Section 11 of the Official  
Languages Act 2003**

**November 2006**

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## **1. Introduction and Background**

This Scheme was prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs under Section 11 of the Official Languages Act 2003. Under this Section, public bodies are required to prepare 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 through the medium of the Irish language will be so provided within an agreed timeframe.

### **1.1 Preparation of the Language Scheme**

This Scheme has been prepared in accordance with Guidelines issued by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs under Section 12 of the Official Languages Act 2003.

The Department of Foreign Affairs published a notice under Section 13 of the Act on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2006, inviting representations in relation to the preparation of the draft scheme from any interested parties. Five submissions were received, from a range of Irish language organisations and educational institutions. These submissions are available on the Department's website ([www.dfa.ie](http://www.dfa.ie)) and were taken into account in drawing up the scheme.

The Department's staff also contributed to the development of the Scheme. It was prepared in consultation with the Department's Partnership Committee and with the active participation of the members of the Irish language partnership sub-committee, *An Fochoiste Gaeilge*

### **1.2 Content of the Scheme**

This Scheme builds on the principles of Quality Customer Service (QCS) and on the commitments in the Department's Customer Charter to "make every effort to accommodate customers who wish to conduct their business with the Department through Irish". It sets out the extent to which services are currently available through Irish and

identifies areas for future enhancement. It also includes a commitment to assess, on an ongoing basis, the level of demand for services through Irish and to ensure that the Department continues to strive to meet this demand in a coherent and effective manner.

### **1.3 Commencement Date of the Scheme**

The Scheme has been confirmed by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. It commences with effect from 1 December 2006 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 earlier.

## 2. Overview of the Department of Foreign Affairs

### 2.1 Mission and Mandate

The Mission of the Department of Foreign Affairs is to advance Ireland's political and economic interests in the European Union and in the wider world, to promote Ireland's contribution to international peace, security and development both through the European Union and through active participation in international organisations, in particular the United Nations, to protect our citizens abroad and to pursue reconciliation and partnership on the island of Ireland.

The Department advises the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Ministers of State and the Government on all aspects of foreign policy and coordinates Ireland's response to international developments. It also provides advice and support on all issues relevant to the pursuit of peace, partnership and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and between North and South of the island, and to deepening Ireland's relationship with Britain. One of the Department's high level goals is *to protect and support the interests of Irish citizens abroad, maintain and strengthen links with people of Irish ancestry, and provide a modern and efficient passport and consular service*

### 2.2 Structure of the Department

The Department currently comprises twelve units at headquarters (HQ) and a total of 73 career diplomatic and consular offices abroad (referred to as 'Missions'), as well as the British-Irish Intergovernmental Secretariat in Belfast and the North-South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat in Armagh. In addition, 24 Honorary Consuls General and 62 Honorary Consuls provide assistance to Irish citizens in 59 countries. See our website [www.dfa.ie](http://www.dfa.ie) for further details.

The main functional areas of the Department are:

- ***Anglo-Irish Division*** deals with British-Irish relations and Northern Ireland
- ***Bilateral Economic Relations Division*** coordinates the promotion of Ireland's economic interests abroad
- ***Consular and Passport Division*** is responsible for providing consular assistance to Irish citizens abroad and for passport and visa services

- **Cultural Division** has responsibility for cultural relations with other countries.
- **Development Cooperation Directorate** is responsible for the administration of the Irish overseas development programme *Irish Aid* and for the conduct of Irish development policy
- **European Union Division** coordinates Ireland's approach within the EU
- **Legal Division** provides legal information and advice, particularly on matters of public international law, human rights law and EU law
- **Political Division** is responsible for international political issues, including at the United Nations, and manages Ireland's participation in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy
- **Protocol Division** is responsible for the organisation of State and official visits to and from Ireland, and for liaison with Embassies accredited to Ireland

The Department's support services include the following:

- **Corporate Services Division** is responsible for the day-to-day management of the Department. It incorporates human resources, change management, training, accommodation, management services, finance, information and communications technology, library and archive.
- **Inspection and Internal Audit Unit** evaluates the performance of Ireland's overseas missions and the adequacy, application and effectiveness of the Department's internal control systems
- **Press Section** is responsible for informing the domestic and international media about developments in Irish foreign policy, and
- **The Offices of the Minister, Ministers of State and the Secretary General**

### 2.3 Customers and Stakeholders

The Department has a wide range of stakeholders including:

- The Government, public representatives, other Government Departments, Offices and Agencies
- The institutions and parties in Northern Ireland, the Embassies and Consulates of other countries, international institutions such as the EU and UN and international organisations.
- Voluntary and representative bodies and organisations
- Individual members of the public

The Department also provides a range of Passport, Consular and other services to the public at its offices in Ireland and through its network of Embassies and Consulates abroad.

The Department does not have an office located in a Gaeltacht area.

## **2.4 Customer Service Priorities**

The Department attaches the utmost importance to the quality of the services it provides to the general public, in particular its passport and consular services. It also places a high priority on highlighting the work of the Development Cooperation Directorate in administering Ireland's overseas development assistance programme, having regard to the proposed decentralisation of DCD to Limerick, which is scheduled to take place in the first half of 2007. The Department is also actively engaged in ensuring that information in relation to its policies and services is provided promptly and in plain language.

### **2.4.1 Consular and Passport Services**

From the general public's point of view the most familiar aspect of the Department's work is performed by the Consular and Passport Division. The Passport Offices and our Embassies and Consulates issue passports to Irish Citizens at home and abroad. The Passport Office has public offices in Cork and Dublin and a new state of the art production facility in Balbriggan. The Consular Section and the Missions abroad provide a range of services to Irish citizens visiting or resident in other countries. Consular Section also deals with citizenship applications from abroad, issues civil letters of freedom in connection with marriages of Irish citizens abroad and authenticates

signatures on public documents for use in other countries. Missions also process applications for visas from foreign nationals wishing to visit Ireland.

#### **2.4.2 Development Cooperation**

The Department's Development Cooperation Directorate (DCD) is responsible for administering the Government's Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme *Irish Aid*. In response to the expanding ODA programme and growing public interest in the area of development, the Department launched a dedicated website that provides detailed information on the programme. The site can be accessed directly at [www.irishaid.gov.ie](http://www.irishaid.gov.ie). There is also a link on the Department's website to the Development Cooperation website.

#### **2.4.3 Dissemination of Information**

The Department strives to provide an efficient and effective information service to customers who call in person to our public offices or visit our websites, and to those who seek information by post, telephone or e-mail. The demand for our services continues to rise significantly each year and we aim to ensure that we maintain and, where possible, improve our services to meet the growing demand.



### **3 Summary of services currently available through Irish**

#### **3.1 General Overview**

The Department takes a proactive and positive approach to the provision of its services through Irish to the citizen. It is fully committed to using the opportunity presented by the drawing up of this Scheme to further enhance this approach.

It was already the Department's policy, prior to the coming into effect of the Official Languages Act 2003, to publish most classes of documentation intended for public dissemination in both Irish and English. The Department provides support, on an ongoing basis, to officers who wish to develop their Irish language skills, as part of a wider policy aimed at developing the Department's internal capability to facilitate those customers who would prefer to conduct their business with the Department through Irish. This support includes facilitating attendance by officers at Irish language classes, at week-long immersion courses in the Gaeltacht and by the provision of in-house classes.

The primary objective of the Official Languages Act is to ensure better availability and a higher standard of service to the public in Irish. In its Customer Charter the Department has undertaken to make every effort to facilitate customers who wish to conduct their business through Irish. The Customer Charter also includes commitments to:

- respond in Irish to all correspondence received in Irish
- publish simultaneously, in Irish and English, key documents such as our Strategy Statements and Annual Reports
- provide as much other material as possible in both languages on our website, and
- ensure that application forms are available in Irish and English

The Department is meeting its commitments under the Charter but it recognises that further work is needed in some areas, including in the provision of passport and consular services and in regard to the amount of information that is available in Irish on our website. To this end, it is engaged in a major revamping of both its own and the Irish Aid website which will result in the provision of web-based information in both official languages as well as some foreign languages. It is expected that this project will be completed by the end of 2006 and all material will be made available on the website in both official languages from then on.

The Department is also committed during the lifetime of this Scheme to improving the services it provides in Irish and to developing a positive culture that encourages the use of Irish both within the Department and with our customers.

### **3.1.1 Cultural Promotion Activities Overseas**

The Department's missions overseas play the lead role in the promotion of Irish culture, including the Irish language, in foreign countries. Significant Irish language projects have been facilitated and/or are ongoing in Germany, Great Britain, the US and academic and cultural institutions in other countries across the globe. In this, the Department works closely with complementary activities sponsored by Culture Ireland and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

### **3.1.2 Irish in the European Union**

Following the decision of the Council in June 2005 to accord Irish official and working language status from 1 January 2007, the relevant European Union Institutions, including the European Personnel Recruitment Office, have been endeavouring to ensure that the necessary recruitment and other practical measures arising from this policy are in place to ensure the new status of Irish comes into effect smoothly by the commencement date. The Department in Dublin has been working with the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to ensure proper support for the policy in Ireland.

## **3.2 Means of Communication with the Public / Information to the Public**

The Department's principal means of communication with the general public are:

- Personal contact with the general public at our Public offices and at public meetings, seminars and conferences
- Documents arising from statutory or other obligations, such as Strategy Statements and Annual Reports
- Brochures and information leaflets
- Press Releases
- Publications
- Application forms
- Websites

At present documents, brochures, promotional material, and information leaflets that are published in English and Irish, or in English only, include:

### *English and Irish*

- Strategy Statements
- Annual Reports
- Customer Charter
- Customer Service Action Plan
- Major Policy Documents
- Application forms for Passport and Consular Services
- Section 15 and 16 Reference Book (under the Freedom of Information Acts)
- Promotional video An introduction to the Department of Foreign Affairs

### *English only*

- Reports, with limited circulation and aimed at specialist groups, which do not contain policy proposals
- Action Plans and Performance Verification Progress Reports under Sustaining Progress
- Documents setting out the Department's approach to various aspects of its Development Assistance Programmes (Irish Aid)

The Department's main website is [www.dfa.ie](http://www.dfa.ie). The Development Cooperation website is [www.irishaid.gov.ie](http://www.irishaid.gov.ie). The Department's policy has been to ensure that as much text as possible is available in both Irish and English on these sites.

Many of our Missions abroad also have websites. Information on these sites is available in English and in the language of the host country in non-English speaking countries, although a number of these also contain at least some information in Irish also. The Department is currently engaged in a project to improve its website infrastructure. The project includes improving the links between local Mission websites and the main Departmental site. This will facilitate access from the Mission websites to the Irish content on the Department's main website.

Speeches or statements, including those made in the Oireachtas, by the Minister or Ministers of State, or speeches by senior officials, are and will continue to be made available in the language(s) in which they are delivered. A limited number of press releases and information for the media have been made available in both Irish and English.

## **4. Enhancement of the Services to be provided bilingually**

### **4.1 Human Resource Aspects / Measures to strengthen knowledge of and competency in Irish in the Department**

The Department recognises that it faces a significant challenge in up-skilling sufficient staff numbers to ensure that it is in a position to provide all its services to an equally high standard in both languages. It is determined, nonetheless, to tackle and overcome this challenge and is fully committed to building on the existing levels of Irish language knowledge and competency among its staff. The Department is also developing a comprehensive strategy aimed at progressively increasing the range and quality of its Irish language services.

A number of initiatives have already been undertaken in this regard. For example, periodic surveys of staff competence levels in Irish have shown that there are a number of staff members capable and willing to provide services to the public in Irish. On a practical service delivery level, the Department's internal directory identifies such officers in order to facilitate the Department's switchboard operators and reception. This approach can and will be augmented and improved upon as other elements of the strategy begin to impact.

#### **4.1.1 Recruitment**

The recruitment of an Irish language officer is a key element in the Department's strategy to develop an effective service to customers in both official languages. The role of the Irish Language officer will include (but will not be limited to) the following:

- provide general assistance and support to Departmental officers who wish to develop their Irish language skills
- provide or arrange for the delivery of Irish language classes for Departmental staff
- organise events throughout the year to promote and encourage the use of Irish in a relaxed and informal way
- coordinate the provision of Irish translation services for the Department and, in urgent and exceptional cases, undertake translation of Departmental documents.

It is hoped to recruit an officer to undertake these duties before the end of 2006.

Staff recruitment and promotion policies in the Civil Service are governed by statutory provisions and agreements negotiated centrally between the staff and official sides through the relevant industrial relations machinery. The Department, in seeking to address and implement the provisions of the Act, will have full regard to any agreements that may be developed and agreed in respect of these policy areas during the lifetime of this Scheme.

#### **4.1.2 Training and Development**

The Department's Training and Development Strategy includes a commitment to provide the necessary training to support the implementation of the provisions contained in the Official Languages Act. The Department currently facilitates officers who are interested in developing their Irish language skills by offering support for a range of training options, including Irish Language training courses provided by Gaeleagras and Conradh na Gaeilge and the Gaeleagras Gaeltacht scholarship scheme. Since 2002, a total of 51 officers have attended Irish language classes and 22 officers have availed of the scholarship scheme. Officers wishing to undertake third level courses in Irish are facilitated under the Refund of Fees Scheme and two officers have been facilitated under this Scheme in recent years. The Department is also arranging for the provision of in-house Irish language conversation classes.

The Department will prepare, in consultation with Gaeleagras na Seirbhíse Poiblí, and for distribution to all staff a short phrase book of terms and expressions that will be of particular relevance and use to officers providing service to the public in Irish.

The Department has also purchased a range of Irish language training packs, covering all proficiency levels from beginners to advanced, as well as a selection of novels. Details of these training aids are made available to staff on request. There has been a strong demand from staff for these products. Additional training aids will continue to be purchased as required.

The Department will maintain, and where appropriate increase, its purchase for distribution to interested staff members Irish language newspapers (Lá and Foinse) as well as other publications to assist staff acquire and maintain an up to date vocabulary in Irish.

It is intended also to establish a dedicated section on the Department's intranet to facilitate the development of Irish language skills among the Department's staff. The site will include a glossary of frequently used terms and phrases, details of training courses available and links to other useful Irish language sites

#### **4.1.3 Role of the Partnership Committee**

The Department has established *An Fochoiste Gaeilge*, a sub-committee of the Department's main Partnership Committee, to advise on the preparation and implementation of this Scheme. Amongst its other responsibilities, an Fochoiste has arranged informal social and cultural activities such as music sessions and poetry readings to encourage the wider use of the spoken language amongst the staff. It is intended that such informal use will create both a greater appreciation of the need for improved competence in Irish and greater confidence in speaking the languages in those who are tasked with the provision of Irish languages to the public.

An Fochoiste Gaeilge will continue to monitor and act as a resource to the Department in its implementation of this strategy. Membership of An Fochoiste will be from the broadest base of Divisions, Sections, grades and offices of the Department. It will work with the Irish language officer, when appointed, with a view to facilitating the effective implementation of the commitments set out in this Scheme

## **4.2 Departmental Priorities**

As previously indicated, the Department will seek to increase the range and quality of services provided through Irish over the period covered by this Scheme. The following services have been identified as being of particular importance and will be accorded priority over the period in question.

### **4.2.1 Passport and Consular Services**

The Department currently provides a limited service in Irish to our Passport and Consular customers, both at our public offices in Dublin and Cork and over the telephone. At present, it is generally possible to facilitate personal callers to these offices and telephone callers who wish to conduct their business in Irish. The level of service can be constrained on occasion, however, by the relatively small number of officers in these areas with good Irish language skills. The Department, therefore, will seek to increase the number of officers in these areas who are capable of delivering services through Irish

to our customers, in order to ensure that an effective bilingual Passport and Consular service will be provided by the end of the period covered by this scheme.

Arrangements are currently being made to provide in-house Irish language classes for officers in the Passport Office, initially at our Balbriggan offices. The proposed appointment of an Irish language officer for the Department will facilitate the extension of this service to other offices in due course. Full information regarding our Passport and Consular Services will also be provided in both English and Irish on the Department's website. It is intended also that recorded information on passport services, which is currently available in English only, will also be provided in Irish.

From the commencement of the scheme the Department will ensure the availability of passport application forms and associated information leaflets in Irish across the range of outlets where these are made available, most particularly in Garda Stations and other public offices in Gaeltacht areas. Arrangements will also be made to ensure the availability in Irish and English of application forms for consular and other services provided by the Department, as well as information and brochures relating to those services, by the middle of 2007.

#### **4.2.2 Challenge of Service in Irish Overseas**

This Department faces a unique and particular challenge with regard to the provision of services in both official languages to our citizens and others who come into contact with our offices and missions in overseas locations. In many of our missions virtually all of the locally recruited staff have had no experience of the Irish education system and otherwise have never had an opportunity to learn Irish. They are recruited to provide services in the language of the host country with English being the "lingua franca" in virtually all other cases.

Notwithstanding this challenge the Department, within the limits of its human resources and staff competence, will put systems in place in those missions where we are aware of, or can otherwise identify, a need and demand for the provision of Irish language services. Our primary strategy for the delivery of services in Irish will be through the provision of access to such services through web-based contact from the local mission website directly with the Department's website. It will be part of our strategy going forward to expand and maintain our face-to-face services in Irish where human resources and staff linguistic competence so permit. The Department will prioritise this strategy in foreign locations

with the highest concentrations of our citizens, particularly those such as the UK and US where significant numbers of Irish speakers reside.

#### **4.2.3 Information and Communications Technology**

The Department's IT Section is currently reviewing how appropriate elements of the Department's IT system can best be customised to facilitate a comprehensive Irish language IT facility for the use of those staff members who would wish to avail of such a facility. This includes providing an Irish language spelling and grammar check and Irish language versions of operational IT systems where available and required. It is expected that this review will be completed, and the new facilities provided, by early 2007.

As part of a scheduled upgrading and maintenance of the Department's computerised systems, it is intended to provide by early 2007 a disclaimer in both Irish and English as a footnote on e-mails issued by the Department and any new computer systems being installed will be fully capable of handling the Irish language.

#### **4.2.4 Website Development**

As previously indicated, the Department is currently engaged in a project to improve its website infrastructure. The project includes the provision of a comprehensive Irish version of both the Departmental and the Irish Aid websites. As indicated at 3.1 above, it is expected that this project will be completed by the end of 2006 and all material will be made available on the website in both official languages from then on. The links between the Departmental and mission websites will also be improved as part of this project, thereby providing improved access to the Irish language content on the main website.

Interactive Services: It is intended during the course of 2006 to provide applicants with the facility to track the progress of their passport application over the internet. This facility, and any other new interactive services being introduced, will be available in both official languages.

#### **4.2.5 Reception / Switchboard Operator / Oral announcements**

Receptionists / switchboard operators are the first points of contact with the public. The policy of this Department is that the current standard QCS practice is implemented:

- Reception / switchboard staff are able to give the name of the Department in Irish and English,



- They are at least familiar with the basic greetings in Irish, and
- Suitable arrangements are in place so that they can put members of the public in touch without delay with whatever office or officer is responsible for offering the service required through Irish.

It is the policy of the Department to work towards ensuring that all pre-recorded oral announcements to our customers shall be in the Irish language, or in the English and Irish languages. This objective will be achieved by the end of the current scheme

Our current computerised telephone handling system operates in the English language only. However, it is intended to offer this service in both official languages. This objective will be achieved by the end of the current scheme. Individual staff members, of course, are free to leave messages in the language of their choice.

#### **4.2.6 Press Office**

While the Department is moving towards a policy of issuing appropriate press releases in both languages, only a limited number of press releases and information for the media has been made available to date. The Press Office will by the end of this scheme:

- make available at least 20% of press releases in both Irish and English
  - ensure that all major policy documents are available in both languages on the website (as indicated at 3.2 above)
  - Log all letters, phone calls, and other enquiries / requests for information that are received in order to monitor the level of demand for services in Irish. The Department will continue its existing Department policy that such correspondence will be responded to promptly in Irish, in compliance with Section 9(1) of the Official Languages Act.
  - Press Office staff will be offered training and actively encouraged to improve their competency in oral and, where required, written Irish with a view to responding to demands from Irish language media for information.
- Our Press Office will continue to actively support the Irish language media in efforts to overcome the particular difficulty they face in identifying commentators abroad with an ability in Irish for interview purposes.

## **5. Monitoring and Revision**

Ongoing monitoring of service provision, and of the level of demand for services through Irish, will be carried out primarily by line managers, who are responsible for the implementation of the Scheme within their division, section or mission.

The Department will keep the effective operation of the Scheme under review, mainly through the Department's Partnership Committee and in particular its Irish Language sub-committee (*An Fochoiste Ghaeilge*). A report on the implementation of the Scheme will be prepared by the Irish Language Officer and submitted, through Partnership, to the Department's Management Advisory Committee (MAC) on an annual basis.

The Department will also consult with interested parties, including those who submitted observations in the context of this Scheme, when reviewing its implementation.

## 6. Publicising the Scheme

The contents of this Scheme will be publicised to the general public by:

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- Publication on the Department's Website
- Press Release
- Official Launch of the Scheme
- Circulation to appropriate agencies and public bodies, including those who made submissions to the Department

In addition, the Department will publicise the availability of any new Irish language services that may be developed during the lifetime of the Scheme.

A copy of the Scheme will also be forwarded to Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga .

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