

Statement by An Coimisinéir Teanga on the Publication of the Official Languages Bill

Publication of Bill an important step. More action needed on Gaeltacht & Recruitment.

The publication of the Official Languages (Amendment) Bill is an important step in the process of bringing forth a stronger and more fit-for-purpose language Act. The opportunity to examine the proposed amendments is to be welcomed, but the deficiencies in the Bill are a matter of concern.

I have continually emphasized three key reforms that I see as being necessary to strengthen the Act. These amendments relate to the provision of State services in the Gaeltacht, changes in State recruitment policies, and the establishment of a system of language standards placing a clearer obligation on public bodies to serve the public in the country's first official language.

Reference is made in the new Bill to these matters and to a number of other important provisions, but the Bill, as it currently stands, does not adequately address some of the most important issues relating to the provision of public services through Irish and protecting the language rights of the community.

The Gaeltacht

The fragile state of Irish in Gaeltacht areas is evident in the census results and in various pieces of research over the past number of years. It is therefore vital that the provision of public services through Irish in the Gaeltacht is placed on a statutory footing and that the language rights of the Gaeltacht community should be underpinned by the legislation. Unfortunately, at this stage, the Bill contains no firm provisions placing a duty upon the State to ensure that the Gaeltacht community is served in their native language.

Recruitment

I support the recommendation that a national statutory plan for the provision of public services through Irish be prepared and I agree that new recruitment policies and practices should be an integral part of this plan. However, I am concerned that external experts and the public are not adequately represented on the Advisory Committee to be established under the amended Act to prepare the implementation plan. I am also concerned that there is no stated deadline for the publication of the plan and that there is no statutory obligation to implement any agreed plan.

System of Standards

One of the main provisions of the Bill is the proposal to replace the language schemes system with a system of language standards. This is a worthwhile proposal, but it is difficult to judge the possible impact of this change without sight of the draft standards. I believe that the timely production of these draft standards would greatly benefit the process of assessing the Bill.

In the coming weeks we will have an opportunity to dissect the proposed amendments to the Official Languages Act and indeed other important matters not mentioned in this Bill. The weaknesses in the existing legislation have long been highlighted and should be addressed at this juncture. To not do so would be a missed opportunity.

In the course of this debate it is important that the needs of the language community and their rights continue to be addressed, taking into account the status of Irish as the national and first official language of the country.

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Further Information

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