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A commentary on the practical application and operation of provisions of the Official Languages Act 2003 has been published by the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga in anticipation of a review of that legislation to be undertaken as part of the programme for Government. The Act's provisions came into effect fully five years ago.

An Coimisinéir Teanga, Seán Ó Cuirreáin, said he hoped that the outcome of the review will be an Act fit for purpose which serves the wishes of the Irish language community in an appropriate manner and ensures that meaning is given to the constitutional provision that Irish is the first official language as it is the national language.

Seán Ó Cuirreáin was speaking at the launch of his commentary report in An Spidéal, Co. Galway today (July 5th 2011).

Amendments to the legislation suggested by An Coimisinéir Teanga's Office include the recommendation that public bodies be classified into different categories (A, B, C, etc.) in accordance with their range of functions and their level of interaction with the public in general, including the Irish language and Gaeltacht communities, and that the level of service through Irish to be provided by public bodies should depend on that classification.

It also recommends that public bodies be obliged by statute to provide their services through Irish in Gaeltacht regions and that such services should be of a standard equal to those provided elsewhere through English.

A renewed effort to ensure the proper implementation of the Act's language schemes system on a strategic and consistent basis is also recommended or, as a possible alternative, that a new "standards" system based on statutory regulations be developed, as is planned for the Welsh language in Wales.

With regard to official publications provided through the Irish language, An Coimisinéir Teanga's Office recommends that priority be given to those publications for which there is the greatest demand from the public, the Irish speaking and Gaeltacht communities included.

The report also calls for the lack of staff in the public sector competent in the two official languages of the State to be addressed whenever the current recruitment embargo is relaxed. An Coimisinéir Teanga describes this problem as the "the most fundamental difficulty with the provision of state services through Irish".

The report also suggests that statutory provision be made to ensure that members of the public have the right to use their names and addresses in their choice of official language when dealing with public bodies.

“No additional spending should result from these recommendations and if expenditure is not reduced then, at the very least, the amendments should be cost neutral” said Mr Ó Cuirreáin.

An Coimisinéir Teanga also announced that he had in recent days placed two special reports before the Houses of the Oireachtas detailing cases where public bodies had been found in breach of statutory language provisions but had failed to implement recommendations to ensure compliance. The organisations involved, the Health Service Executive and the National Museum of Ireland, had not opted to appeal to the High Court the findings that they were in breach of legislation but had nevertheless not implemented his recommendations. “It falls to the Houses of the Oireachtas now to take whatever additional measures they deem appropriate” said Mr. Ó Cuirreáin.

(ENDS)

Further information: Damhnait Uí Mhaoldúin on (091) 504 006 or 0872197946 or at eolas@coimisineir.ie