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Subject: Annual Report 2010

More than a quarter of Government departments and agencies consistently failed to provide even the most basic level of service through Irish to customers who contacted them by telephone, while the level of service provided by a further 29% was deemed to be inadequate to meet their statutory obligations, according to the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga. Details of an audit carried out by that Office are contained in its Annual Report for 2010 published in Galway today/yesterday.

“This level of failure is all the more significant as the audit covered only those public bodies which had statutory language plans in place for more than 4 years” said An Coimisinéir Teanga, Seán Ó Cuirreáin.

During the year, 700 complaints were made to An Coimisinéir Teanga about difficulties or problems accessing state services through Irish – more complaints than were made in any year since the Office was first established. The vast majority of cases were resolved through informal negotiations with the relevant public body or by providing advice to the complainant.

The majority of the complaints came from Dublin (41%) with significant numbers also came from counties along the western seaboard: Clare (9.5%), Galway (9%), Kerry (6%), Donegal (4%), Cork (4%) and Mayo (3%). Nearly one in five complaints came from Gaeltacht areas.

Investigations

A total of 11 formal investigations were commenced during 2010. In addition, one investigation was ongoing from the end of the previous year. These investigations were initiated only when it appeared that a statutory obligation had been breached and when informal efforts to resolve the issues were not successful.

Public bodies found to have failed to comply with specific provisions of language legislation during the year included the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Dublin City Council, Clare County Council, Kildare VEC, Iarnród Éireann and the Private Residential Tenants Board.

An Coimisinéir Teanga found the Department of Education and Skills to have contravened a provision of the Education Act 1998 by providing a range of educational websites in English irrespective of the requirements of gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools.

While an investigation found that Dublin City Council was in breach of regulations in regard to use of official languages in public signage in its new wayfinder signs, An Coimisinéir Teanga did not recommend the replacement of the signage because of the additional costs involved. Instead, he recommended that the non-compliance be noted and that all further signage put in place by the council would be in compliance with the statutory requirements.

Alarming

He described as “alarming” the revelations during the past year that only 1.5% of the administrative staff of the Department of Education and Skills could provide service in Irish. This represented a decrease of 50% in the past five years. Acknowledging this to be a common problem throughout the civil and public sector, he said it showed more clearly than anything else the gap between the ability to provide services through English and the ability to provide services through Irish.

Myth

The suggestion that translating official documents to Irish costs a fortune while their production in English is virtually free has been challenged by An Coimisinéir Teanga, Seán Ó Cuirreáin, who described it as a “myth”.

Mr Ó Cuirreáin said very few official documents were required by law to be provided bilingually and the legislation allowed for their publication electronically rather than in print form as long as both official languages were treated equally.

His report reveals that the full cost of translating Clare County Council’s draft development plan for the six year period between 2011 and 2017 was €10,112 – less than one third of the amount suggested in a media report.

However, an investigation by his Office revealed the true cost of preparing the document in one language – English – was estimated by the Council itself at over €350,000, over one third of a million euro.

“This equates to 97.3% of the budget for the English version and 2.7% for the Irish version,” he said.

He referred to media reports had indicated little or no demand previously for a similar document in Irish as judged by reference to sales at €50 per copy. “The media was either unaware or omitted to include the fact that the Council had quite properly provided these documents as free of charge downloads from its website. Demand for hard copies in English was also very low as most people quite sensibly opted to download the documents for free in their choice of official language. While neither version will ever achieve bestseller status, “compulsory English” in public information matters clearly isn’t the answer either,” he said.

Mr Ó Cuirreáin said that the requirement for public bodies to publish a small number of core documents simultaneously in Irish and in English was enacted by the Houses of the Oireachtas in the Official Languages Act. The only function of the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga in this regard is to act as a compliance agency and an ombudsman service.

Concern

An Coimisinéir Teanga has again expressed concern at the delay in confirming “language schemes” with public bodies under the Official Languages Act and said that 51 of 105 confirmed schemes had lapsed by the end of the year without their replacement by new schemes. Of the 51 schemes, 12 had expired more than two years ago.

In addition, there were 26 other public bodies whose first draft schemes had been requested by the Minister for Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs but remained to be agreed and confirmed. In the case of 10 of those public bodies, more than 4 years had passed since they were requested to prepare the draft schemes.

An Coimisinéir Teanga has warned in his report that it cannot be presumed that his Office will be able to fulfil all of its statutory functions due to staff restrictions which has left it with five staff members despite having eight sanctioned as a minimum.

(ENDS)

The Annual Report is published primarily in electronic format and is available at www.coimisineir.ie. Comprehensive summaries of all investigations are provided in the Annual Report.

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