

**Department of Social Protection**

**Official Languages Act**

**2003**

**Language Scheme**

**2015 to 2018**



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## **Chapter 1 Background**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This Language Scheme has been prepared by the Department of Social Protection ('the Department') as required under the Official Languages Act 2003 ('the Act').

The Act provides for the preparation by public bodies of a statutory scheme detailing the services they will provide:

- a) through the medium of Irish;
- b) through the medium of English;
- c) 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. Responsibility for confirming Schemes lies with the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht ('the Minister').

### **1.2 Context for the Scheme**

The Department of Social and Family Affairs agreed a scheme with the Minister of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs which came into effect on 1 June 2007. Technically, this scheme succeeds that earlier scheme. However due to the circumstances detailed below this new scheme has been drafted in the context of the significantly changed remit of the Department of Social Protection.

In recent years, the organisation and structure of the Department of Social Protection has changed in a very fundamental way with the Department's new mandate from Government. This has included the integration of a large number of staff, services and buildings from a number of other organisations including the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, the Health Service Executive and FÁS. (Almost 3,000 additional staff and 84 buildings transferred over to the Department and shared accommodation increased by over 700 locations.) This extensive change has resulted in a new corporate identity for the Department. The amalgamation of services and the introduction of a new service model (Intreo) has been facilitated by an ongoing programme of re-organisation of offices.

In the development of the Scheme, the approach taken was to develop a language scheme that would reflect the newly constituted and vastly enlarged Department of Social Protection which responds to the full range of needs across the entire organisation. The Department considers that progress can best be made in improving our service delivery in Irish through this approach. The Department has liaised with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in the development of this approach.

### **1.3 Preparation of the Scheme**

The Act provides that the Minister may require public bodies to prepare a draft Scheme for confirmation by the Minister. The Act also provides for the preparation by the Minister of guidelines to assist in the preparation of draft schemes. This Scheme has been drawn up in accordance with the guidelines, guided by the principle that the provision of services in the Irish language should be based on:

- the underlying level of demand for specific services in the Irish language in the context of positive provision;
- the importance of a proactive approach to the provision of such services, and
- the resources, including human and financial resources, and the capacity of the body concerned to develop or access the necessary language capability.

In October 2013, the Department published a notice inviting submissions from any interested parties in relation to the preparation of the new Scheme. A notice inviting submissions was placed on the Department's website and a similar invitation was conveyed to all staff of the Department. These invitations elicited a small number of submissions and the new Scheme has been informed by these.

All areas of the Department were invited to contribute towards the preparation of the Scheme. A review was also carried out of the current level of service available through Irish.

The Scheme has been developed within the policy context of the government's '20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030'.

#### **1.4 Objectives and Content of the Scheme 2015-2018**

The objective of the Scheme is to build on progress achieved over the years, to maintain and enhance the level of quality service through Irish available to our customers during the life of this Scheme. However, we must take account of the prevailing public service context and it must be acknowledged that the current constraints on resources and on public service recruitment allied with the state of the public finances could negatively impact on the Department's ability to deliver on commitments to maintain and enhance the level of service through Irish. In addition, the Department is bound by centrally agreed transfer arrangements and vacancies are filled by reference to the transfer lists. There is no provision to bypass people on the transfer list in order to source a person who is proficient in Irish and the agreed arrangements also preclude direct recruitment where there are staff awaiting transfers.

The Scheme includes a commitment to monitor the level of demand for services through Irish so that we can meet this demand in a planned, coherent and practical manner.

#### **1.5 Commencement of the Scheme**

This Scheme has been confirmed by the Minister for Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The Scheme takes effect from 16 March 2015 and shall remain in force for a period of 3 years from this date or until a new Scheme has been confirmed by the Minister, whichever is the later.

## **Chapter 2 Department Overview**

### **2.1 Role of the Department**

The Department's mission statement is 'To promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services'.

The Department supports the Minister for Social Protection in the discharge of governmental, parliamentary and departmental duties. Our main functions are to:

- advise Government and formulate appropriate social protection and social inclusion policies;
- design, develop and deliver effective and cost efficient income supports, activation and employment services, advice to clients and other related services;
- work towards providing seamless delivery of services in conjunction with other Departments, Agencies and bodies; and
- control fraud and abuse.

### **2.2 Services of the Department**

The Department administers over 70 separate schemes and services which impact on the lives of almost every person in the State. Annually in excess of 2 million customers' claims are processed and over 88 million scheme payments are made. The total expenditure by the Department for 2014 was just €19.75 billion.

The Department serves a wide and diverse group of customers including families, people in employment, unemployed people, people with disabilities, carers, and older people. The Department also provides a range of services to employers. Services include:

- a wide range of social insurance and social assistance income support schemes such as child benefit payments, jobseeker payments, illness/ disability payments and pensions;
- through the Intreo service, the integration of employment services and benefit payment services to ensure that the payment of income supports to people who do not have a job is directly linked to the equally important task of supporting such people in their pursuit of employment and related opportunities and improving their life chances;
- a range of employment supports, guidance and placement services to help jobseekers find and secure employment;
- a range of employer services including recruitment services, online vacancy publication, employment supports (e.g. wage subsidy schemes for people with disabilities) and redundancy and insolvency services;
- a range of community services to promote social inclusion and provide a pathway to employment for people who are unemployed;
- the development of appropriate social policies in areas such as pensions, child income support, activation and job seekers;
- co-ordination of the implementation of government strategies for social inclusion;
- the administration by the General Register Office (GRO) of the Civil Registration Service (for the registration of births, stillbirths, adoptions, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths in the State); and

- the provision of an independent appeals system (through the Social Welfare Appeals Office and the Social Welfare Tribunal.)

## 2.3 Organisation of the Department

The Department is working with a new mandate from government and has gone through an intensive period of integration which resulted in almost 3,000 new staff members joining the Department bringing the staff complement to almost 7,000.

### Service delivery

Service delivery in the Department may be described as ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’. *Direct service* is delivered through face-to-face contact with the public or by telephone or by written communication in the course of administering various payment schemes. *Indirect service* to the public is characterised by infrequent contact with individuals and groups, although there may be extensive consultation with public representatives, interest groups and the social partners.

The Department’s web-site ([www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie)) is a critical information service to customers, providing application forms and details of available schemes and services.

### Local Services and Intreo

Local *direct services* to customers are administered on a regional basis. A new regional structure is in place since 2012. This consists of three regions and comprises 13 divisional areas. Each division has responsibility for the local delivery of services across the three strands of the Department – Social Protection Services, Community Welfare Services and former FÁS Community and Employment Services.

An integrated activation and income support model has been developed by the Department. This includes the provision of an integrated ‘one-stop shop’ service – Intreo – for clients. The new Intreo service is currently being rolled out and implemented on a phased basis as part of the Government’s commitments under the Pathways to Work policy. This new one-stop shop integrates employment and income supports and provides for a streamlined and personalised service to customers in accessing job opportunities and availing of supports to enable them to get back to work at the earliest possible opportunity.

The introduction of the Intreo Service has been facilitated by an ongoing programme of re-organisation of offices and the number of offices where local *direct services* are available is constantly changing as the project proceeds.

Work is continuing on the roll-out of Intreo services and it is planned that the full Intreo service will be available in all of the Department’s local offices in 2015.

### Other Services

Other services are administered on a national basis by headquarters offices in Dublin, Letterkenny, Sligo, Longford, Dundalk, Carrick-on-Shannon, Ballybay, Buncrana, Tubbercurry and Waterford. The majority of these offices engage with customers directly through public offices, by telephone, or in writing. They are mainly concerned with the administration of payment schemes.

Other headquarters' services deal mainly with planning, information technology, and internal administration issues and have only limited direct contact with the general public.

The General Register Office (GRO) which is based in Roscommon manages the Civil Registration Service which provides for the registration of births, stillbirths, adoptions, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths in the State. It also has a public office in Dublin. Registration services are provided by Registrars appointed by the Health Service Executive at various locations across the State.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office is based in Dublin. It was established to provide an appeals service, to persons who are unhappy with decisions of the Department of Social Protection on questions relating to entitlement to social welfare payments and insurability of employment under the Social Welfare Acts.

### **Gaeltacht Offices**

The following public offices of the Department are located in Gaeltacht areas: Acaill (Achill), An Clochán Liath (Dungloe) and Béal an Mhuirthead (Belmullet) Intreo offices and An Daingean (Dingle) branch office.

## **Chapter 3 Summary of Current Services provided through Irish**

### **3.1 Quality Service**

The Department is committed to providing quality services to its customers in either Irish or English as required by the customer. This Chapter sets out a summary of the services which are currently available to the public through Irish.

### **3.2 Official Languages Act Obligations**

The Department is committed to fulfilling our obligations under the Official Languages Act and the Department's policy is to ensure that :

- All letters and emails received in Irish are replied to in Irish.
- Headings of stationery, including notepaper, complement slips, fax cover sheets, file covers and other folders, labels and envelopes are provided in Irish or bilingually.
- All recorded oral announcements are bilingual.
- Documents setting out public policy proposals, financial statements, annual reports and strategy statements are published bilingually on the Department's website.
- Signage in Departmental offices is compliant with the Act.
- Circulars/ mailshots are bilingual.
- The official placenames of Gaeltacht areas are used by the Department.

### **3.3 Website**

The Department's website [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie) contains a large volume of material in both Irish and English. This includes information on the Department's range of schemes and services and on-line query forms.

The Department has put in place a website language policy which is available in a bilingual format on the Department's Intranet site. This policy includes a provision that when any material is being published on the website, the content owner is asked whether there is a requirement for simultaneous publication in both official languages. Where this is the case, the content owner is required to provide an Irish language version of the material before the English language version can be published.

The Department is moving away from holding large stocks of application forms and information leaflets in offices and instead this material is, in general, available for download from the Department's website. The Department is committed to having application forms and information leaflets for the Department's schemes available in both Irish and English on the Website. Considerable work has already been carried out in this area. This was particularly required for the services which have been integrated into the Department in recent years as much of this material had previously been available in English only. The majority of the Department's application forms and information leaflets are now available in both languages on the website.

### **3.4 Email Messages**

Standard messages on the Department's email, such as disclaimers of responsibility, are in both Irish and English.

### **3.5 Office Applications and Processing Systems**

The Department computer applications/ processing systems are, in general, capable of handling Irish language characters.

### **3.6 STÓR**

STÓR is the title of the Department's intranet site. On STÓR there is a dedicated Official Languages Act page which contains information available to assist Departmental staff in complying with the obligations of the Official Languages Act and improving service through Irish. There is also a dedicated Irish site (called Gaeilge) which contains cultural as well as business material. Business material on this site includes guidance notes, a database of bi-lingual signs and samples of bilingual stationery.

### **3.7 Training and Development**

A range of supports is available through the Department's Staff Development Unit (SDU) to equip frontline staff with the necessary skills and confidence to deliver a quality customer service in Irish by phone, letter and in person. Supports available include funding for attendance at Irish language training courses; training resources such as language discs and books; and funding through the Department's refund of fees scheme for staff who pursue Irish language education outside of work hours.

### **3.8 Provision of *direct service* (telephone/face to face) through Irish**

There are two main types of *direct service* areas: local services mainly provided by Intreo offices and centralised payment administration areas for a wide range of social insurance and social assistance income support schemes such as child benefit payments illness/ disability payments and pensions.

Many of the Department's Intreo offices currently provide a telephone/ face to face service through Irish. In these offices, where an Irish speaking member of staff is not available at the time of the customers phone call/ visit to the office an appointment will be offered to the customer for the provision of face to face and/or telephone services through Irish. The offices currently able to provide this service are shown in Appendix 1.

The following of our Headquarter *direct service* offices can currently provide a telephone service through Irish:

- Letterkenny Social Welfare Services
- Sligo Social Welfare Services
- Longford Social Welfare Services
- Buncrana Social Welfare Services
- Social Welfare Appeals Office (Dublin)
- Illness Benefit Section (Dublin)

When a customer phones one of these areas, they will be put through to an Irish speaking member of staff. Alternatively their details will be taken and an arrangement will be made to have an Irish speaking member of staff phone them back.

While every effort will be made to maintain the above telephone/ face to face services, it is subject to wider government policy on recruitment and deployment of staff in the public service sector and on the necessary budget provisions.

### **3.9 Translation Service**

The Department's Information Section facilitates requests from business areas for translation/ interpretation services. This central translation service arranges for timely translation of correspondence and documentation. Information Section also makes arrangements for an interpretation service in situations where a customer wishes to conduct their business in Irish and there is no staff member available to provide the service.

### **3.10 Offices in Gaeltacht areas**

The Department has four public offices in Gaeltacht areas. All of these offices can currently provide a direct (telephone/ face to face) service through Irish.

## **Chapter 4 Enhancement of Services to be provided through Irish**

### **4.1 Quality Service**

The Department is committed to providing quality services to its customers in either Irish or English as required by the customer. This Chapter sets out the level of service which will be available to the public during the period of the Scheme 2015 to 2018. It also sets out the measures and actions which the Department will undertake over the next three years to maintain and where possible improve services available through Irish.

### **4.2 Customer Charter**

The Department's Customer Charter and Action Plan 2013-2015, delivered in accordance with Quality Customer Service Principles, states that the Department will 'provide quality services through Irish and/or bilingually and inform customers of their right to choose to be dealt with through one or other of the official languages'. The Department will continue to include in the Customer Charter and Action Plan this commitment to providing a quality service through Irish.

### **4.3 Correspondence**

In addition to fulfilling the obligation to reply in Irish to correspondence received in Irish, the Department is committed to initiating correspondence in Irish, in so far as our information technology systems allow, with customers who are known to prefer correspondence in Irish. The Department has in place a programme of modernisation of our information technology systems and of replacing legacy systems with Business Objects Model (BOMi) systems. The BOMi systems have a facility for recording the client's language preference when the claim is registered and facilitates the issuing of correspondence to the client in their language of preference. These new payments systems are now in place for 28 payment systems and this modernisation programme will continue during the life of the Scheme.

### **4.4 Office Applications and Processing Systems**

The Department is committed to ensuring that all new computer applications/ processing systems are capable of handling Irish language characters. The Department's procurement guidelines state that this commitment should be taken into account when requirements/ specifications for administrative systems are being drafted

### **4.5 Translation Service**

The Department will continue to provide translation and interpretation services as outlined in paragraph 3.9 during the Scheme.

### **4.6 Website**

The Department will build on progress made in the provision of information, application forms and leaflets in both Irish and English on the Department's website. From the commencement of the Scheme any new information leaflets and static application forms placed on the website will be available in both Irish and English.

The Department will continue to implement its website language policy.

Also from the outset of the Scheme, an online form to allow customers to send queries to the Department will be available in both Irish and English on [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie) and this will be continued during the life of the Scheme.

For customers who do not wish to download leaflets from the website a bilingual telephone service to a leaflet request facility will be available.

#### **4.7 STÓR**

During the life of the Scheme the material on the Department's intranet site, STÓR will be monitored, updated and improved. A copy of the Department's Scheme will be published on STÓR. In year one, the Department will carry out a review/ re-design of the Stór Irish language sites

#### **4.8 Provision of *direct service* (telephone/face to face) through Irish**

As previously explained, there are two main types of *direct service* areas: regionalised local services which includes Intreo offices; centralised payment administration areas for a wide range of social insurance and social assistance income support schemes such as child benefit payments illness/ disability payments and pensions.

During the Scheme *direct service* through Irish will be provided to customers as follows:

- The Department's regional divisional public offices will provide a telephone/ face to face service through Irish where there are sufficient staff with a proficiency in Irish to provide such a service. In these offices, where an Irish speaking member of staff is not available at the time of the customers phone call/ visit to the office an appointment will be offered to the customer for the provision of face to face and/or telephone services through Irish. Alternatively a language interpretive service will be offered to the customer.
- Headquarter *direct service* offices will provide a telephone service through Irish where there are sufficient staff with a proficiency in Irish to provide such a service. When a customer phones one of these areas, they will be put through to an Irish speaking member of staff. Where an Irish speaking member of staff is not available at the time of the customers phone call, the customer's details will be taken and an arrangement will be made to have an Irish speaking member of staff phone them back without delay. Alternatively a language interpretive service will be offered to the customer.
- In areas where staff available are only able to deal with a person through English, a language interpretive service will be offered to the customer. This service, which can be arranged at very short notice, enables customers (through a 2<sup>nd</sup> telephone handset or headphones) to have a conversation with staff through a language interpreter.

We will work to maintain<sup>1</sup> and improve the level of *direct service* available through Irish through the following:

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<sup>1</sup> While every effort will be made to maintain this level of service, it is subject to wider government policy on recruitment and deployment of staff in the public service sector and on the necessary budget provisions.

- during year one of the Scheme, carry out a review to identify staff who are willing and able to provide services through Irish and develop a directory with the contact details of these staff members;
- encourage and facilitate staff to attend training courses to improve their proficiency in Irish;
- develop and implement a framework on the designation of bi-lingual functional posts in relation to obligations under the Irish Language legislation.

#### **4.9 Provision of Services in Gaeltacht areas**

The following public offices of the Department are located in Gaeltacht areas: Acaill (Achill), An Clochán Liath (Dungloe) and Beal an Mhuirthead (Belmullet) Intreo offices and An Daingean (Dingle) branch office. All of these offices can currently provide a direct (telephone/ face to face) service through Irish.

During the life of the Scheme, the Department will work to maintain<sup>1</sup> and improve the level of service available through Irish in Gaeltacht areas through the following:

- encourage and facilitate staff to attend training courses to improve their proficiency in Irish;
- develop and implement a framework on the designation of bi-lingual functional posts in relation to obligations under the Irish Language legislation;
- enter into negotiations with Branch Office Managers seeking to include in their contracts a provision that a service through Irish should be available in offices serving the Gaeltacht. (Services in Branch Offices are provided on a contract basis by non-Department staff and currently there is no provision in the contract relating to providing services through Irish.)
- by these and other means it is intended that Irish will become the working language of our Gaeltacht offices over the lifetime of several schemes.

Where public meetings are being held in Gaeltacht areas, such meetings may be conducted in Irish/ bilingually where requested by the attendees.

#### **4.10 Designated Irish Language Posts**

Having regard to Government policy for enhanced provision of services in Irish, the Department will, by the end of year one of the scheme, identify posts for which Irish language competency is an essential requirement. Every effort will be undertaken to fill these positions by the end of this scheme having regard to recruitment, promotion and training policies, as appropriate. This will enable this Department to plan and prioritise the incremental improvement of services in Irish in a more strategic manner.

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<sup>1</sup> While every effort will be made to maintain this service, it is subject to wider government policy on recruitment and deployment of staff in the public service sector and on the necessary budget provisions.

#### **4.11 Promotion of availability of service through Irish**

Notices advising customers of the availability of services through Irish will be displayed in all relevant offices.

#### **4.12 Training and Development**

The Department is committed to the continued development and training of staff to facilitate the provision of services through Irish and to the continued provision of the range of supports available (as referred to in paragraph 3. 7).

During the life of the Scheme the Department will encourage and facilitate staff to avail of the range of supports and in particular to attend Irish training courses. The Department will assess Irish language training requirements through consultation with managers and staff and arrange for Irish language training for staff. The Department will also ensure that the obligations under the Official Languages Act and Scheme will be brought to the attention of staff at relevant staff training courses including new entrant induction courses and managers training courses.

#### **4.13 Corporate Services Unit**

The Department's Corporate Services Unit will:

- oversee the implementation of the Irish Scheme,
- provide reports on the implementation of the Scheme,
- will monitor the demand for services through Irish
- during year one, carry out a review and compile a directory of staff willing to provide service through Irish,
- in year one, carry out a review/ re-design of the STÓR Irish language sites,
- respond to any customer complaints about services through Irish.

## **Chapter 5 Monitoring and Publication of the Scheme**

### **5.1 Monitoring and Review**

The Department will report on the delivery of services through Irish and the implementation of the Scheme in our Annual Report.

Corporate Services will co-ordinate monitoring and reporting on the Scheme both internally and externally.

The demand for services through Irish will be monitored during the Scheme.

Heads of Business Areas will be responsible for the implementation of the Scheme in their areas.

### **5.2 Publication and Promotion**

The contents of the Scheme will be communicated to our customers and the general public via the Department's website.

The Department's staff will be informed of the introduction of the Scheme through our internal communications system.

New recruits to the Department will be advised of their obligations under the Act and Scheme as part of their introduction/induction training.

A copy of the Scheme will be forwarded to the Office of An Choimisinéir Teanga.

The English language version of this Scheme is the official version of the Scheme.

## Appendix 1

### Intreo and Local Offices able to offer a Service through Irish in 2015

Regional Divisional Area	Intreo Centres	Local Offices (Due to become Intreo Centres)
Dublin Central		Apollo# Nutmeg Thomas Street#
Dublin North	Ballymun Coolock Finglas Parnell Street	Bishop Square Swords
Dublin South	Tallaght	Clondalkin
Midlands North	Athlone Longford	Mullingar
Midlands South	Clonmel Kilkenny	
Mid West	Limerick Ennis Newcastlewest	
Western	Acaill (Achill)* Béal an Mhuirthead (Belmullet)* Clifden Loughrea	Galway Westport
Cork Central	Cobh	Cork Carrigaline
South East	Waterford	
South West	Cahir Listowel Tralee	[An Daingean (Dingle) Branch Office**]
North East	Dundalk	
North West	Dunfanaghy An Clochán Liath (Dungloe)* Manorhamilton Sligo	Letterkenny

\* Denotes offices situated in Gaeltacht areas.

\*\* Denotes Branch Office in Gaeltacht area

# Office is due to close in 2015