

Conradh na Gaeilge



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Submission

*re the drafting of the second scheme
in accordance with Section 15
of the Official Languages Act 2003
to the Legal Aid Board*

3rd March 2011

Introduction

Conradh na Gaeilge is the democratic forum of the Irish Speaking Community and it works on behalf of the Irish Language throughout the whole of Ireland and around the world.

Since its foundation on 31 July 1893 members of the Conradh have been active in promoting Irish in every aspect of life in Ireland, from legal and educational affairs to the development of new media and services through Irish. This major organisation encourages the people of Ireland, it gives us a fresh understanding of our precious heritage and it also fosters respect for our Irish culture.

Conradh na Gaeilge has 200 branches as well as numerous individual members, and every member of the Conradh works hard to promote the use of Irish within their own community.

Further information about the Conradh's work is available on www.cnag.ie.

Submission

A commitment to Quality Customer Service as part of the Public Service Reform Process requires a particular commitment on the part of public bodies with regard to the continuous improvement of customer care standards, services and consultation with customers for this purpose. As the starting point for the Legal Aid Board's Scheme, there is now a need for an expanded consultation process which encompasses customer surveys, regular focus groups, etc.

Recommendations

1. Common Template

It is recommended that the second scheme should be based on a template common to other schemes which come under the Official Languages Act 2003 so that every state organisation's scheme will have the same layout. The services which are available through Irish across all the State Organisations will be clearer to the customer.

2. Under the heading *Summary of the Organisations Services and Activities* it is recommended that a comprehensive description be provided with regard to:

- the services through Irish which were available before the first scheme came into operation,
- how these services were increased in order of priority through the implementation of the first scheme, and
- how the services will now be gradually increased in the second scheme.

3. Active offering and demand cultivation

- (i) It is not sufficient for State Organisations / Public Bodies to satisfy demand for services through Irish. It is the duty of the State to continually cultivate the demand for services through Irish.
- (ii) It is imperative that the public are aware that the organisation offers services in Irish, that these services are clearly laid out and that the public are genuinely welcome to use these services.
- (iii) It must also be ensured that it is physically evident in the organisation, especially in the public offices, that it is a bilingual work place.
- (iv) In this way the customer is given a positive assurance that it's aim is to put the customer at his/her ease when they are seeking services through Irish.

4. Publications

We welcome the efforts that the Legal Aid Board has made in order to provide information on current services, plans and other areas which pertain to the Board in bilingual form, including the Board's annual report.

- (i) With regard to forms, signage, pre-recorded telephone messages and press advertisements, Conradh na Gaeilge recommends that these should be, without any exception, bilingual.
- (ii) This information needs to be made available simultaneously, with each language side by side, in a single binding, so that no extra effort is necessary in order to access the information in Irish, above and beyond the effort which would be involved in accessing the information in English. It is important to make the Irish language more visible in order to communicate that Irish is always welcomed by the Board in the conduct of its affairs.
- (iii) With regard to press releases, we demand that 100% of the Board's press releases be made available bilingually.

5. Correspondence

That all correspondence shall be available in Irish if the citizen so chooses and that this be done in a manner which will not delay the customer in the conduct of their business or interfere with the level of service provided.

With regard to stationery, we recommend giving the Board's customers an active proposal through the statement "**Cuirfear fáilte roimh chomhfhreagras i nGaeilge**" (Correspondence in Irish is welcomed) on stationery. We recommend ensuring that this is implemented and that it is continued during the second Scheme and beyond.

It is recommended that the organisation's officials should be mindful of the specific needs of Irish speakers and people from Gaeltacht areas, of Gaelscoileanna and of Irish language organisations alike and all correspondence should be sent to them in Irish, unless they request the Board to correspond with them in English.

6. Telephone System

The telephone system is vitally important as it is generally the first point of contact that the citizen has with the organisation. It is important that every telephonist be able to deal with queries from the public in both official languages and that every citizen is informed:

- that he/she has a choice of language,
- that Irish is welcome
- that service through Irish is of the same standard as service through English.

It is recommended that a greeting be given in Irish and a choice of language be offered when the phone is answered, and that bilingual messages be recorded or messages in Irish alone if the office is in a Gaeltacht area.

If the system is automated, the citizen should be offered a choice of language before being offered any other choice.

7. Email

That the disclaimer be bilingual in every email which is sent from the Board. It is recommended that every email address have an Irish language version, for example using eolas@cunamhndlithiuil.ie and linking it with the English version so that every email goes into the one address. It is important that the citizen is not delayed in the conduct of his/her business if it is done through Irish.

8. Website

In this day and age, the website is very important as it is usually the citizen's first source of information about the Board and the use of the Irish language on the site indicates the organisation's attitude towards Irish. We welcome the effort that has been made to make the website bilingual but more work is needed with regard to the amount of material which is available through Irish on the site. We make the following recommendations to the Board:

- A homepage which offers the option of accessing the Irish or English version of the site and contains no other information.
- Placing the option for the Irish version above the option for the English version on this recommended page so that the Irish option is made more prominent.
- Creating an Irish version of the website address and avoiding giving precedence to the English version through naming the Irish version www.....ie/ga.
- Ensuring that the Irish on the site is accurate.
- Producing an Irish language version of every press release, and allowing the user to switch between the two versions easily.
- Making speeches on the website available in Irish or bilingually.

9. Computer System

It is very important that the computer system is able to deal with the use of Irish so that it is possible to provide a service through Irish that is of the same standard as the service available through English. 'Gaelspell', 'WinGléacht', or any other system for the correction of spelling in Irish should be included in the computer package which is used in the organisation.

10. Ringfencing of jobs

- (i) There should be at least one executive/official designated to provide services through Irish from **every section** of the organisation which deals with the public, and names and contact details of such employees (phone number, email address, etc.) should be published.
- (ii) It must be ensured that the receptionist/switchboard operator is competent in Irish so that he/she can effectively deal with calls in Irish.
- (iii) The Irish language should be recognized as a requirement for the above mentioned jobs when staff are being recruited. In addition to this, the organisation should be willing to provide in-house and external training courses so that its employees can meet the above requirement.
- (iv) It must be ensured that all offices of the organisation which are located in Gaeltacht areas operate according to Section 13(2)(d & e).
- (v) As the organisation's scheme is implemented service provision through Irish will gradually be increased. It must be ensured that opportunities for promotion are available to those involved in service provision through Irish, as a recognition of the service which they are providing and in order to ensure that their expertise in this area will be available to the organisation in the future.

11. Staff Training

- (i) With regard to Irish language courses for staff, Conradh na Gaeilge has a long established background in the teaching of Irish and we recommend Conradh na Gaeilge's Irish Courses which are tailored to the public sector.
- (ii) It is important that staff are aware of the importance of providing a bilingual service and also that they receive training in language awareness.
- (iii) Conradh na Gaeilge recommends that an incentive be provided for staff to attend Irish classes, whether inside or outside the office hours of the Board.
- (iv) We recommend that a guide book be available to every staff member which contains all the information relating to language rights of customers and how to deal professionally and effectively with customers who would like to be provided with service through Irish.
- (v) It is imperative that an appropriate monitoring and review mechanism be implemented in order to ensure that service provision through Irish and English is of the same standard.

12. Staff Recruitment

We recommend ensuring that a greater number of people be employed on the staff of the Board, including academic, administrative, and service staff, who are capable of carrying out the duties of their position in Irish and in English. To this end:-

- (i) It should be stated on all of the Board's recruitment advertisements that priority will be given to the bilingual applicant (Irish/English) providing that he/she has the appropriate qualifications but that applications will also be accepted from non Irish speaking applicants who are willing to become proficient in carrying out their work through Irish.
- (ii) In the event that no Irish speaking applicant applies for a particular post with the Board, the interviews for the post should be postponed for a period of 6 weeks, the post re-advertised and appropriate steps taken to find and attract Irish speaking applicants.

- (iii) A new appointments system should be initiated which would extend a temporary 3 year contract to a non Irish speaking person in order to enable him/her to become proficient enough in Irish so that he or she can carry out his or her job duties through Irish. If that person passes the Irish language competency exam at the end of that 3 year period, the appointment should be fully confirmed. If they do not pass, the post should be advertised again, without prejudice to the right of the applicant who failed the Irish language competency exam to apply for the post and to sign another 3 year temporary contract with the Board if appropriate.
- (iv) Every interviewee should be given a choice of language, irrespective of whether or not Irish is a specific requirement for the post involved.

13. Public Meetings

It is recommended that the organisation's officials should be mindful of the specific needs of Irish speakers and people from Gaeltacht areas, especially if a public meeting is being organised.

14. Irish Language Terminology

Every organisation in the public sector should ensure that the terminology relating to their duties is available on focal.ie and on acmhainn.ie and if it is not currently available they should ensure that it becomes available in the near future in order to revive, promote, expand and further develop the Irish Language among the public.

15. Legislation

It is necessary to take account of the needs of the Irish Language and Gaeltacht communities in any legislation which is prepared by the organisation.

16. Progress Reporting

- (i) The progress reports which are submitted to the Senior Management Group within the Board should be published in a timely manner.
- (ii) An annual report should be made available to the public with regard to the progress of the scheme's operation and this report should be publicised.
- (iii) Progress achieved under the first scheme should be the starting point of reporting in the second scheme thus clearly demonstrating that the Board is investing in excellence in the Irish Language.

17. Publicising the Scheme

- (i) We recommend that the second agreed scheme be widely publicised and that services which are already available through Irish as part of the first scheme, as well as the extra services which will be available as a result of the second scheme be advertised.
- (ii) We recommend that a symbol or statement be included which indicates that the use of Irish is welcomed, as well as the Irish internet address, in every notice which the organisation publishes so that the public are aware that Irish can be used across all areas of the organisation.