

Press Release: Embargo 11.00 am Monday 29 March 2010

Subject: Annual Report 2009

More complaints were made by members of the public to the office of An Coimisinéir Teanga last year about difficulties or problems accessing state services through Irish than in any other year since the Office was established.

A total of 687 complaints were made in 2009, an increase of 15% on the previous year according to the Office's Annual Report published today.

Most of those complaints were dealt with by the provision of advice to the complainant or through informal negotiations with the appropriate public body.

In cases where this did not lead to a resolution of the matter, formal investigations were conducted.

A total of 17 such investigations were commenced during 2009 in addition to two which were ongoing from the end of the previous year. 16 of those investigations were completed and two others were discontinued when satisfactory agreements were reached. One investigation remained ongoing at year-end.

Three different investigations found the Health Service Executive to have breached statutory language obligations. Findings were made against the Department of Education and Science in two separate investigations while the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the Revenue Commissioners were found to have breached language legislation on one occasion each.

Two local authorities, Galway County Council and Fingal County Council, were found in investigations to have failed to comply with statutory language duties. The following public bodies were also found to have failed to comply with statutory language obligations: the Arts Council, the National Museum of Ireland, the Office of the Information Commissioner and Iarnród Éireann.

Failure to comply with specific language obligations should not be taken to suggest that the public bodies concerned were, in general, negligent in relation to overall language obligations.

One quarter of complaints made to An Coimisinéir Teanga, Seán Ó Cuirreáin, last year came from Gaeltacht areas. On a regional basis, 38% of complaints came from Co. Dublin while 16% came from Co. Galway.

Dealing with complaints is only one element of the work of the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga.

A detailed audit programme of public bodies was undertaken to monitor compliance with provisions of the Official Languages Act. These audits focused on specific direct provisions of the Act, on Regulations made under the Act and on statutory language schemes.

In addition, a total of 377 requests were made during the year by employees of public bodies for advice in relation to language obligations. This was an increase of 153% on the previous year and was due mainly to the introduction of new Regulations governing language usage on signage and stationery.

Information campaigns were also launched during the year in relation to the use of Irish in the courts and on road signs.

Launching the report, An Coimisinéir Teanga, Seán Ó Cuirreáin, said that many of the state's public bodies had made progress in relation to the quantity and quality of services provided through Irish and that awareness of language rights had increased among the public in general and within the public sector.

“On the other hand, there are still significant gaps between the standard of services provided through Irish in comparison with the same services through English. Ensuring the closure of those gaps will be a long-term project,” he said.

“In general, the position of the Irish language on a national level is probably more secure now than at any stage in recent times. However, the future of Irish as a living community language, even in the strongest Gaeltacht areas, is currently at its most vulnerable level – at crisis point according to some analysts – particularly among the younger generation. While many will continue to speak Irish, a critical mass is required for its survival as a community language. Language preference is not a random issue for Gaeltacht parents and their choice is always in the best interests of their children. Every time state officials require Irish speakers to opt for English, it reinforces the negative message. Gaeltacht community organisations must be empowered to have the voice of the Gaeltacht heard and not silenced,” he said.

“The proposed 20 Year Strategy for the language must be robust enough to deal conclusively, as one of its core issues, with securing the future of Irish as a living community language in the Gaeltacht. When the strategy is agreed, it is essential that its full implementation is commenced efficiently and speedily. If this were not to happen, as has been the fate of many well-intentioned reports in the past, it would be better that it be abandoned now to avoid more cynicism. Action not lip service is what is required,” said Seán Ó Cuirreáin.

(ENDS)

The Annual Report is published primarily in electronic format and is available at www.coimisineir.ie.

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

See also: Summaries of Investigations 2009

More comprehensive summaries of all investigations are provided in the Annual Report available at www.coimisineir.ie.