

STRICT EMBARGO Thursday 20th April 07.00



Press Release

Annual Report 2022 – Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga

Highlights:

- ❖ 81% increase in advice issued to public bodies in 2022
- ❖ 600 complaints received by OCT in 2022 – 25% from Co. Dublin
- ❖ Largest ever information campaign undertaken by OCT – more than 2,100 participants in online seminars.
- ❖ 5 investigations carried out in 2022 – 3 investigations relating to local authorities; the failure by the Health Service Executive to provide vaccine registration through Irish; and an investigation into Iarnród Éireann signage.
- ❖ Housing planning in the Gaeltacht and Irish language broadcasting were among the principal issues monitored during 2022

In preparation for the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 coming into effect, the Office rolled out one of the most extensive awareness-raising programmes since its establishment. Over 2,100 participants attended webinars delivered by the Office in 2022, some of which were run in conjunction with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. Of particular note was the 81% increase, from 189 to 284, in the number of cases that OCT shared advice with public bodies regarding their obligations under the Act. A large portion of the increase in advisory cases related in particular to public bodies seeking advice on section 10A. (Advertising by Public Bodies) of the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, which came into effect in October 2022.

Section 10A prescribes an obligation on public bodies that at least 20% of their advertising in any given year is placed through the medium of Irish and that at least 5% of the public body's annual advertising budget is also spent on Irish media.

The Office received 600 complaints in 2022 and although this figure is a decrease from the 727 complaints OCT received in 2021, it is comparable to the number of complaints received in recent years, e.g. 604 complaints in 2020. In addition, one in every five complaints came from the Gaeltacht, and one in every four complaints on a county basis came from County Dublin.

Three of the five investigations completed in 2022 involved local authorities. One of those investigations concerned Offaly County Council. In order to complete this investigation, an Coimisinéir Teanga had to take the unusual step of invoking section 22(1) of the Act. Section

22(1) requires of any person from whom an Coimisinéir Teanga requests any information, to provide that information and where appropriate, may require the person to attend before him for the purpose of implementing his functions.

Another investigation revealed that the Health Service Executive (HSE) breached the statutory language duty prescribed in subsection 9 (2) of the Official Languages Act 2003. The breach arose as a result of the HSE implementing an online vaccine appointments service without due consideration for the language rights set out in subsection 9 (2) where the public have the right to communicate in writing, in Irish, with a public body.

During 2022 the Office also monitored the implementation of investigation recommendations in the case of 10 public bodies. Topics relating to housing planning in Gaeltacht areas and Irish language broadcasting were among the most significant issues monitored.

The number of complaints that have arisen in recent years relating to planning matters in the Gaeltacht is noteworthy. Under section 10(2)(m) of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, planning authorities with Gaeltacht areas in their jurisdiction are required to set specific objectives in their County Development Plan for the protection of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Gaeltacht including the promotion of Irish as the community language. An investigation in 2019 showed that Meath County Council failed to meet objectives set out in its County Development Plan regarding this obligation when processing and determining planning applications for housing developments in the Gaeltacht. Whilst Meath County Council is making a genuine effort to implement the recommendations of the investigation, this case highlights the need for clarification in the form of regulations for local authorities with Gaeltacht language planning areas under their aegis along with other cases relating to housing planning in the Gaeltacht brought to the Office's attention in recent years. To that end, the new statutory guidelines expected to be issued by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage this year will be significant to ensure the implementation of section 10(2)(m) of the Planning and Development Act, 2000.

As regards Irish language broadcasting, an investigation of RTÉ in 2018 showed that statutory duties relating to the provision of a comprehensive range of programming in the Irish and English languages on its broadcasting services were breached. There has been a significant increase in the number of hours broadcast in Irish on RTÉ television services since the investigation, and it is expected that this increase will continue, on an incremental basis, in the coming years. As a direct result of implementing the recommendations of this investigation, RTÉ has indicated that a television current affairs programme in the Irish language shall be broadcast on RTÉ 1 in 2023 for the first time in over twenty years.

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Notes for Editor: **STRICT EMBARGO Thursday 20th April 2022 07.00**