



**Submission to the Committee on the Irish Language, Gaeltacht
and the Irish-speaking Community**

**Recruitment to the public service and the specific target within
The Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 that 20% of
recruits to the public sector will be competent in the Irish
language by the end of 2030**

October 2025

Introduction

Fórsa welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee on the Irish Language, Gaeltacht and the Irish-speaking Community on recruitment in the public service.

Fórsa represents more than 90,000 workers in the public and civil service including health, education and local authorities, as well as staff in the commercial state sector, state agencies, private companies and the community and voluntary sector.

The Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 specifically legislates for the target that 20% of recruits to the civil and public service will have competency in Irish by 2030. This is to provide for the business of state to be conducted bilingually, in Irish and English. The Act requires that recruits have the required proficiency in the Irish language in advance of recruitment.

Fórsa represents workers across the entire civil and public service - meaning this provision will have a significant impact on our members. As the State seeks to increase and improve the number and quality of Irish language public services provided, it is essential that the pathway to achieve that ambition empowers workers to embrace the Irish language, provides adequate training and opportunities for learning, and importantly, does not negatively impact existing public and civil service workers.

In this submission, we outline Fórsa's observations on the recruitment and training of workers in the public and civil service with regards to Irish language competency. We also recommend that the government immediately engage with the trade union movement to ensure the delivery of the 20% target in a way that is equitable, supports workers to engage with the State's official language, and provides the public with high quality services in Irish and English, without negatively affecting the worker experience.

Fórsa celebrates the cultural revival the Irish language is experiencing at present and is supportive of policies and initiatives that embrace the language and encourage its promotion among workers and communities now and into the future.

Our union runs the Fórsa Gaeltacht Scheme annually, which provides a contribution towards Gaeltacht fees for children and has campaigned for the provision of Gaeltacht Irish language courses for civil servants who use or commit to using Irish in the course of their duties.

While the growing popularity of the Irish language is highly positive, and ambitions to increase its use in workplaces are very welcome, the Government must acknowledge the potential challenges and drawbacks associated with meeting the target of 20% of recruits to the public sector to have competency in Irish by 2030 and implement initiatives to

mitigate against any potentially negative associated consequences of achieving the target set down in law.

Embracing Ireland's diverse and multi-cultural society

Ireland is a multi-cultural society and greatly benefits from the participation of migrant workers in our public services, most evidenced in our health services. The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland's (NMBI) State of the Register report showed that 117 nationalities were represented in the nursing and midwifery register in 2023. However, this diversity does not exist elsewhere in our public services. Information available from the Public Appointments System (PAS), while limited, showed that 88% of applications, between 2019 and 2021, were from individuals who identified as 'White Irish,' and of the appointments during that period, 89% were 'White Irish' and a further 6% were 'White' from any other background. This data tells us that these public services roles are not reflective of the diverse communities that they serve.

An internal discussion paper, prepared by the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Unit in Publicjobs, also highlighted that 97% of people working in public jobs were white Irish and strict eligibility criteria made it far too difficult for migrants to apply for roles.¹ The same paper said that the civil service "does not reflect the diversity in wider Irish society" and there are too many barriers to employment. It further argues for a broadening of immigration permissions for the civil service to enhance the service's skills and talent.

The trade union movement has a proud history of opposing racism, bigotry, and sectarianism. Fórsa is an anti-racist and inclusive trade union which supports diverse and inclusive workplaces and agrees with the statement within The National Action Plan Against Racism that "employment and education in particular are powerful enablers of equality, but can also reproduce systemic racism and exacerbate inequalities."²

There is clear evidence that racism exists in Ireland and workplaces are no exception to that. Public sector recruitment should therefore strive to combat racial inequalities and promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace and across society.

Genuine inclusion is about proactively creating an environment in which everyone can participate. In this context, the State has a responsibility to ensure that it creates equal opportunities for all current and future public servants to deliver the service of the state bilingually, including those with no previous experience of the language. Achieving the target of 20% of recruits to the public service to have competency in Irish, particularly if implemented

¹ [97% of public jobs workers are 'white Irish' - research](#)

² [National Action Plan Against Racism](#)

in a way that limits opportunities for those without it, risks placing additional barriers in the way of building a public service which truly reflects the diversity of our society. By narrowing the field of entry to public service, we may as consequence, make it more difficult for those from outside Ireland to integrate into society.

Moreover, research has shown that the requirement for fluent Irish is a significant impediment to more working-class young people becoming teachers, according to a report published by the DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre.³ Likewise, it would be an unfortunate consequence for a requirement for fluent Irish to become an impediment to more working-class people beginning a career in the wider public service.

Initiatives to increase the use of Irish must be implemented in such a way that they do not act as barriers to those wishing to join our public services who would bring greater diversity to the sector and support inclusive public services.

Assessing demand for services

The National Plan for Irish Language Public Services notes that the recruitment target does not specify that this would be at each grade level. It further notes, in relation to the variety of services provided, the importance of considering the language standards, and the services which will be requested through them, on a sectoral basis or even in certain cases an organisational basis, and that the same method will not work in all cases.⁴ The Plan states that the provision of services should be based on the demand for those services (p.113). However, there appears to be no data available to identify existing demand levels across the public sector from service users. According to the last Census, under 2% of the population speak Irish daily (72,000 people).

Fórsa is the largest trade union representing public sector workers, while some public sector workers are represented by other trade unions. Existing workers are best placed to inform the development of services and will have valuable knowledge and information on the frequency of demand for Irish language services, particularly workers who are dealing with the public on a regular basis. The Advisory Committee should seek to engage with the relevant unions to develop a process of consultation with existing staff to determine demand for services and associated language standards.

³ [Fluent Irish requirement ‘a barrier’ to more working-class young people becoming teachers – The Irish Times](#)

⁴ [National Plan for Irish Language Public Services](#)

Career progression of existing staff

The capability framework for the Civil and Public Service states that it was designed to build the workforce of the future.⁵ Though, nowhere does it include references to competency in Irish language. Its stated objectives are to “attract, empower and develop a diversity of people, with the capability and talent to collaboratively deliver excellence, on behalf of our government and the people of Ireland.” Those already employed in the public sector, particularly in the civil service, are well informed of the possible career paths available to them and many have goals of progressing through the relevant routes applicable to their occupation. Reaching a target of 20% of recruits, through both internal and external appointments, has the potential to hamper the career progression of existing staff who do not possess the capabilities to achieve the required fluency to conduct the business of state through Irish. If, for example, 20% of roles will require at least a B2 on the CEFR, regardless of demand for Irish language from service users, many existing staff will be excluded from those competitions due to their lack of competency in the language. This would represent diminishing opportunities for career progression across the public sector and would not be acceptable to our members. Furthermore, it may lead to a two-tier system within the public service, whereby those with competency in the Irish language are fast-tracked due to greater access to promotional opportunities, while those without have less opportunities to progress or are side-lined.

To prevent the above outcomes from happening, the Government must urgently scale-up training opportunities and provide adequate paid time away from normal duties to attend Irish language classes or study. Failure to do this may create an “opportunity-bias” favouring those who are already fluent in Irish with competency to deliver the business of state through Irish over those who are not. The Government must ensure that access to opportunities is equitable, especially given the widely accepted recognition that the State’s teaching of Gaeilge as a subject throughout fourteen years of primary and secondary education has been a failure.⁶

Existing staff and Irish language competency

A survey to examine existing competence across the public service and interest in working through the medium of Irish was issued to 212,000 public service workers, with a response rate of 16.6%. 11% completed the Irish language version of the survey, which matches the level of staff with the required competency to fulfil spoken duties in Irish (B2-C2 level). This was slightly lower at 9% for written Irish. This amounts to approximately 4,000 workers. A

⁵ [Capability Framework](#)

⁶ [Education system has 'failed' in teaching of Irish](#)

public service of approximately 380,000 workers would require 76,000 to have fluency in Irish if it were to achieve 20% of the workforce to have competency in Irish.

Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge (TEG) is the first and only system of certification for adult learners of Irish and is administered by the Centre for Irish Language at Maynooth University. TEG states that a B2 on the CEFR is the minimum level at which a person would be comfortable fulfilling their duties through Irish and providing the service that the public expects.⁷ It is further suggested that C1 would be required for more senior roles. An individual without Irish would expect to study for 1090 – 1300 hours to reach B2 level and 2090 – 2300 for C1. This amounts to between 31.1 and 65.7 working weeks for a civil servant. This further exacerbates the need for rapid expansion or scaling up of Irish language classes for existing staff and paid time off for attendance and study.

It is also worth noting that there is only 3% of secondary school students taught fully through Irish.⁸ Meanwhile, 8% of all primary school students attend a school where all subjects are taught through Irish.⁹ There is an ongoing imbalance in transfer rates from Irish-medium primary schools to Irish-medium post-primary schools with only around a third of Gaelscoil pupils transferring to Gaelcholáiste, while over 60% transfer to an English-language post-primary school. If the State is to increase and improve the number and quality of Irish language public services, the education system must be improved to facilitate this, including the use of the CEFR for learning targets, as recommended by Conradh na Gaeilge.¹⁰

Legislating for changes to terms and conditions of employment

The recruitment target set down in the Irish Language Act is another example of the government deciding to change employment terms and conditions by direct legislation rather than by negotiation in the civil and public service. Other examples include the Policing Bill and the Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Act.

Well established processes exist which facilitate meaningful consultation and negotiation on terms and conditions, routes which are always more preferable than making changes through legislation. Appearing as witnesses before Oireachtas Committees should not be the substitute for meaningful engagement and negotiation between employers and trade unions.

⁷ National Plan for Irish Language Public Services. <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/f26034ec-national-plan-for-irish-language-public-services-.pdf>

⁸ [Post-primary schools enrolment figures](#)

⁹ [Primary schools enrolment figures](#)

¹⁰ [Education Policy - Conradh na Gaeilge | Ar son phobal na Gaeilge](#)

Fórsa has consistently called for greater levels of engagement and stronger social dialogue between government and trade unions for policy development. The lack of engagement ahead of legislating specifically in an area of concern for trade unions (i.e., employment terms and conditions) is a failure of the Government's commitment to the public service workforce to engage with their union on terms of employment.

Conclusion

The Government and the Advisory Committee must immediately engage with trade unions to ensure this legally binding target is delivered in a way which promotes the Irish language, ensures fair treatment of the existing workforce in terms of equitable opportunities for progression, and provides adequate training to staff wishing to learn the language. Engagement with the appropriate and relevant trade unions will facilitate a solutions-oriented approach to achieving the target.