

Padraic O Gaora

Comhairle Gaeilge an Rialtais Áitiúil was set up in September 2004 under Section 68 of the Local Government Act 2001.

Its function is to act as an “Advisory Group” to the Minister to discharge his or her functions under that particular section.

In reality, it empowers the Minister to issue, or arrange to issue, to local authorities, guidelines, codes of practice or other guidance regarding the use of the Irish language in local government. In so doing it gives statutory recognition to measures which would result in **furthering** and **encouraging** the use of Irish at local authority level. This plays an important role in **assisting** local authorities to meet their obligations under the Official Languages Act 2003.

The main thrust of Section 68, was to ensure that anyone who wishes to conduct their business with local authorities through the medium of Irish is facilitated to do so. Section 68 is also intended to encourage the staff and councillors indeed, to make greater use of Irish in the internal workings of local authorities.

As a Gaeltacht person myself, and no doubt, you will have guessed that by now, the assurance that the Local Government Act 2001 gives to the Irish-speaking population of the Gaeltacht and to thousands of Irish speakers in the Galltacht, is a very welcome development.

Even with the passing of the Act and the many measures that have been taken to make it easier to work in Irish, many Irish speakers still feel that it is faster and easier to do business in English. There is with English, perhaps, less of an opportunity for impatience or exasperation at a service desk on a busy Monday or last thing on Friday.

It is fair to say that the Gaeltacht community, and Irish speakers in general, will use local services depending on how well they perceive those services to be delivered through Irish. So, like other communities, the Irish-speaking community of the Gaeltacht and Irish speakers generally do not make use of a poor or mediocre service to the same extent as an excellent one.

On 1st June 2004 then, the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (and a local Teachta Dála of note here in Donegal South) Pat 'The Cope' Gallagher, announced the Government's intention to establish an advisory group for the purpose of promoting the use of Irish in local authorities.

That advisory group, which came into being in September 2004, was to include as least a local authority member, a manager or other employee of a local authority, an officer of the Minister and two persons from Irish language organisations. It was the intention that the group, subsequently named Comhairle Gaeilge an Rialtais Áitiúil, would be appointed for the duration of the current local authorities, that is to June 2009.

An Chomhairle as set up by the Minister included the following:

- Cllr. David Alcorn, Donegal Co. Co. appointed by the Minister;
- Cllr. Tom Prenderville, Clare Co. Co. appointed by The Association of Municipal Authorities;
- Cllr. Colm Wiley, Clare Co. Co. appointed by Local Authority Members Association;
- Martina Moloney, Louth County Manager at the time and now County Manager of that great county of Galway;
- Michael McLoone, Donegal Co. Manager, appointed by County and City Managers Association;
- Páid Ó Neachtain, Oifigeach Forbartha na Gaeilge, Galway Co. Co.
- Éamonn Ó hArgáin of Foras na Gaeilge;
- Pádraig Ó Ceithearnaigh of Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge;
- Deaglán Ó Briain, appointed by An Roinn Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta;
- Seaghan Ó Lanagáin, Chief Executive Officer, Local Government Management Services Board, appointed by his Board and
- Peter Greene, from the Dept. of The Environment, Heritage and Local Government, appointed by the Department
- and a very special member not included in the list, but whose work on behalf of the Comhairle and a loyal servant to its Chairman has been immense – none other than Damian Smyth, slán mar a bheidh sé agus atá anseo linn inniu.
- I should also acknowledge the services of Tom Gallagher, Aiden Kinch, Brenda Parker and Neil Nugent of the Department.

Before I comment on how the Chairman and his 12 disciples went about their business, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the important work carried out by its forerunner, **An Grúpa Stiúrtha**, under the Chairmanship of An Dochtúir Máirtín Ó Murchú.

An Grúpa Stiúrtha was a non-statutory group established by the Minister for the Environment in 1979, with the specific responsibility of giving local authorities advice and guidance in establishing definite policies concerning Irish. The Grúpa Stiúrtha 2000 which was set up to prepare a report to the Minister, set out certain policies and recommendations, most of which I am happy to note, were subsequently included in **The Official Languages Act 2003**.

In many ways that same **Official Languages Act 2003** supersedes the role of our Comhairle Gaeilge which was set up as a result of the **Local Government Act, 2001**. The 2003 Act imposes certain obligations and requirements on public bodies, including local authorities in relation to the provisions of services through Irish, whereas the 2001 Act is more limited in effect, enabling advice and guidance to be given to local authorities.

The **Official Languages Act 2003** empowers the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to have local authorities prepare a scheme for the use and advancement of the Irish language in their particular sphere.

I understand that quite a number of such schemes have already been submitted and approved and that others are at an advanced stage.

The real function of our Comhairle Gaeilge then, was to try and recognise the problems that had to be overcome in order for local authorities to best carry out the added burden of ensuring that **all services** directed at the general public are available through the Irish language and that customers **seeking a service in Irish** should not be treated less advantageously than customers seeking an English language service.

After a number of meetings of An Chomhairle and an assessment of meetings Damian Smyth and myself had with officers from a cross-section of different Local Authorities, it was decided to ask our “Cara sa gCúirt” as we would say, Seaghan Ó Lanagáin, Chief Executive Officer, Local Government Management Board, and a member of our Comhairle, to approach his Board with the view of getting it on side regarding the practicalities of implementing the Department’s mandate.

It is to Seaghan Ó Lanagáin’s credit and powers of persuasion that the very effective Local Government Management Board’s Irish language sub-committee, known as An Fo-Choiste Gaeilge went about their work with great diligence and effort agus ba mhaith liom thar ceann na Comhairle Gaeilge, mo mhíle buíochas a chur in iúl do Sheaghan agus do bhaill uile an Bhoird a chuidigh leis san iarracht.

A list of recommendations made by an Chomhairle to the Minister for the Envir., Her., & Local Gov. was forwarded to an Fo-Choiste Gaeilge (LGMSB) for inclusion in its programme. Included were recommendations that :

- **An Oifigeach Gaeilge** be appointed in every city and county council that does not already have one and that the **necessary resources** be made available for this.

- An Fo-Choiste examine:
 - (a) progress with regard to the implementation of Irish language schemes prepared pursuant to the Official Languages Act.
 - (b) the opportunities which exist for the establishment of a central database of translators and the making available of a central database of translated material.
 - (c) the opportunities which exist for the establishment of a central database of Irish language training providers.
 - (d) how support can be made available to the education institutes to develop a syllabus that relates to public services and examine the appropriate examinations and qualifications associated with this.
 - (e) the advantages which might accrue from Oifig Ghaeilge in consultation with the LGMSB, organising seminars for the purpose of sharing information and experience with regard to implementation of Irish language schemes and/or whether a network of oifig Ghaeilge might be established under the aegis of the LGMSB.
 - (f) The opportunities which exist for examples of best practice, based on the experience of Oifig Ghaeilge to be shared with all local authorities, perhaps through the development of a web page for this purpose on the LGMSB's website.
 - (g) **a place-names committee** be established in every city and county council which would have clear policies in relation to signage and the naming of new housing developments, road, streets etc. and that the best advice be sought in this regard.

I've been privileged to sit in on some of the meetings of An Fochoiste Gaeilge which is Chaired by Mr. Alec Fleming, Clare Co. Manager. The work undertaken by the Fo-Choiste includes not only ensuring Local Authorities compliance with the Irish Language Scheme, but also promoting interest in different aspects of Irish language and culture, is impressive.

You will have heard from Mr. Terry Ó Niaidh, Manager North Tipperary Co. Co. and from Mr. Michael McLoone, Manager. Donegal Co. Co. of the progress made and how much more is in the pipeline. The achievements of An Fo-Choiste Gaeilge since it was set up cannot be overstated and on behalf of Comhairle Gaeilge an Rialtais Áitiúil, I wish to thank Alec Fleming and his hard-working band for the work they have undertaken and their achievements so far. *Nár laga Dia an Fo-Choiste Gaeilge agus an obair fhóna atá ar siúl aige.* I look forward to an Fo-Choiste's report back to the Minister on progress with its own work programme and its comments on the recommendations made by an Chomhairle Gaeilge referred to earlier.

I know from past experience that English is the most prominent language used by the Irish speaking public when contacting State agencies. This is principally because they recognise the reality that the vast majority of the State agencies not only do not openly offer their services through Irish, but neither do they have enough staff competent in Irish to deliver an adequate service through the language.

There are exceptions – indeed it must be acknowledged that many local authorities have made serious attempts to serve their Irish speaking communities with fairness and consideration. Donegal, Galway, Clare, Kerry and Waterford County Councils are ones that readily spring to mind. Those local authorities would of course have a Gaeltacht element

within them but had always accepted without question that service through Irish was available as a right. They ensured that people knew where exactly it was available, from whom it was available and that there was no disadvantage in doing business through Irish with them.

Hopefully, much of the negativity surrounding Irish as a language of local government and business is about to change. The spirit and direction of the Official Languages Act; the different Language Schemes that are now approved by the Department for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, the new status gained by Irish as a working language of the European Union, and the bilingual commitment enshrined in the present Programme for Government all work to change any 'will do' attitude of local authorities and public bodies towards providing services through the Irish language. Central to this change in attitudes are the tools that Fo-Choiste Gaeilge an Rialtais Áitiúil, with the approval of Comhairle Gaeilge an Rialtais Áitiúil and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government is now putting at their disposal.

Mar fhocal scoir, níor cheart a mheas gur gnó don Roinn Comhshaoil, Oidhreacht agus Rialtas Áitiúil, ná don Roinn Oideachais, ná don Roinn Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta amháin é cur na Gaeilge ar chóir shábhála. Ní gnó do Bhisop amháin é, ná do Ó hEochagáin amháin é ach oiread...Pápa, b'fhéidir! Ní fadhb athbheochana ach fadhb athnuachana atá i gceist. Níl an Ghaeilge marbh ar fad fós - tá anam inti fós ainneoin í a bheith ag cúlú an t-am ar fad. Ach b'fhéidir go bhfuil an lá ag gealú don Ghaeilge agus an mhíoruilt theanga in aice láimhe, b'fhéidir sin le cúnamh Dé, ach idir an dá linn it is the responsibility of all the departments of state and all the powers invested in both houses of the Oireachtas to play their part in this 'last ditch'

effort to save a language that is the most distinctive sign of our nationality and an integral part of our culture.

The need to do so is now greater than ever. A small state like ours has a particular need to preserve its national traditions, to strengthen its independence of outlook and to safeguard its identity. It is through Irish as a living language that we must surely retain a lively sense and understanding of the unique and essential elements of the Irish character.

Go gcumhdaí Dia sibh agus an teanga Ghaeilge.