

Opening Statement

Chair, Vice-chair, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the invitation to present Fórsa's observations on recruitment in the public service considering the provision in the Official Languages Act which requires 20% of recruits in the public service to have competency in the Irish language. This provision aims to ensure that the public have access to services bilingually through Irish and English and that the State can effectively deliver its services bilingually.

Fórsa fully supports initiatives that will empower workers to use the Irish language, both professionally and socially. We welcome and look forward to greater use and enjoyment of our national language in workplaces and in communities, along with increased learning and fluency among workers.

Our union has long supported the promotion of our language. We run the Fórsa Gaeltacht Scheme annually, which provides a contribution towards Gaeltacht fees for children, and further expanded the scheme this year so that more families could avail of the grants. We have also 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.

Now, with the legal target of 20% of recruits in the public sector to have competency in the language, we want to ensure our members have fair and sufficient access to training. This may include the provision of Irish language courses and paid time off from regular duties to facilitate their learning and upskilling in the language to achieve the required competency.

The target set down in law is ambitious. However, the lack of meaningful engagement and negotiation with unions on how to meet the target is concerning, particularly given the potential implications for the existing workforce. Fórsa, the largest union representing public sector workers, was not consulted by government in either the preparation of the National Plan for Irish Language Public Services, or the awaited Action Plan for 2025-2027.

We know that, at present, approximately 11% of the public service have the required competency to carry out their duties through the medium of Irish. This research was highlighted in the National Plan for Irish Language Services and carried out by the University of Galway. We also know from Census figures, that less than 2% of the population use Irish on a daily basis.

We agree wholeheartedly that people should have the option to avail of our public services through our national language. However, the provision of public services must also be demand led, a feature also recognised in the National Plan. Yet, there appears to be no data available to identify existing demand levels across the public sector from service users.

Any design of recruitment practices that may restrict or limit employment opportunities for individuals without Irish language proficiency must be evidence-based and linked to service demand.

Additionally, any recruitment measures that could negatively impact our members by limiting their mobility within the public sector or reducing their access to promotional opportunities must be negotiated between unions and the employer.

Our members support a positive, solutions-focused approach to increasing the use of Irish and the quality of Irish language public services. However, achieving this important objective must not come at the expense of our existing, hard-working committed public sector workforce.

We therefore call on the Government to immediately engage with unions on the matter and we strongly urge this Committee to make that recommendation to the Government.

Before we conclude, it would be remiss of us not to highlight the growing threat of racism and anti-migrant sentiment on our streets. And where there is racism on our streets, it will also exist in our workplaces.

Public sector recruitment should strive to combat racial inequalities and promote diversity and inclusion 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 services of the state bilingually, including those with no previous experience of the language.

We look forward to working with relevant parties to support the delivery of the objectives of the Official Languages Act, and thank you again for your invitation to present here today.

Thank you.