

31st January 2012

Ms. Máire Uí Churraoin
Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
Na Forbacha
Co. Galway

Re: Review of the Official Languages Act 2003

A Chara,

Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Authority, welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the review of the Official Languages Act 2003 which is being undertaken by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

I wish to begin our submission on the review of this significant piece of legislation by highlighting the importance of the Irish language for the tourism industry in Ireland. Our language is at the heart of so many communities throughout Ireland, both within Gaeltacht areas and outside of them, and it contributes in a very tangible way to the strong sense of identity and place that is experienced and commented upon by so many of our overseas visitors. It is central to defining our distinctiveness as a people and as a tourist destination, and our visitors relish the many opportunities presented to them to engage with this rich and authentic element of our culture.

For its part, Fáilte Ireland has taken a number of initiatives designed to attract more high value visitors to Gaeltacht areas in particular and to facilitate their engagement with the Irish language in general.

In 2009, 352,000 visitors overnighted in a Gaeltacht (figures weighted to CSO), generating €91m for those areas. We do not have data on the Gaeltacht as a motivating factor for visitors or whether those staying in these areas are staying because they are in Gaeltacht areas. However, we can assume that it is a significant factor as the Gaeltacht is recognised by many visitors as a bastion of traditional Irish culture, which itself is a key motivating factor for visitors when choosing to holiday in Ireland.

In 2009, 3.3 million visitors engaged in heritage/culture related activities and spent an estimated €1.9 billion while in Ireland. Within that total, 376,000 attended festivals/events, spending €296 million, showing potential for even deeper engagement with cultural events. In 2010, 2.9 million visitors engaged in culture and heritage with 433,000 attending festivals and events (no corresponding revenue figure available yet).

In promoting the Gaeltacht and the Irish language, Fáilte Ireland features a number of pages on its consumer-facing Discover Ireland website as per links below, including the Gaeltacht islands and a Gaeltacht Craft Trail in Connemara.

- (a) [www.discoverireland.ie/Things-To-Do/Arts-Culture-and-Heritage/Uniquely-Irish/Language-\(1\)](http://www.discoverireland.ie/Things-To-Do/Arts-Culture-and-Heritage/Uniquely-Irish/Language-(1))
- (b) www.discoverireland.ie/Ireland-s-Islands/Things-to-do/Gaeltacht-Islands
- (c) www.discoverireland.ie/PlacestoGo/Connemara

In 2011, Fáilte Ireland developed a category for B&B's in the Gaeltacht called "A Gaeltacht Experience/Blaiseadh Gaeilge sa Ghaelacht" for visitors with an interest in the Irish language and culture and for B&B owners who wish to share their knowledge of the Irish language and culture with visitors.

Many Gaeltacht based businesses benefit from a range of business supports offered by Fáilte Ireland. Fáilte Ireland will continue to work with Gaeltacht based businesses in developing the necessary skills to use the Irish language and their location in the Gaeltacht as a means of attracting visitors and enhancing a sense of place and distinctiveness.

The continued use of the Irish language both within and outside of Gaeltacht areas is crucially important if we are to maintain and enhance what defines us as a tourist destination. While Fáilte Ireland clearly understands that we are a community first and a destination second, the generation of employment and revenue through tourism contributes to the sustenance of many communities, particularly in geographically peripheral areas. In terms of the Irish language, it is important therefore, that we strike an appropriate and locally acceptable balance between encouraging the continued use of Irish among local communities, and facilitating the engagement of visitors with the language.

It is Fáilte Ireland's view that this delicate balance is not being successfully achieved by the current provisions in the Official Languages Act 2003. This view relates to two aspects of the Act which the Authority believes need to be addressed in the current review and in the subsequent implementation of any provisions. These particular aspects of the Act are as follows:

1. The provision that only the Irish version of a Gaeltacht placename exists in law, and therefore, only this version can be used on any signage erected by or on behalf of a Local Authority, resulting in Irish-only road signage within Gaeltacht areas.
2. The provision that within Gaeltacht areas, all interpretative, orientation and trail-head signage must contain word for word translations from the English into Irish.

The Authority's views on, and recommendations in relation to these provisions are set out below.

Gaeltacht placenames

Fáilte Ireland regularly receives complaints from visitors travelling within the Gaeltacht about the difficulties they experience in recognising placenames on the directional road signs due to the fact that these rarely correspond to those used on their maps and in their guidebooks. The vast majority of our overseas visitors will know Irish placenames within Gaeltacht areas, and outside of them, in their English form. The guidebooks, maps and websites that they use both in their countries of origin prior to their visit and while on holiday here, are much more likely to feature placements within Gaeltacht areas in their English form.

Following a search on Google analytics, Fáilte Ireland found that a larger number of visitors searched for a Gaeltacht island under the English name such as Inishmore and Inisheer, as opposed to the Irish version. As a result, the names of the islands contained within the Discover Ireland website referred to above are included in both their English and Irish forms.

It is recommended that the provisions of the Act be changed to allow for road signage erected by or on behalf of a Local Authority within Gaeltacht areas, and relating to placenames with the Gaeltacht, to be bi-lingual. In order to maintain the primacy of the Irish language within the Gaeltacht, it is recommended that the Irish version of the placename should appear on the sign in capital lettering, with the English version in lower case italics above it, essentially representing a reversal of the format for signage which is used outside the Gaeltacht areas. The important objective from a language perspective is that our visitors recognise the primacy of the Irish language within the Gaeltacht areas, which will be achieved by this proposed revision to the Act.

Interpretative signage

Interpretative signage offers a tremendous opportunity to engage visitors with the Irish language. However, the present requirement to provide all interpretative, orientation and trail-head signage in both Irish and English with full word for word translations represents a 'tick the box' exercise which, in the Authority's view, does little or nothing to advance the interest of the visitor in the language.

Research into interpretative signage and tourist behaviour has shown that the more words there are on an interpretative panel, the less likely the visitor is to read it. It has also been demonstrated that the speed at which the tourist reads a panel increases with an increase in the number of words on the panel. Good interpretative panel design, therefore, involves a relatively low word count combined with strong visuals. A requirement to have direct word for word translations from the English into the Irish on the same panel mitigates against the engagement of the visitor with the language. The provision of a separate panel in Irish, while an acceptable solution from a design perspective, is however a tokenistic exercise which does little or nothing to engage the visitor as they are likely to read the English version and ignore the Irish version.

Fáilte Ireland submits that this provision is overly focussed on outputs, intent on simply 'ticking the box' in relation to the use of the Irish language, rather than arriving at solutions that are outcome focussed which encourage a more meaningful engagement with the Irish language among our visitors (including our domestic visitors). A good example of an interpretative sign which is focussed on outcome (engaging the visitor with the language) rather than output (word-for-word translation) focussed solution, is one which intersperses Irish words and phrases throughout the English. Such a sign will not only ensure that the Irish is read, but that it is understood and it may even trigger greater interest in the language on the part of the visitor. The attached example of an interpretative sign from the Wild Coastal Trail, produced by The Highland Council in Scotland, illustrates how the language could be used in a more engaging way for visitors, without having to translate everything. It is considered that a greater proportion of Irish could be used on interpretative boards in Ireland, as are used in the attached example, focussing on the translation of headings, key words and phrases. The same could apply to trailhead signage for the likes of looped walks and cycling trails.

Conclusions

It is crucial that our visitors' experience of the Irish language while in Ireland is positive and memorable rather than frustrating and tokenistic. Fáilte Ireland believes that the revisions proposed in this submission on the review of the Official Languages Act 2003, and its implementation, will not impact negatively on the overall objectives of the Act. In fact, they are likely to result in a more positive experience of the language by our visitors. It is important that we strike an appropriate balance between protecting the authenticity and continued use by communities of the Irish language within Gaeltacht areas, and facilitating visitor engagement with the language so that they return home having experienced a strong sense of our culture and picked up a 'cúpla focal' along the way.

Fáilte Ireland respectfully requests that the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht considers this submission and takes into account the recommendations contained herein in its review of the Official Languages Act 2003.

Is mise, le meas,



Paddy Mathews
Manager, Destination Development