

Meath County Council Irish Language Scheme 2021-2024

**Prepared under Section 11 and revised under Section 15 of the Official
Languages Act 2003**

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

Meath County Council has revised its scheme under the Official Languages Act 2003. Section 11 of that act provides that public bodies have a duty to prepare a statutory scheme specifying the services that they will provide:

- through the medium of Irish
- through the medium of English, and
- through the medium of both Irish and English

Meath County Council's primary objective for this revised scheme is to create and foster an atmosphere of bilingualism within all its sections/departments. Irish speaking customers will be encouraged to transact their business in Irish and it is intended that customers and staff alike will be comfortable with conducting official business through the Irish language.

1.2 Inputs to the scheme

Section 12 of the Act provides that guidelines shall be prepared to assist public bodies in the preparation of schemes. These guidelines were published by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in September 2004 and this scheme has been prepared in line with those guidelines.

In revising this Scheme, Meath County Council undertook the following:

- (i) A public consultation process seeking submissions from the public on the revision of the draft scheme (held from August 25th to September 30th, 2020)
- (ii) An internal audit of services provided/capable of being provided through Irish.

Meath County Council received a total of 5 submissions from the consultation process and the scheme's revision has been informed by these submissions. An internal Steering Committee consisting of representatives of senior management and the Council's Irish Language Officer prepared the revised scheme.

The Scheme has been informed by the national '20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030'.

1.3 Commencement Date of Scheme

This scheme will take effect following confirmation by the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. The scheme shall come into effect on 01 May, 2021 and shall remain in force for a period of three years or until a new scheme has been confirmed by the Minister (pursuant to Section 15 of the Official Languages Act), whichever is later.

1.4 Overview of Meath County Council

Meath County Council has responsibility for the administration of County Meath and its stated purpose is to drive the economic, social, cultural and environmental improvement of the county to enhance the quality of life of the people of Meath.

The Council's vision, as set out in its Corporate Plan 2019-2024 is: *"To make Meath the lead county for economic prosperity, social development and environmental protection, with efficient and good value services and a Council representing the people and communities of County Meath in an effective and accountable manner."*

The functions of the Council are classified into the following eight programme groups as follows:

- Housing and Building
- Road Transportation and Safety
- Water Supply and Sewerage
- Development Incentives and Control
- Environmental Protection
- Recreation and Amenity
- Agriculture, Education, Health & Welfare
- General and Miscellaneous

The Council's Corporate Plan 2019-2024 sets out the objectives and strategies for the authority and our actions and operations are guided by the following core values:

- Strong customer, citizen and community focus
- High standards of conduct, probity and impartiality
- Accountable, Accessible and Responsive
- Innovative and Sustainability
- Integrity and respect for all

1.5 Customers and Clients

Meath had a recorded population of 195,044 (Census 2016), an increase of 19.8% in 10 years, since 2006. Some 10.1% of the county's population is non-national. The county is home to the third youngest population in the state, with an average age of 35.2 years (national average is 37.4 years).

Meath is divided into the six Municipal Districts of: Ashbourne; Kells, Navan, Laytown-Bettystown, Ratoath and Trim.

The wide-ranging and diverse work of the Council means that it has many target audiences to communicate with and they have been identified as being:

Audience	Who they are:
Citizens of Meath	Nearly 200,000 people living in 68,500 households in the county.
Councillors	The 40 elected members of Meath County Council.
Rate-Payers	The over 4,400 rateable businesses in the county.
Oireachtas Members	The TDs and Senators based in Meath, as well as, the four MEPs (Midlands-Northwest). Other relevant members of the Oireachtas.
Government	The various structures of national government including the Cabinet, Departments and civil servants.
Agencies	Those national agencies whose role and activities impact on Meath and Meath County Council.
Employees	The 830 staff who work for Meath County Council
Potential Employees	The people who will work for Meath County Council in the future.
Investors	Foreign Direct Investors as well as Irish investors who have already invested in Meath or may be considering investing in the county.
Visitors	Foreign as well as Irish visitors to the county.
Media	Local media as well as national and international media.
Community and Voluntary Sector	Community and residents groups; PPN members and other voluntary groups working within Meath

1.6 Content of the Scheme

This scheme builds on the achievements of the initial scheme and has been developed to consolidate progress. Future enhancement of the services provided by the Council are identified in this revised scheme.

Meath County Council commits to an ongoing assessment of the level of demand for its services through Irish and will strive to meet this demand on an incremental basis.

1.7 Extent of Current Services Delivered through Irish

The primary objective of the Act is to ensure better availability and a higher standard of public services through Irish.

In this regard, Meath County Council currently provides very limited services either bilingually or through the medium of Irish. Conscious of the need to introduce a recognised method of gradually improving the level and standard of the services to be provided through Irish, the Council commits through its Customer Charter to: *“accommodate our customers who wish to conduct their business through the Irish language”*.

Chapter 2

Summary of Council Services and Facilities – Language Usage

2.1 Introduction

This Chapter sets out the position in relation to service provision/activities by individual Departments of Meath County Council. The first part of the chapter lists the various Departments/service sections and provides an overview of their function. The second section outlines the offices and facilities of the Council. While the third section sets out how the official language regime operates in each Department.

2.2 Overview of Departments and Sections - Customer Facing Services

The Council's customer facing services are delivered by the following sections:

Housing	Community Development
Transportation	Environment
Water Services	Fire and Emergency Services
Planning	Library Services
Economic Development and Tourism	Arts Office

Housing - The Housing Department's core remit is the provision of social housing supports to those unable to provide accommodation from their own resources, the provision of homeless services and the delivery of other services including the administration of adaptation grants, private rented inspections, provision of Traveller Accommodation and collaboration with Approved Housing Bodies.

Transportation - The Transportation Department is responsible for the provision, maintenance and improvement of: regional and local roads; parks and playgrounds; public open spaces; bridge remediation; sustainable transport schemes; road safety schemes; car parking; and public lighting.

Water Services - The Water Services Department implements the Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Irish Water. As agents for Irish Water, it works to safeguard the provision and distribution of the highest quality drinking water supply and to manage the treatment and disposal of waste water in the county.

Planning - The Planning Department supports the sustainable development of the county through the Meath County Development Plan and the development management process. The Department manages the planning application, planning enforcement and building control functions of the Council.

Economic Development and Tourism - The Economic Development and Tourism Department promotes local employment, local enterprise and export-led growth by

working in partnership with local businesses. The Department also supports the development of tourism and the promotion of the county for investment. It includes the Local Enterprise Office.

Community Development - The Community Department provides a range of services relating to community development, community facilities and broadband and supports the implementation of a range of programmes including the Local Community and Development Plan. The Department manages a number of funding schemes and includes the secretariat for the Public Participation Network (PPN).

Environment - The Environment Department enforce environmental legislation, as well as, dealing with derelict sites, managing flooding mitigation measures, recycling facilities and landfill sites, implementing environmental awareness programmes. The Department also coordinates the Council's climate change actions.

Fire and Emergency Services - The Fire and Rescue Service provides a range of functions including the operational response to fire prevention; firefighting and rescue services; community fire safety; technical fire prevention; and major emergency planning and pre-incident planning. The Council also hosts the Meath Civil Defense.

Library Service - Meath Library Service provides a countywide branch network, local studies department and a schools service. In addition to an on-going programme to improve access, the service provides a wide programme of cultural, literary events and festivals each year.

Arts Office - The Arts Office delivers a range of programmes, funding opportunities, initiatives and events aimed at supporting the arts and creative sector in the county as well as encouraging increased engagement and participation.

2.3 Overview of Departments and Sections - Supporting Services

The Council also has a number of supporting services, including:

Corporate Services	Human Resources
Finance	Information Systems

Meath County Council also hosts the national Age Friendly shared service for the local government sector.

Corporate Services - Corporate Services facilitates the work of the Elected Members of the Council. It oversees various governance processes and ensures compliance with certain legislative requirements such as data protection. The department includes customer services, communications and media services, manages the Council's facilities and promotes a strong health and safety culture.

Finance – The Finance section includes procurement, payment processing, income collection, banking, housing loans, insurance administration, budgeting and financial reporting. The Department manages and monitors the income and expenditure of the Council. The Motor Tax function is within the Finance Department.

Human Resources - Human Resources identifies staffing requirements with a focus on recruitment, selection and retention of staff. The department also implements the learning and development programme to enable staff to improve their skills and knowledge and contribute to their professional development and personal wellbeing.

Information Systems - The Information Systems Department provides a wide range of IT support services across the organisation.

Age Friendly Shared Service - Age Friendly Ireland is a shared service of local government hosted by Meath County Council on behalf of the sector. It supports and provides technical guidance to the 31 local authority led Age Friendly programmes nationwide.

2.7 Council Offices and Facilities

The majority of services are provided from Meath County Council's headquarters in Buvinda House, Navan. The Council does also operate Civic Offices in Ashbourne; Duleek; Dunshaughlin; Kells; and Trim.

The purpose of the Civic Offices is to provide quality customer services with a public counter facility in each office where customers can conduct their business with the Council across a range of service areas. The Customer Service Team is the first point of contact for the majority of the Council's customers, as they operate the public counters in Headquarters and the Civic Offices and also operate the contact centre – central telephone network.

The Finance and Housing Departments also operate public counters in Buvinda House for cash transactions; motor tax and housing appointments.

The Council also operates a library network of 12 branches located in: Navan; Ashbourne; Athboy; Duleek; Dunboyne; Dunshaughlin; Kells; Nobber; Oldcastle; Ráth Chairn; Trim; and Slane. The Council also operates facilities such as recycling centres and other community facilities.

2.8 Operating Language of Each Department/Section

Meath County Council acknowledges that there are relatively low levels of Irish language competence among its staff cohort. While there are some notable exceptions, the Council

commits to addressing this deficiency over the lifetime of this scheme. Actions to address this are set out in the next chapter.

However, with the structures it has created, customers can conduct their business, across all Departments/section, with the Council in the Irish Language. This is achieved by including the Irish Language Officer, with the cooperation of the Customer Service Team, as a front line point of contact with Irish speaking customers.

That said, some of the Council’s Departments/sections can directly offer a comprehensive bilingual service or a limited bilingual service, as set out below. All other services channel their bilingual service through the Irish Language Officer.

3.5.1 Comprehensive Bilingual Service

Meath County Council can currently offer a comprehensive bilingual service in a number of its library branches and through the designated Irish Language Officer.

	Section/Department	Comment
Comprehensive Bilingual Service	Library Service	At 5 branches only: Library HQ Navan; Ashbourne; Ráth Chairn; Trim; and Slane
	Corporate Services	Irish Language Officer – designated point of first contact for Irish language queries and service requirements.

3.5.2 Limited bilingual service

A number of Departments have a limited compliment of staff that can provide a bilingual service directly to customers.

	Section/Department	Comment
Limited Bilingual Service	Corporate Service	Customer Services at Buvinda House; Trim; Ashbourne
	Environment	General Queries
	Finance	Some Motor Tax functions

The provision of a full Irish language service in these Departments is not guaranteed as it depends on the availability of certain key staff.

Chapter 3

Council Services - Bilingual Commitments and Enhancements

3.2 General Policy

Meath County Council is committed to fostering an atmosphere of bilingualism within all its sections/departments and to securing an adequate number of staff competent to provide a service through Irish. Given the current low level of Irish language competence within the Council, this objective will take some time to realise.

Meath County Council has a designated Irish Language Officer and dedicated Customer Service Team and they are the first points of contact for customers wishing to conduct business in Irish. At present, all written correspondence received in Irish is responded to in Irish.

The commitments set out in this chapter build on the initial language scheme and the progress that the Council has achieved in that time. The commitments will enhance services and support the established structures for providing quality customer services, including through the Irish language, and will encourage a wider use of the Irish language more generally within the Council.

3.2 Communication with the Public - Oral Communication

Meath County Council's Customer Service Plan outlines the key approach to customer service and the standards that customers can expect in their dealings with the Council.

3.2.1 Customer Service – Public Counters

Meath County Council customer service team applies Quality Customer Service (QCS) principles in dealing with customers. Over the lifetime of this scheme, this will include:

- to give the name of the Local Authority in Irish and English
- to be familiar with the basic greetings in Irish.

Arrangements are in place so that a team member can put a customer in touch with the Irish Language Officer or officer responsible for offering the service required through Irish, where available.

At each of these primary points, front line staff will have a list of staff in the relevant section that are available to provide a more comprehensive service through Irish.

The public counters in each section will display notices inviting the public to use Irish.

Commitments in this section - over the lifetime of the scheme.

3.3 Communication with the Public - Written Communication

Communication with the general public happens primarily through English but in both Irish and English, where possible. The Council's key means of communication include:

- ◆ Publications
- ◆ Website
- ◆ Social Media
- ◆ Press Releases and News Statements
- ◆ Application Forms and Brochures
- ◆ Signage

3.3.1 Council's Communications Strategy

The Council will review its Communication Strategy with a view to identifying the Gaeltacht community as a specific target audience in its strategy, increasing use of the Irish language on its social media accounts and in providing a bilingual service in other communication priority actions, where possible.

3.3.2 Publications – General Provisions

Council documents intended for an audience outside of the state and documents intended for internal use will in general be made available in English only.

Any other publication not listed and not referred to in any other section will be considered on a case by case basis with due regard for public interest.

3.3.3 Media Relations and Press Statements

Press releases relating to the Gaeltacht Area will be produced bilingually and circulated to the Irish language and English language media simultaneously.

10% of News Statements relating to the Gaeltacht Area will be produced bilingually circulated to the Irish language and English language media simultaneously.

20% of total Press Releases will be produced bilingually and circulated simultaneously.

Meath County Council commits to providing a spokesperson to talk to the Irish language media on matters relative to the Gaeltacht area(s) should the need arise, subject to advance reasonable notice e.g. minimum 24 hours

3.3.4 Brochures, Information Leaflets and Application Forms

10% of new Information Leaflets and Application Forms to be produced by the Council shall be fully bilingual.

50% of new brochures and information leaflets to be produced will be produced bilingually by the local authorities by the end of this scheme.

Other existing information: Documents produced for public consumption will be available bilingually, such as applications forms.

3.3.5 Council Website and Social Media Accounts

30% of the documents on the website (excluding technical documents) will be bilingual within the first year of the scheme, and 30% minimum will be maintained throughout the lifetime of the scheme.

Meath County Council shall make provisions to make its existing computer services and any new or existing interactive services, where feasible, available through Irish. In particular, it will explore the feasibility of expanding the bilingual content of its dedicated consultation portal – consult.meath.ie.

Meath County Council will initiate the use of Irish on its social media accounts to provide relevant information and engagement with its followers, where appropriate. Meath County Council will continue to explore opportunities for improving how its electronic communications policies can facilitate a wider use of the Irish language.

Commitments in this section - over the lifetime of the scheme.

3.4 Designated Irish Language Officer

Meath County Council's designated Irish Language Officer acts a point of first contact in supporting an enhanced level of bilingual service. This post was established in 2020.

The Council has established a dedicated email account for Irish Language queries and where customers wish to conduct their business 'as Gaeilge': gaeilge@meathcoco.ie Queries received via this dedicated email address are managed by our Irish Language Officer and are dealt with in accordance with the Council's Customer Charter, which is also available in Irish on the Council's website.

The Council's website will feature and promote the role of the Irish Language Officer and the Council's commitment to providing a bilingual service to customers, with this Officer as a first-point of contact.

The Irish Language Officer will manage a listing of staff across the organisation available to provide services 'as Gaeilge', as well as, updating the list of the services which are available bilingually. It is envisaged that this policy will help reverse the current low demand for services through Irish.

Commitments in this section - over the lifetime of the scheme.

3.5 Recruitment & Selection and Learning & Development

3.5.1 Recruitment and Selection

The Human Resources Department will address the issue of the Irish language in relation to recruitment, development and management of staff.

New staff will be provided with an induction pack containing a copy of our agreed scheme in order to ensure that they are made aware of our commitments under the legislation.

Where bilingual communication skills through the medium of Irish and English are considered essential or desirable for any post, this will be outlined in the job specification.

In the context of our recruitment and selection and mobility policies, regard will be given to proficiency in the Irish language where such would facilitate the achievement of specific commitments made in the scheme.

3.5.2 Learning and Development

Meath County Council is committed to making opportunities available for staff to attend Irish language training courses as resources permit. Staff will be advised of facilities/opportunities to improve their competency in Irish.

Opportunities to develop the Irish language competence of staff will continue to be provided and arrangements will be made for the provision of Irish language training in order to:

- Support staff in maintaining and developing their proficiency in the Irish language;
- Enhance the capacity of staff to meet Irish language obligations.

Commitments in this section - over the lifetime of the scheme.

3.6 Council Meetings and Events

3.6.1 Council Meetings

Efforts will continue to maintain an element of bilingualism during all Council meetings.

Anyone from the Gaeltacht area(s) wishing to speak in Irish as part of a delegation to a meeting of the Kells Municipal District on matters relative to the Gaeltacht area(s) shall be facilitated, subject to advance notice, and in accordance with the Council's Standing Orders and its Protocol for Deputations at Municipal District Meetings.

3.6.2 Corporate Events

Efforts will continue to be made to introduce an element of bilingualism into the proceedings of major Public Meetings.

As part of the Council's efforts to positively promote Irish in the community, high profile corporate events shall incorporate an element of bilingualism into the proceedings.

Meath County Council will continue to enhance its annual programme of events and activities as part of Seachtain na Gaeilge, which will include a mix of public events and internal activities to promote the Irish language among staff members.

Commitments in this section - over the lifetime of the scheme.

3.7 Libraries Development Programme

Meath County Council library service is committed to the protection and conservation of the literary heritage of the Gaeltacht and the cultural heritage of the county. The opening and successful operation of a branch library in the heart of Ráth Chairn (from 2007) demonstrates the commitment of the local authority to deliver library services in Irish to the Gaeltacht community.

The annual library programme delivers a wide variety of Irish language events and activities across the branch network ranging from Irish language book clubs, conversation circles to Irish literary events. Irish language events are also embedded in annual library programmes, for example: Children's Book Festival; Bealtaine; and the Summer Programme.

The library service delivers the annual Gaeltacht scholarships scheme and supports the on-going development of the archive in Ráth Chairn.

The library service shall commit to the expansion of Irish language programming at existing service points with particular emphasis on expanding the number of Irish language conversation circles. As new service points come on stream, such as at Bettystown, the library service shall ensure that Irish language programming is at the heart of service delivery in these flagship developments.

Commitments in this section - over the lifetime of the scheme.

3.8 Working with An Ghaeltacht

3.8.1 Protecting the Gaeltacht

Meath County Council is committed to the protection and development of the Gaeltacht areas and to continuing its long-standing relationships with the communities of Ráth Chairn and Baile Ghib. The Council will strive to ensure that its services are available in Irish to the people of the Gaeltacht.

The Meath County Development Plan will support development that protects and enhances the distinctive linguistic and cultural heritage of the Gaeltacht and liaises with the local community in this regard.

3.8.2 Working with Gaeltacht Communities

Public Meetings organised by the Council in the Gaeltacht shall be in Irish only, or fully bilingual.

Information directed at the public in the Gaeltacht will be available in Irish only, or in both English and Irish where appropriate

3.8.3 Gaeltacht Service Towns

Meath County Council will examine the role it can play in supporting the establishment of Navan, Trim and Athboy as the Gaeltacht Service Towns in the county, in cooperation with the relevant statutory bodies, Gaeltacht communities and other stakeholders.

3.8.4 Placenames

Meath County Council shall use the official Placenames of Gaeltacht areas for official purposes.

The official Irish language name of Gaeltacht places shall become the default on registers and databases relative to the Gaeltacht areas of Ráth Chairn and Baile Ghib.

Commitments in this section - over the lifetime of the scheme.

3.9 Supporting Gaelscoileanna and Irish Language Organisations

Meath County Council is conscious that the county hosts nine gaelscoileanna and recognises and respects the linguistic preferences of Irish language schools, as well as other Irish language organisations and groups operating throughout the county and nationally. The provision of services in Irish to these particular bodies and groups will be maintained.

The Irish Language Officer is the designated first-point of contact for gaelscoileanna and other Irish speaking groups or organisations and any dealings with them shall be in the Irish language only or bilingual where practical.

Commitments in this section - over the lifetime of the scheme.

Chapter 4

Monitoring, Revision and Promotion of the Agreed Scheme

4.1 Monitoring and Revision

Responsibility for ensuring implementation of the scheme, as well as monitoring and reviewing the scheme, will rest with senior management of Meath County Council.

The day-to-day monitoring will be carried out primarily by line managers in each of the service areas (who are responsible for the implementation of the scheme within their own areas).

This will be done with guidance and support from the Irish Language Officer and regular reports will be provided to the relevant Director of Services.

A report on the implementation of the provisions of the scheme, along with details of demand for the services provided, will be provided in the Council's Annual Report.

4.2 Promotion of the Scheme

The contents of this scheme, along with the commitments and provisions contained therein, will be publicised by means of:

- ◆ Press Release
- ◆ Advertising of provisions
- ◆ Circulation to appropriate agencies and public bodies
- ◆ Website and Social Media Platforms

A copy of this scheme will be forwarded to Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga.