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**STATEMENT BY DR. ORLAIGH QUINN, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL PROTECTION TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SERVICE OVERSIGHT AND PETITIONS ON MATTERS ARISING OUT OF THE COMIMISINÉIR TEANGA'S REPORT RELATING TO THE AWARDING OF BONUS MARKS FOR PROFICIENCY IN IRISH FOR INTERNAL STAFF IN THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL PROTECTION.**

Chairman, Deputies and Senators, thank you for inviting the Department of Social Protection to address the Committee. The Department delivers a wide range of income, employment and other services through its own network of almost 130 offices and throughout Ireland from some 900 other locations. The schemes and services delivered benefit some 2.1 million people. The Department is committed to providing a service through Irish to its customers and to the continued development and training of staff to facilitate the provision of services through Irish. A range of supports is available to equip frontline staff with the necessary skills and confidence to deliver a quality customer service in Irish by phone, letter and in person.

With almost seven thousand staff in the Department, the Department has always had significant involvement in running competition promotions across all grades. In recent years, and particularly due to the volumes of staff involved, the Department has been greatly assisted by the Commission for Public Service Appointments.

In relation to all competitions, the Department has always complied with all agreed circulars as set out for all Government Departments across the Civil Service.

In relation to the specific issue of how bonus marks should be awarded at internal competitions, the Department has always awarded bonus marks in accordance with Department of Finance Circular 43/75, as amended by circular 30/90, to those successfully panelled from the final competition interview. The Department is satisfied that it awards the bonus marks in the same way as all other government departments and in accordance with the Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA) Code of Practice.

Furthermore, the Department's competitive processes have in the past been subject to audit by the CPSA, including one of the competitions which is the subject of the Commissioner's report. The audit included the selection and assessment process, including the award of credit for language proficiency and the matter was found to be fully in order.

The Report of the investigations by the Commissioner Teanga was examined by the Department and in accordance with recommendation number 5, the matter was referred to the Department of Finance (now the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform) who

will be addressing the Committee today. At the time the Department suggested that the Commissioner might contact the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, who are responsible for setting the terms and conditions of service for civil servants.

The Department informed the Commissioner of this position on a number of occasions. We are not in a position to implement the recommendations because this would have the effect of unilaterally amending a centrally agreed policy. This would have major impacts far beyond the Department of Social Protection.

In conclusion, the Department fully supports the award of bonus marks for proficiency in Irish at interview and is satisfied that it is fully compliant with the Code of Practice of the CPSA, custom and practice in the Civil Service and Department of Finance Circulars. In the last 5 years there were 9 internal promotion competitions in the Department involving 4,500 staff all of whom had access to Irish language proficiency tests. The Department places great value on the promotion of Irish proficiency within its Department and on the process for awarding bonus marks at promotion competitions.