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English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
Second session**

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Item 4(a) of the provisional agenda *

**Reports: Governments on the situation in their countries and on the progress
made in the standardization of geographical names**

Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Submitted by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland**

Summary:

There is no single national names authority in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but there are thorough practices ensuring the accuracy and currency of geographical names. There are authorities overseeing names in both Scotland and Wales. For the island of Great Britain (but not Northern Ireland, which also forms part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), the geographical names as portrayed on products of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain are recognized as being authoritative. Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland, administered within Land and Property Services, performs a similar function in Northern Ireland. The full report provides an outline of the function of Ordnance Survey as the national mapping agency and its role with regard to toponymy, indicating developments since the 2019 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. It contains information on names policy, database management and geographical names products.

The report also describes the status of the Government's country register and territory register, which are maintained by its Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its Government Digital Service.

Geographical names for places and features outside the United Kingdom are the responsibility of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, whose objectives are described in the report. The Permanent Committee gathers information on names standardized by national authorities to inform the Government of appropriate names for use on its products.

A revised edition of the "Toponymic guidelines for map and other editors for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" was presented at the Eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. The Guidelines are kept up to date, for example when administrative changes are made. The full report includes information on such changes and how to find the information

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**Prepared by the UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

REPORT OF ACTIVITIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Ordnance Survey

Ordnance Survey (OS) ([Ordnance Survey | See A Better Place](#)) is the national mapping agency of Great Britain and as such is responsible for collecting geographical names information for national maps and geographical databases of England, Scotland and Wales.

Names Policy

The collection of consistent, definitive and authoritative descriptive annotations and proper names/postal numbers of buildings, places and features forms part of Ordnance Survey's public task. In 2015 Ordnance Survey introduced a new [Names Policy](#) which is published on the organisation's website.

Ordnance Survey is guided primarily by local usage and custom. It makes enquiries and consults appropriate authorities to establish, with as much authority as possible, the most suitable name, form, and spelling for all places. Sometimes more than one name is in use at the local level for a single feature and, in cases where the use of two names is sufficiently prevalent locally, it may be necessary to record and/or portray both. The final decision on the recording and publication of any name rests with Ordnance Survey. Having done this for over 200 years, Ordnance Survey has effectively become the *de facto* authority for geographical names in Great Britain although the use of the internet, along with crowdsourcing and other mapping applications, may be changing this very slowly.

Names are usually captured in English although there are occasions when it is appropriate to capture names in another language. The Welsh Language Act 1993, the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 give these languages special recognition under UK, Welsh and Scottish law. Where these languages are in common use (Welsh throughout Wales and Gaelic within the Outer Hebrides and Highlands), Ordnance Survey will apply dual names to features when both names are accepted and in local use. There needs to be evidence of active use of all names. Ordnance Survey will not record translations of English names into alternative languages, or vice-versa, in the absence of such evidence. It is worth noting that there are many examples where the name is only shown in Welsh or Gaelic as this is the accepted name. For further information about how this policy is applied to Welsh and Gaelic names see the [Gaelic Names Policy](#) and [Welsh Names Policy](#).

There are other languages used in Great Britain including Cornish and Lowland Scots that are recognised by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages but, in the absence of any UK legislation, names in these languages are not recorded as official names in Ordnance Survey data.

Products & Services

Ordnance Survey makes several datasets available free of charge under the terms of the Government Open Data Licence, including [OS Open Names](#). Introduced in 2015, OS Open Names contains over 870,000 named and numbered roads, nearly 44,000 settlements and over 1.6 million postcodes, all matched/mapped to the National Grid. The same data is available via the OS Names API (Application Programming Interface), a place, road and postcode verification tool that users can plug into a web site or API free of charge.

Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI), which is a Directorate of Land & Property Services (LPS), is the official mapping organisation.

In 1988, OSNI made a map called Éire Thuaidh (Ireland North), with place names in English and Gaelic (Irish) at 1:250,000 scale, which shows Northern Ireland and border counties in the Republic

of Ireland. This is now available through the Open Government Licence (OGL) at: [OSNI - Open Data \(arcgis.com\)](https://osni.gov.uk/open-data). This map was created as a one-off production and has not been updated.

Pointer® is the authoritative address database for Northern Ireland, and is maintained by LPS, with input from Local Councils and Royal Mail. It was created in 2002 and is the common standard address dataset for every property (addressable building) in Northern Ireland. Local councils can provide alternative language names (Gaelic or Ulster Scots) for street names. LPS holds approximately 550 alternative language street names within the OSNI Pointer address dataset, with the majority of these being in Gaelic.

A new version of the Pointer® product is being released in 2021. The new product is a result of the integration of Pointer addresses with OSNI Fusion largescale mapping. Globally unique identifiers (Fusion IDs) from Building and Land Parcel Fusion feature classes will be added to addresses. The Pointer Building Number and building classification attributes will also be added to Fusion large-scale mapping. This integration will provide additional intelligence to work in business areas across LPS and to all users of LPS mapping products.

Also of interest is the Placenames Northern Ireland website [Place Names NI - Home](https://placenamesni.gov.uk) which examines the history behind the placenames. For example, a search for Belfast gives the origin of the name: Gaelic - Béal Feirste ‘mouth of the sand-bank ford’. 2021 will see the PlacenamesNI website and content transfer from Land and Property Services (LPS) to the Centre for Data Digitisation and Analysis (CDDA) in Queens University Belfast (QUB). This will bring the PlacenamesNI project fully under the remit of QUB. CDDA is one of the leading Digital Humanities units within UK and Ireland with the [Historical Gazetteer of England’s Place-Names](https://www.britain.gov.uk/historical-gazetteer) project one of many the Centre has completed. LPS staff will support CDDA during the process until PlacenamesNI is fully operational at QUB.

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Maintained Datasets on GOV.UK

The United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office¹ (a new department formed from the merger of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development in September 2020) maintains and publishes a number of geographical names datasets on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk). UK Government is committed to data transparency and accessibility in the public domain, ensuring accurate and timely access to approved geographical names in publications, communications and for database development and support.

These datasets include:

[Geographical Names Index](https://www.gov.uk/geographical-names-index) - a site holding indexes of approved British English-language names for countries and UK overseas territories, as well as supporting information on the use of geographical names. Data can be viewed online or downloaded.

[Country names](https://www.gov.uk/country-names) – the index of country names for UK Government use, organised by ISO 3166 2-letter code, including short form country names, official state titles in line with Permanent Committee on Geographical Names policies and citizen names. Data can be viewed online or download as a CSV file.

[UK Overseas Territory names](https://www.gov.uk/uk-overseas-territory-names) - the index of approved UK Overseas Territory names, organised by ISO 3166 2-letter code, including territory names and citizen names. Data can be viewed online or download as a CSV file.

Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN)

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-development-office>

The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN)² is the United Kingdom’s authority on foreign geographical names. It formulates and coordinates policies and procedures for the proper writing of geographical names for places and features outside the United Kingdom, excluding the Antarctic, and to ensure the implementation of those policies across the UK Government. It gathers information on names standardised by global national authorities.

Toponymic Guidelines

A second edition of the “Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland” was presented to the Eleventh UNCSGN in 2017. As a digital document, this guide is updated as administrative or other changes are made; changes made since the 2019 UNGEGN session include the creation of the unitary authority area of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and Buckinghamshire becoming a unitary authority. A further change to Northamptonshire to form two unitary authorities is due in 2021. The up-to-date document is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/toponymic-guidelines>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/the-permanent-committee-on-geographical-names>