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English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
2023 session**

New York, 1 – 5 May 2023

Item 4 (a) of the provisional agenda *

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

National Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

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

Summary:

Though there is no single national names authority in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, there are thorough practices ensuring the accuracy and currency of geographical names. For Great Britain, the geographical names as portrayed on products of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain are recognized as being authoritative. Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland performs a similar function in Northern Ireland.

The full report outlines the function of Ordnance Survey as the national mapping agency and its role with regard to toponymy, noting developments since the 2021 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

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

The report also notes that the current edition of the “Toponymic guidelines for map and other editors for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland” was updated with administrative changes as required so that it remains up-to-date.

* GEGN.2/2023/

** The full report was prepared by UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, with input from Ordnance Survey and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

**REPORT OF ACTIVITIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND**

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

Summary

Though there is no single national names authority in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, there are thorough practices ensuring accuracy and currency of geographical names. For Great Britain, the geographical names as portrayed on products of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain are recognized as being authoritative. Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland performs a similar function in Northern Ireland.

The national report outlines the function of Ordnance Survey as the national mapping agency and its role with regard to toponymy, noting developments since the second Session of the UNGEGN in 2021.

Geographical names for places and features outside the United Kingdom are the responsibility of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN). PCGN gathers information on names standardised by national authorities to inform the UK Government of appropriate names to be used on its products.

The report also notes the current edition of the *Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*: administrative changes have been made to this document as required so that it remains up-to-date.

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.

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 was released in 2021.

Also of interest is the Placenames Northern Ireland website [PlacenamesNI \(arcgis.com\)](#) which examines the history behind the placenames, and includes some 30,000 names in Northern Ireland. This database is now fully under the remit of Queens University Belfast and the project secured additional government funding in March 2023.

Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN)

The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN)¹ is the United Kingdom's authority on foreign geographical names. It gathers information on names standardised by global national authorities, and uses this information to advise UK Government on the proper writing of geographical names for places and features outside the United Kingdom.

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

The United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) works closely with the [Permanent Committee on Geographical Names](#) and maintains and publishes a number of geographical names datasets on the UK government website (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 data sets include:

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/the-permanent-committee-on-geographical-names>

- [Geographical Names Index \(GNI\)](#) - a site holding indexes of approved British English-language names for sovereign countries and UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies, as well as supporting information on the use of geographical names. The datasets in the GNI ensure that the correct country and UK Overseas Territory names are used consistently, including in outward-facing and internal UK government publications and communications. Data can be viewed online or downloaded.
- [Country names](#) - the index forms part of the GNI and shows approved country names and terms organised by ISO 2-letter country code, British English-language country names, official country names and citizen name. Data can be viewed online or downloaded as a CSV file.
- [Crown Dependencies \(NEW\)](#) – the index forms part of the GNI and shows the approved British English-language name, official territory name and citizen names of each of the UK’s Crown Dependencies. This list is in CSV format and can be downloaded or viewed online from GOV.UK.
- [UK Overseas Territory names](#) - the index forms part of the GNI and shows approved UK Overseas Territories names. Data is organised by ISO 2-letter country code (where one exists), UK territory names, official territory name and citizen name. View the data online or download as a CSV file.

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. Since the 2021 UNGEGN session, Northamptonshire has become two unitary authorities: North Northamptonshire unitary authority and West Northamptonshire unitary authority, and as a result of this change the United Kingdom now has a total of 217 first-order administrative divisions. The up-to-date document is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/toponymic-guidelines>.