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English

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

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**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

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** The report was prepared by Catherine Cheetham, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, with support from the Welsh Government, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and Ordnance Survey.

As reported at the 2023 session, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has thorough policies and practices to ensure the accuracy and currency of geographical names on official maps and documents. This is in spite of having no formal national names authority. The report outlines the role with regard to toponymy of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain, as the national mapping agency, and focusses on developments since the 2023 session, including in Ordnance Survey's published policy for Welsh geographical names and a tool for the collection of vernacular names. It also reports on updates made to the *Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* and looks in more detail at geographical names in Wales. The report concludes with information on the treatment of names outside the UK for British use.

Ordnance Survey tool for vernacular names

Ordnance Survey has launched its own tool to collect vernacular names for use by the emergency services: [New national vernacular mapping tool | OS](#) and an [Emergency Services Gazetteer](#), directly supporting UNGEGN Strategic Plan action 4-i-4. The focus of the tool is presently for the emergency services (it serves as a replacement for FINTAN, a similar tool described in past reports) through creating and maintaining a centralised view of known alternative names for the emergency services user. The data comes from emergency services and related rescue organisations rather than being supplied by the general public and, while hosted on the OS Data Hub, it is currently for the exclusive use of these services in order to help with support to e.g. multi-agency response efforts.

Geographical names in Wales

Welsh is an official language in Wales and is used across the country in all aspects of life: in communities where near 90% of the population are speakers, as well as in those communities where Welsh is spoken by less than 10%. The vitality of this minoritised Celtic language is supported by the Welsh Government's ambitious long-term strategy to reach a [million Welsh speakers](#) by 2050. It is also underpinned by robust and transformative legislation (including the Welsh Language Act of 1993 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011), the latter establishing the principle that the Welsh language should be treated no less favourably than the English in Wales.

This legislation has obvious implications for Welsh language place names and the way they are depicted on signage and in publications. The legal linguistic duties placed upon local authorities, and other public bodies, create an expectation that Welsh language text displayed should be 'correct' and positioned so it is likely to be read first (see, for example Standards 61–3 [The Welsh Language Standards \(No. 1\) Regulations 2015](#)).

It is in this context that Ordnance Survey committed to revisit its [Welsh Names Policy](#) and republished it in February 2024 with strengthened commitments to better reflect the current linguistic and legislative landscape in Wales across its products, including giving Welsh and English names equal status with regards to font size etc. and displaying the Welsh name above, or in front of, the English name. It also includes a commitment to gain consensus on the accepted form and spelling of Welsh names through the Welsh Language Commissioner.

The Welsh Language Commissioner is an independent regulator with the chief statutory aim of promoting and facilitating the use of the Welsh language. The Commissioner also has a unique and key responsibility to offer advice on the standard forms of Welsh place names and has convened a panel of experts to support this work. This independent and academic panel ensures that the Commissioner's recommendations are well founded. The Place-names Standardisation Panel follows [National Standardisation Guidelines](#) to inform its decisions and these recommendations are shared in the list of [Standard Welsh Place-names](#). A revamped list was recently published and now includes new features such as Wikipedia images and sound files to aid pronunciation as a result of a working partnership with the National Library of Wales.

The list of Standard Welsh Place-names is an important resource to protect Welsh names and promote their use by elevating their status and raising awareness of lesser-used Welsh names. It provides guidance to users on which forms of place names should be officially adopted to try to ensure standardisation and consistency and avoid the proliferation of unnecessary forms.

It should be emphasised that the Commissioner's recommendations are only advisory and have no statutory force. But the Commissioner's authority and expertise in the field is widely recognised and organisations of all kinds turn to the office for advice, including local authorities. One notable example is Flintshire County Council who recently requested advice on adopting an official Welsh name for New Brighton, in response to a campaign from local residents that the historic Welsh name for the village should be officially adopted and shown on signage. In this case, Pentre Catherall was the name used locally in the 19th century (after the industrialist Josiah Catherall who built houses there for his workers) before New Brighton was officially adopted. But as the linguistic and economic makeup of this area changed this Welsh name fell out of official use until relatively recently. Following extensive research and local consultation, the Welsh Language Commissioner fully supported the official adoption of the revived Welsh name and noted its preference for Pentre Cythrel (rather than the common, less 'respectful' variant Pentre Cythraul (devil or demon)) as the second element is a verbal development of the surname Catherall and reflects local and historic pronunciation. Using the word *cythraul* with its negative connotations would be [less acceptable to some residents](#) and a step further away from the original spoken form. This community's desire to officially adopt a Welsh name for their village – and the local authority's readiness to give this matter such meaningful consideration – speaks volumes about the importance given to Welsh place names and how the status of the language has been transformed. However, it has become apparent in recent years that more needs to be done to promote and protect Welsh place names – especially those of topographical features. There is widespread belief that these names are under threat, and are being translated, forgotten, or simply ignored. This led to a commitment in the 2021 [Co-Operation Agreement](#) between the Welsh (Labour) Government and Plaid Cymru to 'ensure Welsh language place names in the built and natural environments are safeguarded and promoted'.

It was also a catalyst for a pilot project between Eryri National Park and the Welsh Language Commissioner's office. The National Park (still officially known as [Snowdonia National Park at the time](#)) approached the Welsh Language Commissioner to ask for assistance to standardise their internal lists of topographic names, in order to [safeguard historic landscape names](#). The result was an agreed list of standard forms for the lakes in the national park and Ordnance Survey showed in practice the value of their Welsh Names Policy by updating their datasets, thereby correcting forms which had been misspelt on mapping for many decades. Following the success of this pilot the Park and the Commissioner have continued to work in partnership and will shortly be publishing a list of mountains, passes, mountain ranges and waterfalls.

Actively responding to the National Park's need has been typical of the way the Commissioner has responded to increasing demand from other public bodies in recent years. They have extended their former remit to advise on settlement names to allow them to provide advice on standard Welsh forms for various geographies and locations, including CADW (Welsh Government's historic environment service) site names, special areas of conservation, and community wards and constituencies. The Commissioner has also worked in partnership with the Welsh Government's Translation Service to provide guidance to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and others on the standard forms of Welsh names for the rest of the world: [International place-names | GOV.WALES](#).

Toponymic Guidelines

The [United Kingdom Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors](#) is updated as changes are required (there are typically some changes to the administrative structure each year). Since the 2023 session, in addition to changes to the administrative list, the content on Welsh names has been reviewed and updated and the definition of 'Great Britain' has been updated. Administrative changes were made in April 2023, whereby Somerset and North Yorkshire two-tier authorities became unitary authorities and Cumbria two-tier authority was replaced with Cumberland, and Westmorland and Furness unitary authorities. Consequently, there are now 132 unitary authorities in England, and a total of 218 first-order administrative divisions in the United Kingdom.

Names outside the United Kingdom

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. One of PCGN's outputs is the growing series of [Toponymic Factfiles](#), which provide a guide to the toponymy of countries outside the United Kingdom for UK government use.

The Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) works in close partnership with the PCGN to assist in coordinating the use of foreign geographical names across UK Government. The FCDO maintains and publishes a number of geographical names datasets on Gov.UK as a further commitment to sharing expertise and capability across UK Government. The datasets help deliver interoperability and maintain consistency across Government Departments ensuring that names used on mapping and other communication products align to the UK's foreign policy.

These data sets include:

- [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 3166 2-letter code, British English-language country names, official country names and citizen names. Data can be viewed online or downloaded as a CSV file.
- [Crown Dependencies](#) – the index forms part of the GNI and shows 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 organised by ISO 2-letter code, UK territory names, official territory name and citizen name. View the data online or download as a CSV file.

Since the 2023 Session, a link to Welsh language international place names has been added to the bottom of the GNI.