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English only

**Eighth United Nations Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names**

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Item 9 (c) of the provisional agenda*

**National standardization: treatment of names
in multilingual areas**

United Kingdom: Gaelic place names in Scotland

Submitted by the United Kingdom**

* E/CONF.94/1.

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Introduction

Today largely associated with the Highlands and western Isles of Scotland, Gaelic speaking at one time or another has extended across nearly all of Scotland. There was a growth in the settlement of western Scotland by Gaelic speakers from Ireland during the 5th-6th centuries AD and by the 9th century the other Celtic and Germanic languages previously spoken in Scotland had been largely ousted. The remnants of all these languages are encountered in place names throughout the country and Scotland can be divided into nine toponymic areas, each of which has its own particular sequence and interaction of languages. Many Gaelic place names recorded by military and Ordnance Survey surveyors at different times during the 18th and 19th centuries have become either anglicised or distorted leading to a certain amount of inconsistency in their depiction on maps.

The Status of Gaelic

The 1991 census indicated that there were 67,000 Gaelic speakers in Scotland (1.6% of the population) compared with 82,600 in 1981, 1.43 million Irish Gaelic speakers in the Republic of Ireland in 1996 (43.5% of the population) and 508,000 Welsh speakers in Wales in 1991 (18.7% of the population). While current indicators suggest a steady decline in the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland, there is considerable support for the language in post-devolution Scotland, particularly through the medium of broadcasting. A Minister for Gaelic serves the Scottish Parliament and there is an on-going debate on the subject of a Gaelic Language Act that would give Gaelic legal status similar to that provided for Welsh by the Welsh Language Act. In addition to this, the Ordnance Survey is reviewing its place names on its map products and has recently published a Gaelic Names Policy. A Gaelic Maps Initiative is also being explored by Highlands and Islands Enterprise as part of a wider Gaelic development programme.

Ordnance Survey Gaelic Names Policy

In support of the Scottish Parliament's initiative in the promotion of Scottish Culture, the Ordnance Survey (OS) has just completed an extensive review of the depiction of Gaelic place names in Scotland to establish a consistency within its mapping products. Ordnance Survey has also identified participants from local authorities, key Scottish bodies, such as the Scottish Place Name Society, and academia and has formed a Gaelic Names Liaison Group which is now recognised as the authority for Gaelic names.

The Ordnance Survey will not attempt to translate Gaelic into English or vice-versa to contrive 100% bilingual naming cover. It will collect names within the "Man-made Environment" category, giving equal status, when they are in common use, to English and Gaelic by depiction of names in the same font type and point size (ie Inverness/Inbhir Nis). It will also review existing names of all features in the natural environment, recording either English or Gaelic names. Historic mapping or local use will determine where Gaelic names apply to natural features, such as mountains, islands, rivers and lochs. Administrative information will be shown in either Gaelic or English, the correct form being provided by the recognised authority.

Under the new policy, Ordnance Survey will gain consensus on the accepted form and spelling of Gaelic names and ensure this is consistently applied to every map series (ie. Carn Mor v. Cairn More).

The full text of the OS Gaelic place names policy document is available to download as a pdf document at www.ordnancesurvey.gov.uk/downloads/gaelic/policy-english.pdf