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REPORTS BY GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN THEIR COUNTRIES
AND ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE SEVENTH CONFERENCE

Report of Ireland

(Submitted by Ireland)**

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REPORT OF IRELAND

Background.

Geographical names may have two official forms in Ireland, one in the English language and one in Irish. The English spellings of geographical names were standardised in the mid-nineteenth century by The Ordnance Survey of Ireland, the national mapping agency, now Ordnance Survey Ireland, and until 1975 these spellings were the only forms of placenames recognised for official purposes. In 1946, the Placenames Commission (An Coimisiún Logainmneacha). was established by the Minister for Finance to advise on the determining of authoritative Irish language name-forms for official use and, in 1956, the Placenames Office was set up as a division of the Ordnance Survey to undertake the research necessary for the standardisation of the Irish forms. Legislation to give legal status to the Irish language forms of placenames was enacted in the Place-Names (Irish Forms), Act, 1973. This Act authorised the Minister for Finance, having received and considered advice from the Placenames Commission, “to specify for purposes of law forms of place-names in the Irish language and to provide for other matters connected with the matter aforesaid”.

Recent administrative changes.

The Placenames Office and the Placenames Commission.

Since the Seventh United Nations Conference on the Standardisation of Geographical Names in January 1998, a number of administrative changes have been made regarding the standardisation of placenames. In 1999, the Placenames Office was transferred from Ordnance Survey Ireland to the Department Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and Islands. In 2000, the functions of the Place-Names (Irish Forms), Act, 1973, and responsibility for the Placenames Commission were transferred from the Minister for Finance to the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and Islands. Following the reorganisation of government departments in June 2002, all matters pertaining to Irish language forms of placenames were transferred to the newly designated Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Ordnance Survey Ireland.

In March 2002, the status of Ordnance Survey Ireland (OSI) was changed from that of an office of the Department of Finance to that of a commercial state company under the terms of the Ordnance Survey Ireland Act, 2001. The general function of OSI, according to the Act, is to provide a national mapping service in the state. Its specific function in relation to geographical names is set out in section 4.(2)(f) of the Act as follows: “to depict place-names and ancient features in the national mapping and related records and databases including the Irish language equivalent of place-names as advised by An Coimisiún Logainmneacha [The Placenames Commission] and declared in place-names orders made under section 2 of the Place-Names (Irish Forms) Act, 1973”.

Work of the Placenames Office.
Standardisation of Irish language name forms.

The Placenames Office researches the names of administrative units and of physical features in the state and provides standardised Irish language forms of those names. In 2001, research was completed on the names of the administrative units known as district electoral divisions (DED) and standardised Irish language forms were provided for these. The DED, of which there are approximately 3,500 in the state, is used mainly in the compilation of national statistics such as census returns, as well as for electoral purposes.

Publication
Concise national gazetteer.

The Placenames Office produced a concise bilingual gazetteer, *Gasaitéar na hÉireann / Gazetteer of Ireland*, (Dublin, 1989), but this has been out of print for the past two years. A new edition of the gazetteer is in preparation and is due for publication in early 2003. The new edition will contain over 4,000 standardised names, compared with 3,500 in the first edition. The names range from those of major physical features to those of places which are centres of social importance solely for the fact that they are, or were until recently, locations of post-offices. The gazetteer is arranged alphabetically in two sections, one Irish-English and the other English-Irish. Information given in the gazetteer includes the standardised English and Irish forms of the names, guides to pronunciation, grammatical details on the Irish forms, the category of feature, the county of location, and the co-ordinates of the national grid to the accuracy of one kilometre. It is intended to provide an electronic edition of the gazetteer on the website of the new Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs as soon as this becomes feasible.

County gazetteers.

The standardised English and Irish forms of all the administrative names are being published in a series of bilingual county gazetteers. The format of the county gazetteer is similar to that of the concise national gazetteer, in that the names are arranged alphabetically in Irish-English and English-Irish sections. In the county gazetteer, however, the names are listed in their standardised English and Irish forms in separate sections according to administrative category of barony, civil parish, and townland. Gazetteers have been published for six counties, containing approximately 9,500 names, while volumes for three further counties, containing approximately another 10,000 names, are due for publication in 2002-3. In addition to the geographical information given in the earlier volumes, the new volumes will contain the national grid co-ordinates of the centres of townlands to an accuracy of 10 metres.

Database of geographical names.

Work is progressing on the compilation of a comprehensive relational database of geographical names. The database currently contains the standardised English forms of the names of all the national administrative units in the state in the hierarchical structure of geographical county (26), barony (c.300), civil parish (c.2,400), district electoral division (c.3,500), and townland (c.54,000). The standardised Irish forms of the names are being added at present. Non-administrative geographical names will be added to the database in the future. Geographical information contained in the database includes the category of the feature, the relationship of the feature to other categories, the reference number(s) of the large-scale map plans on which it is located, and its national grid coordinates to an accuracy of 10 metres. Further geographical information, such as altitude, area in hectares etc., will be added in the future. The database will also contain the complete corpus of historical references to the geographical names which is being compiled by the Placenames Office in the course of its research. This corpus is being added to continuously and it is estimated that it currently contains more than 500,000 references from historical sources dating from the seventh to the twentieth centuries. As this material is initially in paper copy at present, it will take a number of years to include it all in the database. The database is located in the Placenames Office but parts of it are being made available to other government offices according to requirements and it is planned to provide it on-line to the public under Ireland's E-Government programme.