

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

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Item 4 of the provisional agenda\*

**Reports by Governments on the situation in their countries  
and on the progress made in the standardization of  
geographical names since the Eighth Conference**

**Report of Ireland 2002-2007**

Submitted by Ireland \*\*

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## **Report of Ireland 2002-2007**

### **Summary**

This report outlines activities relating to the standardization of geographical names in Ireland since the Eighth United Nations Conference in 2002, with particular reference to the effect of the Official Languages Act 2003 on the legal status of placenames in the country. The report also includes information on national and regional gazetteers, and on a new web-based national database of geographical names.

### **National standardization**

Geographical names may have two official forms in Ireland, one in the English language and one in Irish. The English-language forms of names were standardized by the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, the national mapping agency, in the mid-nineteenth century. Official Irish language forms of names are established on the advice of the Placenames Commission by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs under the provisions of Part 5 of the Official Languages Act 2003. The research necessary to establish correct Irish forms is undertaken by the Placenames Branch of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

### **Legal status of placenames before 2003.**

The definitive legal placenames of Ireland are contained in the maps of Ordnance Survey Ireland which date back to the time of the original mapping and valuation of the country between 1824 and 1874 and the publication of a townlands index with the 1851 census. These were deemed to be the legal placenames of the country. The maps and the placenames were exclusively in the English language. English-language placenames may be changed under procedures set out in the Local Government Act 2001, consisting of local consultation/plebiscite, decision by local authority, confirmation by the Minister for Local Government in statutory order.

### **Place-Names (Irish Forms) Act 1973.**

The Placenames Commission was established by warrant of the Minister for Finance in 1946 to advise on establishing authoritative Irish language name-forms for official use. The Placenames Branch was established as a division of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland to undertake the research necessary for the standardization of the Irish forms. Legislation to give legal status to the Irish-language forms of names was enacted in the Place-Names (Irish Forms) Act 1973. The Act allowed the Minister for Finance to declare by Order, having received and considered the advice of the Placenames Commission, that the equivalent in the Irish language of a placename specified in the Order is such word or words as might be specified in the Order. The Irish words then would have the same meaning and same force and effect as the placename. Two Orders were made under this Act, one in 1975 to declare Irish language versions of the names of postal districts, and one in 2001 to amend the original 1975 Order.

The Place-Names (Irish Forms) Act 1973 was seen as unsatisfactory which explains its lack of use. The problem was that while the Act allowed definitive Irish language versions of placenames to be made available for official use, it also meant in legal terms that the placename remained in the English language only. This situation was regarded

as unacceptable and in order to rectify it the provisions of 1973 Act, with fundamental amendments, were incorporated in the Official Languages Act 2003

### **Position under the Official Languages Act 2003**

Under Part 5 of the Official Languages Act 2003, the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, may by Order declare the Irish language version of a placename specified in the Order. Once such a statutory order is made in respect of any particular placename in any area outside the Gaeltacht, the designated traditional Irish-language speaking areas, the effect of the new legislation is that the Irish and the English versions of the placename have the same status and the same legal force and effect.

Where the Minister makes an Order in respect of a Gaeltacht placename, the English version of that placename ceases to have any legal force and effect. While this is without prejudice to any private use and most public use of the English version, the Act provides that the English version may not be used in Acts of Parliament or Statutory Instruments, on road and street signs, or on Ordnance Survey Maps.

The Minister, on the advice of the Placenames Commission, has made ten Placenames Orders under the 2003 Act to date. These Orders declare the Irish version of placenames for County Kilkenny, County Louth, County Limerick, County Monaghan, County Waterford, County Offaly and County Tipperary. Orders were made to declare the official Irish versions of names of centres of population in other counties, and of the names of the administrative Counties and Provinces. An Order to declare the official Irish names of administrative units in Gaeltacht areas was made in 2004 and a second Order will be made in respect of all other placenames in Gaeltacht areas shown on the maps of the Ordnance Survey in the second half of 2007. PDF versions of all Placenames Orders made to date are available for downloading from the website of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, <http://www.pobail.ie/en/IrishLanguage/ThePlacenamesBranch/PlacenamesOrders/> or from that of the Placenames Commission <http://www.logainm.ie/English/placenames.asp>.

### **Gazetteers and databases.**

*Gasaitéar na hÉireann/Gazetteer of Ireland.*

A new edition of the bilingual national gazetteer, *Gasaitéar na hÉireann / Gazetteer of Ireland*, (Dublin,1989), has been prepared by the Placenames Branch of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and will be published at the end of 2007. In the meantime, a downloadable electronic version of the new edition in MS Word format is available on the website of the Placenames Commission ([www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie)). The new edition contains 4,000 geographical names in their Irish- and English-language forms, including names of cities, towns, and smaller centres population, as well as the names of major physical features, and of places of historical or other interest. Other information on the names includes the county of location, and a national grid reference to the accuracy of one kilometre. The first edition of the gazetteer included a standardized pronunciation guide to the Irish-language forms of the names in International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcription. This feature has not been included in the electronic

version of the new edition for technical reasons but will be available in the published edition.

### **County gazetteers.**

A series of bilingual gazetteers, *Liostaí Logainmneacha*, listing administrative and other names by county, is being published by the Placenames Branch under an ongoing programme. Seven counties have been published in the series to date, namely Kilkenny, Limerick, Louth, Monaghan, Offaly, Tipperary and Waterford, and four are in preparation, Cork, Dublin, Galway and Wexford. These volumes contain the names of administrative units in their standardized English and Irish forms together with certain geographical information, including the reference numbers of the historical large-scale map plans on which the names occur and, in the case of later volumes, the national grid references to the townlands and non-administrative features to an accuracy of 100 metres.

### **Web-based toponymic database.**

The Placenames Branch is currently developing an online web-based database of geographical names in collaboration with Dublin City University (DCU). The database will contain information on all geographical names in the country, including names of administrative units, namely counties, administrative cities and towns, baronies, parishes, townlands and electoral divisions, and non-administrative names, that is, districts, smaller towns and villages, and physical and artificial geographical features. It will also contain a full list of streetnames in the state. All names will be in their official standardized Irish and English versions. The database will have an aural guide to pronunciation of names. The database will be available to the public on the website of the Placenames Commission [www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie) from May 2008.

### **Websites**

Information on national standardization and related matters may be found on the websites of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, <http://www.pobail.ie/en/IrishLanguage/ThePlacenamesBranch/>, and of the Placenames Commission, <http://www.logainm.ie>