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

**2019 session**

New York, 29 April – 3 May 2019

**Item 5 (a) of the provisional agenda \***

**Reports: (a) 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 United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland\*\*

### Summary:

There is no national names authority in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, although both Scotland and Wales have place -name authorities. In practice, the geographical names as portrayed on printed and digital products of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain are recognized as being authoritative. Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland, administered within Land and Property Services, performs a similar function in Northern Ireland. The full report provides an outline of the function of Ordnance Survey as the national mapping agency and its role regarding toponymy, indicating developments since the Eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. It contains information on names policy, database management and geographical names products.

The report also describes the status of the Government 's country register and territory register, which are maintained by its Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its Government Digital Service.

Geographical names for places and features outside the United Kingdom are the responsibility of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, whose objectives are described in the report. The Permanent Committee gathers information on names standardized by national authorities to inform the Government of appropriate names for use on its products. The Permanent Committee celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2019.

A new edition of the "Toponymic guidelines for map and other editors: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" was presented to the Eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. The report contains updates made since the publication of the guidelines.

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\*\*Prepared by the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland

## **REPORT OF ACTIVITIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

*Document prepared by the UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland*

### **National Geographical Names**

#### **Great Britain**

Ordnance Survey (OS) ([www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk](http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk)) 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<sup>1</sup> which is published on the organization's website.

Ordnance Survey is guided primarily by local usage and custom. It makes enquiries and consults appropriate authorities in order to establish, with as much authority as possible, the most suitable name, form, and spelling for all places.

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 Gaelic Names Policy<sup>2</sup> and Welsh Names Policy<sup>3</sup>.

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.

Names are collected as follows:

Administrative environment - These names are laid down in legislation from which Ordnance Survey takes the information.

Built environment - Names within the built environment usually come from the authority for that particular building or object. Where possible Ordnance Survey takes visual evidence for these features but in the case of dispute or query then they refer back to the authority on the subject. This may be the town council, house owner or in the case of a building name, the owner of the building.

Geographic environment - This is more complex as there is no authority in Great Britain for Ordnance Survey for such names; Ordnance Survey is guided primarily by local usage and custom. It makes enquiries and consults appropriate authorities in order to establish, with as much authority as possible, the most suitable name, form, and spelling for all

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/docs/policies/os-names-policy.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/docs/policies/ordnance-survey-gaelic-names-policy-in-english.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/docs/policies/os-welsh-names-policy.pdf>

places. Sometimes more than one name is in use at 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.

### ***Products***

Ordnance Survey makes a number of datasets available free of charge under the terms of the Government Open Data Licence, including OS Open Names<sup>4</sup>. 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)<sup>5</sup>, a place, road and postcode verification tool that users can plug into a web site or API free of charge.

### **Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland, official maps are made by Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI).

In 1988, OSNI made a map called Éire Thuaidh (Ireland North) with place names in English and Gaelic (Irish) at 1:250,000 scale which shows Northern Ireland and border counties in the Republic of Ireland. This is now available as Open Data at: [http://osni-spatial-ni.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets?q=osni+open+data++eire+thuaidh&sort\\_by=relevance](http://osni-spatial-ni.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets?q=osni+open+data++eire+thuaidh&sort_by=relevance). This map was created as a one-off production and has not been updated.

OSNI is provided with address information from local councils and is sometimes provided with alternative language names (Gaelic or Ulster Scots) for street names. OSNI holds approximately 550 alternative language street names within the OSNI Pointer address dataset, with the majority of these being in Gaelic.

Also of interest is the Placenames Northern Ireland website <http://www.placenamesni.org/aboutus.php> which examines the history behind the place names. This website provides public access to a database produced and maintained by the Northern Ireland Place-Name Project, Queen's University Belfast, in association with Land and Property Services, Department of Finance (Northern Ireland). For example a search for Belfast at <http://www.placenamesni.org/search.php> gives the origin of the name: Gaelic - Béal Feirste 'mouth of the sand-bank ford'.

### **UK Country Register**

The United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office<sup>6</sup> and UK Government Digital Service<sup>7</sup> maintains and publishes a Country Register<sup>8</sup> and Territory Register<sup>9</sup>. The aim of the registers is to provide a canonical dataset that can be used by UK government digital services and potentially any private sector digital services requiring country names data. The open dataset is available in a range of formats and can be linked to or downloaded for use.

The Country Register is a dataset of current country names in line with UK Government policy. It also includes a number of historical country names. The register includes ISO 3166 codes as well as short form country names and official state titles in line with Permanent Committee on Geographical Names policies.

### **Foreign Geographical Names**

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/business-and-government/products/os-open-names.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/business-and-government/products/os-open-names-api.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-office>

<sup>7</sup> <https://gds.blog.gov.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://country.register.gov.uk/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://territory.register.gov.uk/>

The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN)<sup>10</sup> is the United Kingdom's authority on foreign geographical names, and this year celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. PCGN has a cross-government function to formulate and coordinate policies and procedures for the proper writing of geographical names for places and features outside the United Kingdom, excluding the Antarctic, and to ensure the implementation of those policies across the UK Government. It gathers information on names standardised by national authorities.

### **UK 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 UNCISG. Since this edition was published, a number of minor updates have been made to clarify the status of the City and Borough of Wolverhampton and also to alter the controlling council (whether district or county) within certain unitary authorities.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/the-permanent-committee-on-geographical-names>