



Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-1032  
Ein cyf/Our ref EM/00623/20

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30 October 2020

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter concerning Welsh house names. This is a topic that I have a particular interest in, and I understand that when a name, such as a house name, is changed, it can feel like losing something intrinsic to the local community. As a government, we are aware of the concerns surrounding the displacement of Welsh names, and we are taking steps to attempt to safeguard them.

I feel it is important to recognise that when we speak of 'place names' we are speaking about something very broad and complex, with different contexts calling for different solutions. Generally speaking these can be broken down into three layers:

- settlement names
- topographical features and historic names
- house names.

Below I have tried to set out the current approach in relation to these different type of place names in Wales.

### **Settlement names**

In the case of settlement names (i.e. the names of cities, towns and villages), the Welsh language standards relating to signage places a duty on local authorities not to treat the Welsh language less favourably than English. In practice, this means that Welsh place names, where they exist, must be placed on all road signs and other materials for which local authorities are responsible, with the effect of normalising those names through their presence in visually prominent positions, and ensuring they are not displaced.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

The Welsh Language Commissioner is also responsible for providing advice to individuals and organisations of all kinds on the standardised forms of place names in Wales. The Commissioner's List of Standardised Welsh Place-names is an on-line resource, which can be searched or downloaded to find the standardised names of villages, towns and cities in Wales. The list can be found via this link:

<http://www.comisiynyddygybraeg.cymru/english/commissioner/placenames/pages/search.aspx>

## **Topographical features and historic names**

Regarding prominent topographical features, I am strongly of the opinion that Welsh names are key as we market Wales to tourists from all parts of the world. The Welsh Government is committed to developing the role of Welsh in technological developments such as on-line maps as a way to ensure names for topographical features continue to be used and are not displaced.

Names for topographical and historic features are also an important part of our heritage, of course, and their significance was recognised in the Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2016. The Act recognises the importance of historic place names by requiring the Welsh Ministers to compile and maintain a list of historic place names in Wales. This is the only statutory record of historic place names in the United Kingdom.

The List of Historic Place Names of Wales (<https://historicplacenames.rcahmw.gov.uk/>) is maintained on behalf of the Welsh Ministers by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. It was launched in 2017 and has already doubled in size to contain nearly 700,000 entries. It records names, with alternative forms and spellings, for settlements, properties, thoroughfares, rivers and countless other features of the Welsh landscape from across the centuries.

The list is not just a useful record of place names in the past, but also an important resource to secure their future. One of its central objectives is to raise public awareness of the wealth of historic place names in Wales and their importance as elements of our wider cultural heritage. As people become more conscious of historic place names and their importance, they will, no doubt, value them more highly and continue to use them now and in the future.

The Welsh Government has also published statutory guidance on the use of the List of Historic Place Names for Local Authorities, National Park authorities and Natural Resources Wales. Those public bodies should take account of the list when considering the naming and renaming of properties and places in their care.

Cadw, the Royal Commission and the Welsh Language Commissioner are resuming engagement with local authorities and other bodies — suspended due to Covid-19 — to raise awareness of the complementary resources provided by the List of Historic Places and the Welsh Language Commissioner's Standardised List of Welsh Place-Names for promoting and valuing the place names of Wales.

Furthermore, Technical Advice Note 20: Planning and the Welsh Language provides supplementary guidance to Planning Policy Wales. Within the guidance, encouragement is given for the use of traditional Welsh names for new developments and streets.

## **House names**

House names are the most difficult to safeguard of the three types I have mentioned. On the one hand, if a property is only known by its name, owners cannot change that name at a whim. They must apply to their Local Authority, who are responsible for street naming and

numbering. This is to ensure that statutory bodies such as the fire authority, police, ambulance and postal services can identify every property. However there is nothing to prevent a homeowner from putting their own name plaque or sign on a property that is known to these authorities by its street number, as long as they continue to use that street number when referring to their property.

Similarly, an individual can buy a property with a historic name, and attach a new business name to that property without changing the original name of the property itself. The most notorious example — the 14<sup>th</sup>-century farm in Ceredigion called Faerdre Fach which was named Happy Donkey Hill — is a good example of these difficulties. The public perception is that the property was renamed Happy Donkey Hill, however in reality the farm name remains Faerdre Fach, with the business opened at the property being called Happy Donkey Hill. No formal change of address in fact occurred.

In an attempt to get to grips with this, the statutory guidance on the use of the List of Historic Place Names, referred to above, contains specific directions aimed at local authorities in the discharge of their statutory street naming and numbering functions. It states that local authorities in Wales should have policies on the naming and numbering of streets and properties that recognise the importance of historic place names and encourage their continuing use.

In cases of applications for changes to existing property names, the guidance sets out that authorities will now be expected to check the list of historic place names when processing such applications. If a historic name appears on the list, or if an officer is aware of one from another source, the applicant should be encouraged to retain, or perhaps even adopt, it.

Since the list is easily available online, developers and property owners can be encouraged to consult it themselves before submitting any applications for naming or renaming. For instance, if an application for a new street name disregards a suitable historic name that appears in the list, an authority is asked to bring it to the developer's attention and encourage its use. The List of Historic Place Names' full-time curator is happy to assist developers and local authorities in the selection of appropriate historic names for new developments and streets.

**To sum up**, it can be seen that options for the safeguarding of names become more complex as we move down from settlement names to house names.

Furthermore, we must be careful not to create a solution with unintended consequences. For instance, according to Gwynedd Council, of 140 notifications of house name changes received during 2019, only six went ahead to change from a Welsh name to an English name. In Ceredigion in 2018-19, 44 applications to give new houses Welsh names were received, and 4 applications to give new houses English names. 10 applications to change a house name from English to Welsh were received, and 2 applications to change a house name from Welsh to English. If our intention is to not only safeguard existing Welsh names, but to encourage more people to use Welsh names for their houses in future, we must be sure that we don't discourage or prevent that from taking place.

We have also seen how local activism and awareness-raising have led to decisions to rename prominent historic locations being reversed. The most well-known example is perhaps Plas Gynllifon, whose developers used the name Wynnborn Mansion as a marketing name. Following strong negative reaction locally and further afield, they announced that they had no plan to change the original name.

Welsh-language place names, Welsh-language names for geographic features, and Welsh names for houses are an important part of our history and culture, not only as evidence that can deepen our understanding and appreciation of historic places and sites, but as a living, breathing part of our modern consciousness as a nation.

The Welsh Government gave serious consideration to introducing legal protection for historic place names during the development of the Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2016. After analysing various options, the conclusion was that such protection would be costly — requiring consent, enforcement and appeal regimes — extremely difficult to enforce and would possibly raise human rights issues with regard to house and property names.

However, we continue to keep our policies under review. We are gathering evidence to inform our consideration of future options, which might include local programmes, public awareness raising or, if necessary, legislation.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. E. Morgan'.

**Eluned Morgan AS/MS**

Y Gweinidog Iechyd Meddwl, Llesiant a'r Gymraeg  
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