



Via e-mail to:  
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07/12/2021

Dear Chair

### **Petition P-06-1207: Start referring to Welsh cities and towns by their Welsh names**

Thank you very much for contacting me to seek my views on this petition and to enquire about the work my office is undertaking in this field. The accuracy and rigour of the research brief (Reference: SR21/1044-8) which supported members in discussing the petition is to be commended. It is a fair reflection of the current situation and conveys the richness and complexity of the place-names of Wales.

The brief also stresses that the Senedd has had to consider several petitions concerning place-names in recent years: a sure sign of the public interest in the field. It also suggests that more needs to be achieved, despite the hard work and considerable efforts of my office and other partners over recent years. This need has compelled the Government to commit in its programme for government to 'act to protect Welsh language place names'.

In his letter of 11 October, the Minister sets out the Government's practice of dividing this multifaceted subject into three parts to facilitate discussion: 1) Names of cities, towns and villages; 2) Historical and geographical names; and 3) House names. The work of my office relates primarily to the first category, namely the names of Welsh settlements. I will therefore concentrate on this category although I will also have some comments to make on the other categories identified.

### **Names of cities, towns and villages in Wales**

You will, of course, be aware of the Welsh Language Commissioner's expertise in the field of Welsh place-names and our responsibility to recommend the standard forms of settlement names to organisations and individuals. We have a panel of experts on place-names and the orthography of the Welsh language to assist us in this work, and the panel's recommendations are published in the [List of Standardised Welsh Place-names](#). The panel uses the [Guidelines for Standardising Place-names in Wales](#) to guide its decisions and also considers the meaning, history and origin of the place-names and their current usage in formulating its recommendations.

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It must be emphasised that these efforts to standardise place-names are not a *recent* development. Standardising place-names has been undertaken for decades in Wales. A formal mechanism was created within the Welsh Office to advise public bodies in the early 1970s, and following devolution responsibility was transferred to the Assembly for a short period before the Welsh Language Board was invited to undertake the advisory service in 2001. This responsibility was later transferred to the Welsh Language Commissioner when the office was established in 2012.

It must also be emphasised that the panel is not tasked with coining or creating *new* forms, but rather it is required to *recommend* a standard form from amongst several competing forms. Sometimes there are two (or more) forms of a name in circulation, with one considered to be a 'Welsh' name and the other an 'English' name, despite deriving from the Welsh language (e.g. Taf/Taff). In such cases the panel often recommends adopting a single standard form, with preference given to the standard Welsh form. In his letter to you the Minister endorses this approach and notes that it 'makes sense to adhere to the Welsh spelling'. This would be an obvious way of promoting the Welsh language, in accordance with the petitioner's ambition, and removing unnecessary dual forms.

There is no naming authority in Wales. Local authorities decide how they spell names on signage and in their publications. They are also responsible for uploading address data to national gazetteers which form the basis of other agencies' mapping products and address data. Very often, local authorities also have the most up-to-date information about local usage and residents' opinions. We therefore consult and cooperate closely with local authorities across Wales to ensure that local views and information are considered as part of the standardisation process.

Joel James MS referred during the committee's discussion to his personal experience in the case of one name in Rhondda Cynon Taf where there was local disagreement about whether Efailisaf should be spelled one word or two words, Efail Isaf. It is an excellent example of how a place-name and its spelling can elicit very emotional responses and there is a real danger that debates regarding how names should be spelt may create unnecessary division in communities. This clearly demonstrates the benefit of standardisation: having a specialist, external body to settle an argument and offer guidance is a valuable service to organisations.

Unfortunately, the Commissioner's recommendations have no statutory force. There is no law to protect the names of the cities, towns and villages of Wales or to incentivise public organisations to follow the advice of the Place-names Standardisation Panel. This is in stark contrast to the practice in Ireland, for example, where official names are protected by statute. In our view, establishing a system where public organisations in Wales are expected to adopt the standard forms recommended by the Commissioner would transform the current situation. It would lead to a situation where standard Welsh forms would be adopted and promoted and this, in turn, would reduce confusion, duplication and inconsistency in mapping data and references. It would also save the time and resources of local authorities who currently have to deal with a situation of uncertainty and disagreement about what forms they should use.

### **Historical, geographical and street and house names**

To date, the Commissioner's work in this area has focused on the names of settlements, mainly due to capacity considerations. However, we see clear potential to apply our expertise to related areas and have recently agreed to work with the Snowdonia National Park on a pilot project to standardise the geographical names (rivers, lakes, mountains) within the National Park and produce standardisation guidelines to support their work.

Since the List of Historic Place Names was established almost five years ago my officials have been working with officials from Cadw and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales to promote that list alongside our list of standard forms to local authority officers to support the naming of streets and new developments. The List of Historic Place Names is a valuable source of historic names which may be resurrected to name new developments and the Commissioner offers an advisory service to local authority officers who would like guidance on how best to spell these names in modern Welsh.

One of my officials has also recently been invited to be a member of a Task and Finish Group which will review the current provision and assess the success of the List in fulfilling the Welsh Government's statutory duty to compile and maintain a list of historic place-names in Wales. The Group intends to produce a report by the end of March 2022 which will make recommendations on how the work should be developed in the future.

### **Education and resources**

In their letter dated 2 November 2021, the petitioner touches on the potential of the curriculum to foster pupils' pride in our rich linguistic, historical and literary heritage. There is no doubt that Welsh place-names provide a key to understanding aspects of this heritage. To this end there is a need to support academic studies in Welsh toponymy and to nurture experts who will be able to explain and interpret these names in an entertaining and engaging way for future generations. The public also needs easy access to information about place names, their origin, meaning and pronunciation.

There is value in highlighting again here the excellent provision they have in Ireland to promote the use of Irish names: [Logainm.ie](http://Logainm.ie). A resource of this kind would provide an appropriate platform for Welsh names and serve to educate people on their meaning and importance, as well as providing practical guidance to users on how to pronounce these names in Welsh.

The petition in question highlights a desire to promote Welsh forms. It should be emphasised that the Commissioner does not consider that names which originate from languages other than Welsh should be ignored or displaced. Indeed, the Commissioner also offers advice to organisations on the standard spellings of these names. It is fair to note, however, that Welsh names are often less prominent or well-known than forms or names used in English. It would be possible for the Senedd and Welsh Government to take steps to promote the standard Welsh forms of Welsh place-names without this being at the expense of, or posing a threat to, names originating from other languages. There are practical methods of doing this, such as noting the Welsh form alongside the English name in English publications, for example.



As noted at the outset Welsh place-names is a rich, complex and multifaceted field. It is impossible to do justice with all aspects of the discussion in a letter of this kind. I would therefore be more than happy to respond to further questions on specific topics or to come and discuss with the committee if that would be helpful to you.

All the best with the work of considering this petition.

Yours sincerely,

**Aled Roberts**  
Welsh Language Commissioner