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To Standardise or Not to Standardise: Minority (and Majority) Place Names in the United Kingdom

1. Introduction

1.1. Place-name standardisation in the United Kingdom

When considering regulations on minority place names in Europe, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a very unusual case. To start with, the UK does not have the same co-ordinated approach to place-name standardisation or regulation as some other states in Europe, such as in much of the Nordic region. There are two UK-level official bodies that have a sole focus on place-name standardisation, but neither of these organisations has a purview covering names within the UK itself. These two UK-level bodies are the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN) and the UK Antarctic Place-Names Committee (APC). The function of the APC is clearly related to toponyms at the other end of the world (in the British Antarctic Territory and in South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands), while the PCGN exists to advise the British government on the use of geographical names for places outwith the UK.¹

This imbalance might suggest a preoccupation with naming other parts of the world, possibly at the expense of caring for the UK's own toponymic heritage, but place-name standardisation does not have to be seen as a zero-sum game. It does mean, however, that standardisation and regulation of place names in the UK may take less obvious forms than in some other parts of Europe. It is also interesting to note that the most consistent official toponymic standardisation efforts for places within the UK are probably those focused on minority languages at sub-state levels.

This paper will explore some salient points regarding place-name regulation and standardisation in relation to minority languages in the UK, including a look back at the history of place-name standardisation in official cartography in the UK, before exploring developments in recent decades and the present

¹ The PCGN does, however, represent the UK in the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), reporting internationally on place-name standardisation in the UK.



state of official co-ordination and regulation of minority place names in various parts of the UK.²

1.2. Other selected peculiarities of the United Kingdom

In addition to the less obvious approach to place-name standardisation already mentioned, there are many other reasons why the UK is a peculiar case in connection with matters that might concern linguistic standardisation or regulation, not to mention geographical naming. For instance, the UK encompasses several distinct countries, the four main composite parts being England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.³ Even the terminology to describe the status of these different parts of the UK is not entirely straightforward, and it is probably not helped by the UK being one of only a handful of states in the world that has no single, formally codified constitution. England, Scotland, and Wales are widely recognised as countries and nations in their own right, while Northern Ireland has no universally accepted basic generic noun to describe its status, which resulted from the partition of Ireland in 1921. The closest to a widely accepted appellative may be *jurisdiction*, as used to refer to Northern Ireland in Article 3 of the Constitution of Ireland, which is a separate state altogether.

Three Crown Dependencies (Guernsey, Jersey, and the Isle of Man) are situated adjacent to the UK and in a close political relationship with the UK, but they are not part of the UK. There are also, at the time of writing, fourteen other territories around the world that are not part of the UK but have the status of British Overseas Territories, where the UK assumes responsibility for defence and international relations, as in the Crown Dependencies. Most of these are largely self-governing, except for those without permanent populations. These territories are an ongoing legacy of the British Empire, many are subject to international disputes, and as of 2025 one of them (the British Indian Ocean Territory) is pending transfer of sovereignty to Mauritius. Two of the British Overseas Territories are in Europe, namely Gibraltar and the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, on Cyprus, but this paper will focus on the UK itself and on the adjacent Crown Dependencies.

Governance and administration in the UK are partially decentralised, with devolved parliaments and governments in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, each with varying levels of power. In their current form, these devolved

² This article draws partly on findings presented in a longer chapter the authors have drafted for a forthcoming multi-volume international handbook on minority place-name regulation and standardisation in Europe, edited by PETER JORDAN.

³ The population of the UK (in mid-2023) was estimated to be 68.3 million, made up of 57.7 million in England and 3.2 million in Wales (ONS 2024), 5.5 million in Scotland (NRS 2024b), and 1.9 million in Northern Ireland (NISRA 2024).



bodies date from the late 1990s, but areas such as the legal system, education, and healthcare have never been homogenous across the UK. England is by far the most populous part of the UK, but it has no unified system of devolution in place.

Furthermore, the fact that there are many different languages in use in the UK is not an unusual point at all, but English being the majority language makes for particularly unequal power relationships, when we consider the global reach of the English language and that the language originally emerged from within the UK. These unequal power relationships involving English can be seen externally when thinking about the linguistic power dynamics across the world, but also on an internal level between the state's majority and minority languages.

2. Approaches in official cartography

2.1. The early development of the Ordnance Survey

The official mapping agencies in the UK are the Ordnance Survey (OS), which covers England, Scotland, and Wales, and the separate Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI). As its name suggests, the OS grew out of military logistics activities following the Jacobite rebellions in Scotland in the 1700s. The military survey work under William Roy that partly lay the foundations for the OS began in 1747 in the Highlands of Scotland, an area that was central in the Jacobite uprisings, and where the Scottish Gaelic language has a major presence in the toponymy. Although the OS did take some care to ensure spellings were correct in its work in Scotland over the next couple of centuries, its success with this varied from one area to another (ROBSON 1989; WITHERS 2000).

The OS began its work in England and Wales in earnest in 1791 and turned its attention to Ireland in 1824. Similarly to Scotland, the OS work in Wales and Ireland also posed significant linguistic challenges, due to the strong presence of Celtic languages, for the primarily Anglophone surveyors and mapmakers. A system of *name books* emerged as a repository for surveyors' research on historic forms of names, although as historian RACHEL HEWITT (2010: 194) has stated, this "placed an enormous and in many cases inappropriate onus of responsibility on the military engineers".

2.2. Early work of the Ordnance Survey in Ireland

The early story of the OS in Ireland covers the whole of Ireland so largely belongs in other studies, but it is worth touching upon here too. When the Irish OS began its work in the 1820s, two famous brothers of Anglo-Irish birth were among those involved: Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of



Wellington, the victor of Waterloo (as Master-General of the Ordnance), and his brother Richard, the 1st Marquess Wellesley (as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland). They held strong views on how the work should be done, and Richard wrote to his brother Arthur that the work “cannot be executed by Irish engineers and Irish agents of any description. Neither science, nor skill, nor discipline, nor integrity, sufficient for such a work can be found in Ireland” (cited in WELLESLEY (ed.) 1867: 219). Those words illustrate some of the colonial attitudes towards Ireland at the heart of the British state at the time. In fact, however, by the late 1830s, Irish “civil assistants” to the Irish OS outnumbered British soldiers working on it by four to one (ANDREWS 1975: 65).

The early work of the OS remains very controversial, especially in Ireland, and mapping reinforced and enshrined the anglicisation of place names across the island of Ireland, but there was for a while also a serious approach to place names steered by the Topographical Branch of the Irish OS in Dublin. Still, many decades later, in 1883, Lord Salisbury, who would later serve three times as UK Prime Minister, is quoted as saying that “the most disagreeable part of the three kingdoms is Ireland, and therefore Ireland has a splendid map”, again highlighting the colonial overtones of the early OS work in Ireland (cited in ANDREWS 1975: v).

2.3. Recording names and hierarchies of authority for naming

In terms of recording names, the OS began publishing its *Instructions to Field Examiners* towards the end of the 1800s. This publication was meant to improve the consistency of mapping, and the 1905 edition clearly gives a good sense of the importance given to naming. It states that “nothing shows an Examiner’s intelligence or want of it more than the manner in which he attends to the spelling of names” (Ordnance Survey 1905: 29). Although the *Instructions to Field Examiners* refer to those involved as “he”, women also had a role in naming practices in the OS. For instance, in the late 1800s, a single person, Thomas Rowland, was used to check all Welsh names on maps, and this task later passed to his widow, Elizabeth Rowland (JENKINS 1959), so that couple were extremely influential for mapping in Wales. In 1888, the OS published a pamphlet by the husband, Thomas Rowland, together with Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Owen Jones, entitled *Instructions to Field Examiners on the Orthography of Welsh Names*. A notable principle covered therein was as follows: “When names have assumed a corrupted form, which is thoroughly established, their orthography should not be altered even when they are known to be etymologically wrong”, although in order to “prevent questions”, field examiners were also under instruction to include a note of “the original name” to make clear that they had intentionally recorded “the wrong spelling” ([ROWLAND–JONES] 1888: 7). If places had names in English and



Welsh, both names were to be recorded, with “the English name first and the Welsh under it, in brackets” ([ROWLAND–JONES] 1888: 7).

Around the same time as this, the OS began to acknowledge the problem of inconsistent and incorrect presentation of place names in Scotland too. In the 1890s, the OS sought the assistance of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society (RSGS) in providing expertise on place names, especially those of Gaelic and of Old Norse origin (WILSON 1891: 259). These activities fluctuated in the early twentieth century (RSGS 1913; HARLEY–SEYMOUR 1980a: 326), but there has been more work to address inaccuracies and inconsistencies with Gaelic place names in the official maps in the most recent quarter century, as will be touched upon below.

The OS, at the time of the *Instructions to Field Examiners*, generally aimed to standardise names according to local usage. Written sources were preferred, but the guidance established a hierarchy of authority for naming:

For the name of a house, farm, park, wood, or other part of an estate, the owner is the best authority. For names generally the following are the best individual authorities, and should be taken in the order given:

Owners of property; estate agents; clergymen, postmasters, and schoolmasters, if they have been some time in the district; rate collectors; road surveyors; borough and county surveyors; gentlemen residing in the district; Local Government Board Orders; local histories; good directories. Assistance may also be obtained from local antiquarian and other societies, in connection with places of antiquarian or national interest.

Respectable inhabitants of some position should be consulted. Small farmers or cottagers are not to be depended on, even for the names of the places they occupy, especially as to the spelling, but a well-educated and intelligent occupier is, of course, a good authority. (Ordnance Survey 1905: 27–28)

Such clear distinctions in terms of socio-economic status, as outlined here, will have posed problems for collecting minority place names. Moreover, the OS had a practice of fossilising the toponomasticon it had collated and perpetuating its own name usage (HARLEY–SEYMOUR 1980b: 176). The *Instructions* stated, for instance:

It is important that names which have already appeared on the Ordnance Survey maps should not be altered, or new names inserted, except on the best authority. [...] New names, for which



authority [,] such as has been specified, cannot be obtained are probably not worth inserting [...]. (Ordnance Survey 1905: 28)

These extracts from the *Instructions* show that the OS established not only a hierarchy of authorities for information on names, but also a hierarchy of which names were worth collecting.

Today, according to its *Names Policy*, the OS is still “guided primarily by local usage and custom” and “makes enquiries and consults appropriate authorities”, some of which will be detailed further in the following sections (Ordnance Survey 2022: 4). As for its approach to different languages, the OS “will include other languages when they are recognised as a regional or minority language under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and they are the subject of UK, Scottish or Welsh legislation requiring the official use of the language” (Ordnance Survey 2022: 5, emphasis in original). This idea of including names in other languages (than English) only if required by legislation is interesting, as there is no UK legislation in this regard requiring the official use of English, which relies more on its *de facto* status. The relevance of the European Charter will be explored in the following section.

In its *Names Policy*, the OS also makes clear that, in the absence of a single authority for place names, “geographical names as portrayed on hard-copy and digital products of the national mapping agency—the Ordnance Survey—are recognised as being the authoritative geographical names of Great Britain” (Ordnance Survey 2022: 4).⁴ While this can be taken to imply all geographical names, regardless of their linguistic origin, other bodies have specific roles for the standardisation of names in various minority languages, as will be detailed below.

The proclaimed authoritative status of OS names has largely emerged *de facto* through the historical development of the OS, reflecting the typical operation of much language policy in the UK, and indeed many provisions in other areas of society. The OS is, however, mandated to collect geographical names as part of the public task it performs to maintain the National Geographic Database through the Public Sector Geospatial Agreement, which governs the relationship between the OS and the government. The postal service, Royal Mail, has a similar public task to perform for address data through its maintenance of the Postcode Address File, in accordance with the Postal Services Act 2000. Royal Mail was privatised in 2013, and at the time of finalising this article, in early 2025, it is being taken over by Czech businessman Daniel Křetínský’s company EP Group, which makes this an



⁴ The specification of “Great Britain” relates to the fact that the separate OSNI covers mapping in Northern Ireland.

interesting example of the involvement of private capital in geospatial data activities of considerable importance to the state and society.

While the OS and Royal Mail maintain records that are generally seen to have an authoritative status, and they certainly have a role to play in choosing which names to use in their products and services, they are not, as such, the original font of authority for establishing or changing names. Some authority for name changes rests with the Crown, and the monarch may grant a place a special royal title, such as was announced in 2025 for the *Royal Port of Barrow* in the northwest of England, “in recognition of the town’s unique and critical contribution to national security as home of nuclear submarine building in the UK” (UK Government 2025). Local authorities, meanwhile, have statutory powers to approve or alter street names and property numbers through e.g. the Town Improvement Clauses Act 1847, the Public Health Act 1925, the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982, and the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Local authorities also register changes to the names of individual properties, which are normally chosen by property owners themselves. The anglicisation of house names, often by new owners, has been particularly contentious in Wales in recent years. In the case of property name changes, the Welsh Government body responsible for the historic environment recommends as follows: “If there is good evidence that the property has a historic name that has appeared on historic mapping, then the local authority should ask the applicant to reconsider the proposed change and retain, or perhaps adopt, the historic name” (Cadw 2017: 18). Such checks have been made simpler by the Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2016, which required the creation of a list of historic place names, which is maintained by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

3. Recent developments as seen through the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML)

3.1. The ECRML and place names

The UK ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) in 2001, and in 2003 the territorial application was extended to include the Isle of Man, one of the UK’s Crown Dependencies. Signatory states of the ECRML specify which languages they choose to protect and develop under the Charter, and to some extent they also choose which specific measures they intend to take for each language. All languages selected by a state for recognition under the ECRML will have “Part II” objectives applied to them, while states can also opt whether or not to apply certain “Part III” measures to each language, and which of these to apply. The UK has ratified the ECRML in respect of seven languages so far. Four languages have Part II and Part III



status (Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Irish, and Manx Gaelic), while three languages are covered only by Part II provisions (Scots, Ulster Scots, and Cornish). Some relevant demographic information on these languages is provided in Appendix 1, as well as some notes on the general geographical distribution of their users.

The ECRML can be an important impetus for the official use of minority languages, including place names. Among the Part III measures that states may choose to commit to is Article 10 sub-paragraph 2.g, which commits states “to allow and/or encourage [...] the use or adoption, if necessary in conjunction with the name in the official language(s), of traditional and correct forms of place-names in regional or minority languages” (CoE 1992). The UK has committed to this for all the four languages with Part III status.

Although the UK signed the ECRML, it is important to note that the everyday responsibilities towards the languages in question largely fall to devolved government in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, except for Manx—which concerns the government of a territory that is not part of the UK—and Cornish, for which responsibilities mainly lie with the local authority, Cornwall Council. Furthermore, there are other relevant autochthonous languages in the UK and its adjacent Crown Dependencies that are not yet covered by the ECRML. These include British Sign Language, Irish Sign Language, and the surviving minority languages of the Channel Islands: Guernésiais, Jèrriais, and Sercquiais.⁵

Every few years, signatory states of the ECRML are expected to submit a report detailing their progress vis-à-vis the commitments made, and an international Committee of Experts is sent by the Council of Europe to reflect upon the report and make recommendations. The UK has completed six monitoring cycles thus far.⁶ In the following sections we will consider the Committee of Experts’ reports over the six cycles to explore how they have viewed the fulfilment of the commitment most clearly related to minority-language place names, i.e. Article 10 sub-paragraph 2.g, for the relevant languages (see an overview in

⁵ While space does not permit a full treatment of these languages in the present paper, they are covered in more detail in the more substantial chapter on which the topic of this paper is based.

⁶ The initial state reports for these cycles were submitted in 2002, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2018, and 2023, with the respective Committee of Experts’ main evaluation reports adopted in 2003, 2006, 2009, 2013, 2018, and 2024. All the reports and recommendations that have been published may be found on the website of the Council of Europe:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages/reports-and-recommendations> (accessed 2024-08-01).



Appendix 2).⁷ Brief summaries of key developments for each language will be given.

3.2. Welsh

Over the six monitoring cycles, the commitment to the official use of Welsh place names has consistently been fulfilled. On three occasions the Committee of Experts' reports did not even explicitly comment upon this commitment in detail for Welsh because it was already deemed fulfilled and the Committee of Experts had apparently not received any information to raise new concerns.

Recent developments of particular importance for the official use of Welsh place names include the new system of Welsh Language Standards, overseen by the Welsh Language Commissioner (Welsh: *Comisiynydd y Gymraeg*), a role that came into being in 2012. Among the most pertinent regulations are a requirement that Welsh-language text must not be treated “less favourably than the English language text” and that Welsh-language text “must be positioned so it is likely to be read first” (Welsh Language Standards (No. 1) Regulations 2015: Standards 61–62). The Welsh Language Commissioner has a Place-Name Standardisation Panel, and there has been an increased public interest in place names as cultural heritage (see e.g. JAMES 2022; PARRY 2023). The most recent reporting round for the ECRML has seen a deeper embedding of commitments about Welsh place names mentioned in the state report, such as a general pledge by the Welsh government to “ensure that Welsh language place names in the built and natural environments are safeguarded and promoted” (CoE 2023b: 70). Nonetheless, toponymy can still be a highly contested matter in Wales, and an interesting illustration of this came in 2023 when a visiting professor at Wrexham University (Welsh: *Prifysgol Wrexham*) was controversially removed from his role after criticising bilingual road signs on social media (EVANS 2023).

3.3. Scottish Gaelic

For Scottish Gaelic, the Committee of Experts initially saw the obligation for official use of Gaelic place names as only partly fulfilled, and it was first deemed to be fulfilled in 2018.

The new millennium brought with it a new drive from the OS to improve consistency and standardisation of Gaelic place names on maps, and over the same time there has been a significant increase in the use of Gaelic place names on official signage. These developments lay behind the formation in 2006 of

⁷ As mentioned above, this commitment only applies to Part III languages, and although the UK has opted to make this commitment to all of the relevant languages with Part III status, Manx Gaelic was only promoted to Part III status in 2020, so in the monitoring cycles from 2002 to 2018, this commitment only applied to Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, and Irish.



the Ainmean-Àite na h-Alba partnership (Gaelic Place-Names of Scotland) as a recognised point of reference for authoritative Gaelic forms of place names (Ainmean-Àite na h-Alba 2020: 2). This body carries out a great deal of scholarly work in its approach to standardisation.

For Gaelic, like many minority languages around Europe, multilingual signage has been a real catalyst for place-name standardisation efforts. Notably, the main design for bilingual road signs in Scotland features an impressive compromise in language order, with Gaelic place names appearing in a slightly less prominent colour, but sitting above their English equivalents, and in the same size and typeface, making “a remarkable step towards equal respect for the two languages” (PUZEY 2010: 80). In the 2021 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 42% of respondents said that they saw Gaelic on road signs, street signs or other public signs “about once a week” or “more than once a week”, which was more than twice the figure in 2012 (19%) (DEAN et al. 2022: 22). Still, attitudes to signage varied by sub-groups: 59% of the 18–29 age group thought that there should be bilingual Gaelic/English signage all across Scotland, compared to 34% of respondents aged 70 or over (DEAN et al. 2022: 29).

3.4. Irish

For Irish, the first monitoring round in 2002 seems to have taken the intentions expressed in the state report at face value, so the commitment to the official use of Irish place names was considered to be fulfilled. The second round noted some concerns about authorities refusing to engage with the procedure for exploring public support for street-name signs in languages other than English when these are requested (CoE 2007: 53). This is an obligation for local authorities in accordance with the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Nonetheless, the Committee of Experts still felt the commitment was overall fulfilled. From 2009 onwards, however, the situation has either deteriorated or the Committee of Experts has gained a different picture of the state of affairs, as it has deemed the commitment only partly fulfilled since then.

Of course, there have been major divergences in the official use of the Irish language over the last century since the partition of Ireland. Between 1949 and 1995, for instance, the official use of any language other than English for street names was effectively banned in Northern Ireland by section 19 of the Public Health and Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 1949. This affected Irish, Ulster Scots, and indeed any language apart from English. Some did try, however, and by 1989 it was said that there were over 300 road signs in Irish, even though they were technically illegal (HARTNETT 2011: 93).



Since 1995, the use of another language on street nameplates is legal, but if this is done, local councils “shall have regard to any views on the matter expressed by occupiers of premises in that street” (Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995: section 11). Practices for consulting on views vary between councils. In some cases, a majority vote of up to two thirds of occupiers is needed in favour, sometimes counting non-responses as votes against, and often with a follow-up vote by the council itself (CnG–CAJ–UU 2019: 14–20). These thresholds are clearly hard to meet for a minority language, and this has been criticised as “demonstrably prohibitive” by the Advisory Committee of another treaty, the Framework Convention for National Minorities (FCNM) (CoE 2023a: 32). Article 11 of the FCNM deals with personal names and place names, as well as with language visibility. Among other things, it commits signatories “to endeavour [...] to display traditional local names, street names and other topographical indications intended for the public also in the minority language when there is a sufficient demand for such indications” (CoE 1995). The FCNM Advisory Committee’s most recent report asks the UK “to guarantee a transparent and consistent approach to the display of topographical indications in minority languages”, which has generally been lacking in Northern Ireland (CoE 2023a: 32–33). In 2022, Belfast City Council simplified its requirements, and seven months after that change, valid applications had been received for bilingual signs on about 350 streets (BBC News 2023).

The Northern Ireland Place-Name Project (Irish: *Tionscadal Logainmneacha Thuaisceart Éireann*; Ulster Scots: *Norlin Airlan Placenaime Project*; NIPNP), based at Queen’s University Belfast, is the main hub for research on place names in Northern Ireland. Funding for the NIPNP has fluctuated since it began in 1987, but the NIPNP has been commissioned from time to time to provide Irish-language forms of street names and other place names for official use in parts of Northern Ireland (see e.g. UPNS 2017; KANE–Ó GLIASÁIN–BHREATHNACH 2023: 246–248).

3.5. Scots, Ulster Scots, Cornish, and Manx Gaelic

While Ulster Scots and Cornish are not covered by Part III provisions, and Manx Gaelic has only been covered by Part III since 2020, we can still see (in Appendix 2) that the Committee of Experts has commented on various points of relevance for place names in these languages, such as signage, street names, and the importance of standardisation.

There have been some positive notes on Cornish. The Akademi Kernewek, a voluntary charitable organisation supporting the language, now has an established role in place-name standardisation, although there have been concerns that the recent approach towards standardisation may “blur the



distinctive patterns that exist, distorting and corrupting the Cornish heritage” (PADEL 2017: 30). That said, the increase in visibility of the language on signs was reported to the FCNM Advisory Committee as “one of the most significant developments for Cornish in recent years” (CoE 2017: 36).

For Manx Gaelic, Coonceil ny Gaelgey, an advisory council that “unites most of the most active language activists and intellectuals as a statutory committee” (Ó HÍFEARNÁIN 2015: 108) has responsibility for standardisation of the language, including authoritative forms of place names and street names. Even before the language was covered under Part III of the ECRML, the recommendations of the Committee of Experts intensified around the need for a long-term strategy for official use of place names on the Isle of Man (CoE 2020: 18). Now that Manx Gaelic is covered by Part III provisions, the most recent evaluation report from 2024 mentioned speakers’ concerns about the hierarchy of languages implied by Manx Gaelic names appearing in smaller text on signs. The Committee of Experts advises “that the name in the regional or minority language should not be in a smaller size than the name in English” (CoE 2024: 16). It deems the undertaking only partly fulfilled.

A language that appears to be an anomaly in this list is Scots, in Scotland. It is the only one of these languages for which the ECRML’s Committee of Experts had not made any really substantive comment in relation to place names until the most recent report published in 2024. This may be partly due to the Scots language’s close relationship with English. There is a continuum between Scots and Scottish Standard English, and with the dominance of the English language, it is often commonly assumed that a place name is of English origin even when that name is actually Scots (see e.g. SCOTT 2016). Furthermore, there have been many debates and proposals about standardisation of Scots, but the prevailing view has tended to be against standardisation. The debate may be stirring again, “as part of a wider reflection on how the public space is changing” in Scotland today (COSTA 2018: 63), and in that regard it is also noteworthy that the most recent Committee of Experts’ report does mention the anglicisation of place names and poor provision of signage in Scots (CoE 2024: 16). Those who work to promote the Scots language certainly do appreciate the importance of place names. The Scots Language Centre (SLC [2020a]; [2020b]), for instance, has produced a variety of place-name resources, including an interactive map, a gazetteer, and even recommendations for the use of exonyms in Scots (HORSBROCH 2020). Many of these exonyms demonstrate longstanding international links, but some seem outmoded, such as *Reffel* for the city of Tallinn, based on the historical name *Reval*, which has largely fallen out of use since Estonian independence in 1918.



4. Conclusion and future prospects

One of the ECRML Committee of Experts' most important general findings in 2007 was that:

[...] there is a need to raise the awareness of the English-speaking majority population in England about the UK's regional or minority languages [...]. Although the National Curriculum in England includes the teaching of regional, religious and ethnic diversity, there seems to be no specific inclusion of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to regional or minority languages traditionally spoken in the UK. (CoE 2007: 63)

This raises significant concerns about relationships between the linguistic majority and the minorities, and the latest highest-priority recommendations of the Committee of Experts include that the UK should “take measures to promote tolerance towards speakers and awareness of regional or minority languages to promote mutual understanding in society as a whole” (CoE 2024: 50).

The governance structure of the UK also presents challenges for wider awareness of minority languages. There are intergovernmental structures such as the British-Irish Council that offer a platform for co-operation on these matters, but these platforms do not always align neatly with the needs of minority languages such as Cornish, which does not have a fully devolved government focusing on its own needs.⁸ Since the most direct responsibilities for the minority languages covered by the ECRML in the UK tend to fall to devolved governments, one local authority (in the case of Cornish), and the government of a territory that is not part of the UK (for Manx Gaelic), it would appear to be easy for the UK government not to take action in other, perhaps less direct ways, such as raising awareness of regional or minority languages through the education system in England, the country with the largest population in the UK by far, and where the UK government has responsibility in this area.

While the broader standardisation debate continues for languages such as Scots, and it is also a controversial topic for other languages such as British Sign

⁸ For co-ordination and dialogue between levels of administration, the new UK government elected in 2024 has established a Council of the Nations and Regions. This body has only met once at the time of writing, but it is notable that it is highly asymmetrical, effectively giving devolved nations a similar degree of representation to a number of English regional authorities, and with no direct representation for Cornwall, or vast swathes of England that do not have combined authority mayoralities. Meanwhile there also exists a Prime Minister and Heads of Devolved Governments Council, established in 2022, but this has only met twice to date, so it seems unlikely it will devote much time to matters of language policy.



Language (see e.g. EICHMANN 2009), standardisation of the majority language, English, is also inconsistent. Language policy and planning for the English language tend to be laissez-faire, lacking any formal co-ordination, and resting instead on the language's de facto status. The same applies to the treatment of place names in the majority language, with the aforementioned exceptions of the official treatment of names for places outwith the UK, as dealt with by the PCGN and APC. It appears, therefore, that the most concerted efforts for organised place-name standardisation and regulation—when it comes to places within the UK—tend to be for minority languages. This is partly out of necessity in endeavours to strengthen their position, and is spurred on by commitments through the ECRML and FCNM, but it is worth considering what lessons could be learnt for a more co-ordinated approach to place-name standardisation at other levels. Perhaps a joined-up approach to these matters in each part of the UK would help to make institutions more effective and accountable. This could build on existing activities and take an inclusive approach. Above all, when dealing with such a complex set of languages, and asymmetrical governance structures, it is important to remember that work to take care of toponymic heritage does not have to be seen as a zero-sum game. It is possible to promote multiple languages without necessarily taking anything away from others.

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Abstract

This paper investigates aspects of minority-language standardisation with particular relevance to place names in the United Kingdom (UK), and the current extent of official co-ordination on regulation of minority place names in various parts of the UK. Examples are included from England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the adjacent Crown Dependency of the Isle of Man, although the latter is not part of the UK. Following a historical overview focused on naming policies followed by official mapping agencies, developments in recent decades are summarised as seen through the reports prepared by the Committee of Experts appointed by the Council of Europe to report on the UK's implementation of commitments in respect of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

While the focus is mainly on minority languages, the paper also touches on some inconsistencies in naming practices at the state level related to geographical naming in the majority language, reflecting aspects of the more general approach to standardisation of English. There is also consideration of whether there are broader lessons to be learnt from the approach to minority toponymic standardisation in different parts of the UK. Through this, it is queried whether more wide-ranging place-name standardisation efforts, building upon existing activity and with an inclusive approach, might help to build more effective and accountable institutions in the UK.

Keywords: place names, minority languages, United Kingdom, place-name standardisation



Appendix 1. Demographic overview of languages discussed above in relation to the ECRML. Statistics referring to any combination of self-reported abilities have been used (except for Cornish where these figures are not available). The less expansive category of “speakers” would yield lower numbers, to varying degrees. Sources: NISRA 2022a, 2022b; ONS 2022a, 2022b; Statistics Isle of Man 2022; NRS 2024a, 2024c.

Lan- guage	Origin	Estimated number of users in relevant geographical area	Present main geographical distribution of users
Welsh	Celtic (Brythonic group)	759,155 people in Wales aged three or over (25.2%) reported some ability in Welsh in the 2021 census.	Widespread in Wales, with the highest concentrations today in the north and west of the country. Established diasporic populations of speakers also in Argentina, the United States, and in a number of Commonwealth countries.
Scottish Gaelic	Celtic (Goidelic group)	130,161 people in Scotland aged three or over (2.5%) reported some ability in Gaelic in the 2022 census.	Historically across most of Scotland, with the highest concentrations today in the Hebrides and parts of the Scottish Highlands. The language also has a degree of official recognition in Nova Scotia, Canada.
Irish	Celtic (Goidelic group)	228,617 people in Northern Ireland aged three or over (12.4%) reported some ability in Irish in the 2021 census.	The largest number of speakers is in the Republic of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, varying proportions of speakers in different areas. Diasporic speaker populations primarily in English-speaking countries. Irish is also an official language of the EU.
Scots	Germanic (West Germanic)	2,444,659 people in Scotland aged three or over (46.2%) reported some ability in Scots in the 2022 census.	Wide geographical distribution across Scotland, predominantly in the Scottish Lowlands, with particular concentrations in e.g. Aberdeenshire, as well as in Orkney and Shetland.
Ulster Scots	Germanic (West Germanic)	190,613 people in Northern Ireland aged three or over (10.4%) reported some ability in Ulster Scots in the 2021 census.	In Northern Ireland, mainly in the northern and eastern parts closest to Scotland, with speakers also in the Republic of Ireland in the east of County Donegal (the northernmost county of Ireland).
Cornish	Celtic (Brythonic group)	There are no census questions about Cornish language ability, but 471 people in Cornwall aged three or over (0.08%) reported Cornish as their ‘main language’ in the 2021 census, as did 89 people in the rest of England.	Mainly in Cornwall.
Manx Gaelic	Celtic (Goidelic group)	2,223 people on the Isle of Man (2.6%) reported they could speak, read or write Manx in the 2021 census.	Mainly on the Isle of Man.



Appendix 2. Evaluation by ECRML Committee of Experts on Article 10.2.g fulfilment (for Part II+III languages) or reporting on matters of relevance to place names (for Part II-only languages).

Language and ECRML recognition	Article 10.2.g fulfilment per monitoring round					
	2002	2005	2009	2013	2018	2023
Welsh Part II+III	Yes	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed	Yes	Yes
Scottish Gaelic Part II+III	Partly	Partly	Yes, by two local authorities; otherwise partly	Partly	Yes	Yes
Irish Part II+III	Yes	Yes, but noting reports of some councils refusing to consider Irish street-name signs	Partly	Partly	Partly	Partly
Scots Part II only	-	-	-	-	-	N/A but discusses e.g. anglicised place names and poor signage
Ulster Scots Part II only	-	-	N/A but discusses importance of standardisation	-	N/A but discusses signage being removed	-
Cornish Part II only	-	N/A but discusses signage and lack of standard	N/A but discusses signage	N/A but mentions e.g. working group on signage	-	N/A but discusses e.g. concerns about poor signage
Manx Gaelic Part II (2003–) + Part III (2020–)	-	-	N/A but discusses place-name and street-name projects	N/A but discusses standardisation of street names	N/A but discusses signs and need for long-term strategy for place names	Partly

