

Use only Welsh names for places in Wales

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 13 Tachwedd 2023
Petitions Committee | 13 November 2023

Reference: SR23/7092-2

Petition Number: P-06-1369

Petition title: Use only Welsh names for places in Wales

Text of petition:

In a spirit of respect for Wales as its own nation with its own history and culture; and as a mark of acknowledgement concerning some of the cultural oppression that has historically been inflicted on Wales and her language and culture. English names might initially continue to be used by some out of habit but in all official avenues and in both spoken and written media, the original Welsh names for places in Wales should be used.

Following moves concerning the names of Eryri and Bannau Brycheiniog, we consider it an opportune moment to move to using only the Welsh names for places in Wales.



1. Background

The names of Welsh villages, towns and cities have developed over a period of two millennia. While the **majority of place-names in Wales are Welsh**, the origin of some place-names lie in English, French, Latin, Irish, Norse and Brittonic/British (evolving to become *Cymraeg* as we know it today).

Examples of some recognisable **Welsh only place-names** include Aberystwyth, Bangor, Tonypandy, Penarth and Pontypridd. However, there are several examples of cities, towns and villages in Wales that have both a Welsh and English name.

Some of those places with Welsh and English names have very **similar spelling and pronunciation** in both languages. Places like:

- *Caerffili* - Caerphilly;
- *Caerdydd* - Cardiff;
- *Merthyr Tudful* - Merthyr Tydfil;
- *Treorci* - Treorchy.

Dr. Dylan Foster Evans expands on the evolution of Welsh place-names in this brief article - [*What's in a name?*](#) He notes that Cardiff, for instance, 'derives from the medieval Welsh *Caerdyf* (which also gives us the modern Welsh *Caerdydd*)'. He notes that linguists believe the name was likely 'coined in the British language, back when the Romans occupied Cardiff some 2,000 years ago'.

There are examples of English names such as Flint (*Y Fflint*), Wrexham (*Wrecsam*) and Caldicot (*Cil-y-coed*) that have been adopted by the Welsh rather than the other way around. Similarly, the original name for Biwmares was the Norman-French name - Beaumaris.

Other places in Wales have alternate names unrelated to each other. Examples include:

- Newport - *Casnewydd* (the Welsh meaning New Castle);
- Swansea (derived from the Norse meaning Svein's Island) - *Abertawe* (the Welsh meaning the Mouth of the River Tawe);
- Brecon (derived from Welsh Kingdom of Brycheiniog) - *Aberhonddu* (Welsh taken from River Honddu)
- Anglesey (derived again from Norse - *Ongul*), while the Welsh name *Môn*, was first recorded as Latin *Mona*.

There are examples of anglicised Welsh place-names gradually ceasing to be accepted or used, including Caernarvon (Caernarfon), Conway (Conwy), Portmadoc (Porthmadog) and Llanelly (Llanelli).

There are also places where there are ongoing disagreements over whether the Welsh spelling should be used exclusively or not, such in Varteg (Farteg) which has had some publicity in recent times.

2. The Place-names Standardisation Panel

The Welsh Language Commissioner, an independent body established by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011, is responsible for providing advice on the standard forms of Welsh place-names. A list of standard forms of the Welsh names of villages, towns and cities in Wales is available online for anyone wishing to use it.

The Commissioner established a panel of experts to work on and make recommendations on the standard form of Welsh place-names. The Commissioner's website notes that in forming its recommendations, 'the Place-names Standardisation Panel gives consideration to the **meaning, history and etymology of the place-names**, as well as their **current usage**'. The panel is also guided by the Guidelines for Standardising Place-names in Wales. Section 9 – *Dual forms* notes the following advice for the panel to consider:

If the difference between the Welsh form and the 'English' form consists of **only one or two letters**, the use of a **single form is recommended**, with **preference being given to the Welsh form**. This accords with the recommendations of the Ordnance Survey and the Highway Authorities. However, recognized variations should be acknowledged (Caeriw/Carew, Biwmares/Beaumaris, Y Fflint/Flint, Wreccsam/Wrexham).

3. Welsh Parliament action

The Senedd has considered several petitions in the last few years relating to Welsh place-names and Welsh house names. In 2021, a petition calling on the Senedd and other bodies to start referring to Welsh cities and towns by their Welsh names was submitted, receiving 108 signatures. The petitioners called on public bodies to start using Welsh terms and place-names to "increase Welsh language use".

The Committee heard from the Welsh Language Commissioner's office during its meeting on 7 March 2022 in relation to the petition. One of the issues highlighted during the session was that responsibility for deciding on Welsh place-names sits with more than one organisation. Moreover, there is no specific legislation in Wales for standardising Welsh place-names. The Deputy Commissioner at the time stated that:

there is room for us to carry out a review of the situation in Wales and to find solutions that are appropriate to our circumstances. One of the things that I think is extremely important is that we do get that clarity. It's clear to me in Wales that there is quite a bit of confusion. Now, you don't have to have legislation to deal with confusion, but I do think that very often we fail—. Although there is hard work done, we are failing to deliver to the utmost of our ability the work of promoting and safeguarding these names because of uncertainties in this area.

While the Deputy Commissioner didn't call for a move towards legislation in this area, she did consider a review of the issue would be timely.

During the first half of 2020, a similar petition was submitted which called for reverting to the Welsh language spelling of place-names. The specific action the petitioners called for was:

Wales has many place names which have needlessly been Anglicised, and have often been replaced by Anglicised forms for no good reason. [...] I, and the undersigned, therefore petition the Welsh Assembly to take action and change these Anglicised forms of Welsh names - throughout Wales - and restore their original Welsh spellings.

The Petitions Committee of the 5th Senedd considered the petition in June 2020. The petition gathered 1,096 signatures.

During the second half of 2020, a petition calling for legislation to prevent people from changing Welsh house names was submitted to the Senedd. This petition gathered 18,103 signatures, and was debated in Plenary on 20 January 2020. The previous Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and the Welsh Language stated during the debate:

I have to admit that this is an issue that I am concerned about, but there are practical problems that we need to look at... I'm happy to see whether it's possible for us to do something on a statutory basis as well.

But, I have to say, I'm not sure if it's possible, but I'm more than happy to see if we can move further in this area.

In 2018, a [petition calling on the Senedd to protect and promote Welsh place-names](#) was submitted. It gathered 431 signatures. The specific action the petitioner called for was:

Increasingly historic Welsh place names and house names are being replaced by English names. This kills the local culture and one of the elements which makes Wales unique... Old Welsh place names/building names should be protected by law; and new developments should have a mandatory Welsh name in order to preserve our unique culture and language.

A year earlier, Dai Lloyd MS won the ballot to propose a Member's bill: [Development of the Protection of Welsh Historical Place Names Bill](#). A [Plenary debate](#) was held on 15 March 2017.

The Welsh Government did not support the bill, and it did not receive leave to proceed.

As part of its 2017 inquiry into the [Historic Environment](#), the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee (of the 5th Senedd) considered the List of Historic Place Names of Wales. It stated that the Welsh Government should keep the matter under "active review and should be willing to introduce further protection for historic place names if the current list does not prove effective".

4. Welsh Government action

The previous Welsh Government [outlined its activity](#) in this area in response to the petition in 2018 [calling on the Senedd to protect and promote Welsh place-names](#). It noted that, following the passing of the [Historic Environment \(Wales\) Act 2016](#), the Welsh Government introduced a statutory list of historic place names, and that:

Statutory guidance requires local and National Parks authorities and Natural Resources Wales to take account of the list when their functions involve naming or renaming places. This includes the naming or renaming of streets, properties and other places, either directly or by another party. The intention is that the operation of the list and the

statutory guidance together will lead to a reduction in the number of formal changes to historic property names.

However, the Welsh Government noted:

...these measures stop short of providing formal protection for historic place names. Detailed consideration was given to providing statutory protection for historic place names during the development of the 2016 Act.

In response to the petition calling to revert to the Welsh language spelling of place-names, the Minister for the Welsh Language at the time noted that:

The Welsh Language Commissioner is responsible for providing advice to individuals and organisations on the standardised forms of place names in Wales. The Commissioner's List of Standardised Welsh Place-names is a useful online resource, which can be searched or downloaded to find the standardised names of villages, towns and cities in Wales...

However, the Commissioner's role is to suggest forms and spellings for place-names, rather than to enforce them.

Responding to the last petition calling on the Senedd and other bodies to start referring to Welsh cities and towns by their Welsh names, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language noted that:

Welsh place names are currently the subject of close attention from the Welsh Government, with several processes ongoing in order to collect evidence for policy developments.

The Minister concludes by referring to the Welsh Government's Programme for Government Commitment, stating that:

I know that people feel strongly about Welsh place names, be they the names of houses, geographic features, towns or villages, and they are included in our Cooperation Agreement with Plaid Cymru because we as a Government want to make a real difference

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that

these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.