



Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee
By email to:
SeneddCulture@Senedd.Wales

16/02/2023

Dear Committee,

Inquiry into Wales-Ireland relations

I am very keen to raise the committee members' awareness of existing links between my office and Ireland and the potential to further develop this work for the mutual benefit of Welsh and Irish speakers. Our current collaboration in two priority areas is outlined below, namely promoting and facilitating the use of official languages, and protecting and promoting the place names of those languages. At the end of this letter, you will find a list of practical suggestions for developing cooperation in these areas, and ideas for funding collaborative projects.

1. Working together to defend and promote language rights

The post of Irish Language Commissioner, [An Coimisinéir Teanga](#), was established by the Official Languages Act 2003. A close working relationship was soon established between us when the Welsh Language Commissioner's office opened in 2012, and that relationship has been supported and further nurtured through the International Association of Language Commissioners ([IALC](#)). An Coimisinéir Teanga has given evidence to this committee in the past, of course, and the Welsh Language Commissioner has in turn provided evidence to the Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann committees as they scrutinized recent amendments to their official languages act. There has been great interest in Ireland in the Welsh Language Measure and its influence, and the Commissioner has received several invitations to address various groups there in recent years – from language officers

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and pressure groups to the Bar Association. The personal tributes received by our office from Ireland, together with the public attention in the press there to the passing of the late Commissioner Aled Roberts, were indicative of the appreciation for these efforts.

At the end of 2021, a revised Official Languages Act came into force in Ireland which contains a number of significant provisions – the most obvious and the most significant in the context of this inquiry – is Ireland's move to a language standards system under the influence of our legislation here in Wales. This is testament to the importance of sharing successful practice between the policy makers and legislatures of the two countries. There are a number of other provisions in the act which should be closely monitored, such as the commitment that 20% of those recruited into the public sector and civil service will be Irish speakers by 2030.

We naturally support that 'Culture, Language and Heritage' is recognised as an area of collaboration in [the Joint Action Plan 2021-25](#). However, the main emphasis of this section is very much on the arts and cultural initiatives. There is recognition that there is a need to 'continue to work through the British-Irish Council indigenous, minority and lesser-used languages work sector to support the development of, and policy cooperation for, indigenous languages'. Of course, the British-Irish Council's Indigenous, Minority and Lesser-Used Languages work sector is a useful forum to bring relevant Ministers together. But we believe there is scope to cast the net wider and involve other key stakeholders – including the independent Language Commissioners of both countries.

Language should also be a core part of the Education and Research priority area to strengthen the academic foundations of linguistic revitalisation efforts in both countries. It must be ensured that the best ideas and practices in relation to language planning and the protection of linguistic rights are not lost in the Irish Sea.

The Commissioner would be delighted to contribute to this important discussion, of course. The fruitful relationship that exists between the Commissioners' offices alongside the structure of the International Association of Language Commissioners provides a possible foundation for further collaboration, should the necessary investment to facilitate the work be secured. For example, we hope to organise an international conference for the International Association of Language Commissioners in Wales in 2024 (dependent on securing sponsorship) – we would be very open to discussing the potential of collaboration and ensuring that conference themes and events support the strategic relationship between Ireland and Wales.



2. Standardisation, protection and promotion of place-names

Ireland has a tradition to envy of legislating to protect place-names. Following the receipt of expert advice, the Minister for the Gaeltacht will prescribe the standard forms of Irish place-names in regulations. This procedure means that there is no vagueness about the standard and official forms of place-names and which forms must be displayed on signs and adopted in official contexts.

This is quite different to the current situation in Wales where 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 institutions to follow the advice of the Place-names Standardisation Panel. Establishing a regime where public institutions in Wales are expected to adopt standard forms recommended by the Commissioner would be transformative. It would lead to a situation where standard Welsh forms would be adopted and promoted which would in turn reduce confusion, duplication and inconsistency in mapping and address data. It would also save the valuable time and resources of local authorities who currently have to deal with uncertainty and disagreement over what forms they should adopt.

Ireland also has a tradition to envy of supporting research into place-names. The Placenames Branch was established in 1956 to undertake detailed research into place-names and provide authoritative recommendations on which forms should be adopted. These recommendations, along with the wealth of research to support them, are available to the public through [Logainm.ie | Placenames Database of Ireland](https://logainm.ie) since 2007, a resource developed by DCU under the auspices of the Department for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media. It is an extremely attractive and interactive resource that allows users to search for places on a map, includes records and audio recordings derived from fieldwork, and supports users to pronounce the names correctly. Having a resource like this would transform efforts to standardise and promote the use of standard forms in Wales and I am confident that our Irish colleagues would be very keen to share their expertise and experience with us.

With the Government and Plaid Cymru's Co-operation Agreement recognising the need to protect and promote Welsh place-names, it would be very timely for the Welsh Government to scrutinise what is being achieved in Ireland and the legislation and investment that supports the work there. Collaboration in the field of place-names and the exchange of knowledge, technological solutions, and research as part of the next co-operation plan would also open up exciting possibilities of collaboration across three of the six existing priority areas (Trade and Tourism, Education and Research, Culture, Language and Heritage).



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3. Recommendations to strengthen future collaboration

I would be keen to be involved in discussions about how the Wales-Ireland collaboration could be further developed in the above priority areas. In particular, I would like to discuss:

- Possible structures to support a language planning forum between the two countries.
- Ensuring that language, and in particular language planning, is considered as an overarching theme and a core part of the Education and Research priority area.
- The need to scrutinise Irish legislation in relation to place-names.
- The potential for Wales to benefit from the Irish expertise in the field of place-names and the exciting possibilities to share resources and solutions between the two countries.
- The possibilities of further collaboration through the International Association of Language Commissioners, specifically in planning a conference in Wales in 2024.

Yours sincerely,

Efa Gruffudd Jones
Welsh Language Commissioner