

Protecting the Tapestry

Place, house and street names - the current situation

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1. Background

Every good journalist knows that two specific topics will certainly attract the response of the public: health and education. In Wales, the 'Welsh language' could be added to these. Not a day goes by on social media where a comment isn't made about changing house names, poor signs and a general lack of respect towards the Welsh language. There have been arguments between people, organisations and public bodies. Changing house names has been, and remains, a contentious issue and there is an increasing requirement on Gwynedd Council to address the problem.

The report submitted to the Committee in 2018 acknowledged that it was unclear who did what within the authority, and how much consultation was being undertaken on names at the time. There was no clarity either about which procedure existed to address the matter within the current statutory rights and legislation. This was not a shortcoming on behalf of the authority, as such, but a situation that was a result of changes that had occurred in legislation, jobs and policies over the years, with no central point to gather everything together.

2. The challenges

Persuading

The Place Names Project Team recognises that it will not be an easy task to persuade every individual who lives in Gwynedd, or every individual who will move to the county to live, that there is value in preserving Welsh names on houses. It can prove very difficult at times, and varies from place to place within the county. We therefore need to look at the broader picture.

Each culture can be considered as a large, colourful old tapestry, speckled with small pictures and events that tell the stories of a country by means of illustrations and colour. One integral part of the tapestry is the history of place names.

It is a cause of great concern that the Welsh language tapestry has deteriorated a great deal over time. The thread is weakening on a daily basis, and holes are appearing in every part. We must acknowledge that it is not possible to save the tapestry in its entirety and that repairs will have to be undertaken here and there, slowly but surely. It will never return to its original splendour but it is possible to repair the vast majority of it. If a hole is found, we will place a new Welsh patch over it. It does not matter if that cover is made of the highest standard material, *'gwell clwt na thwll'* (*better a patch than a hole*) as the older generation would say.

The world needs to be persuaded that there is special value to the tapestry, whilst also accepting that not everyone will have the same opinion, that there will be failures, and that totally unsuitable names will manage to reach the front gates of many houses. However, the Place Names Project is a way forward and builds a firm foundation for the future.

Legislation

It became apparent in the report to the Language Committee that the main barrier when dealing with the matter is legislation. Specific, effective legislation would be of great help to close the door just a little on the possibility of decisions by the authority on house or street names being challenged.

If the person applying to re-name his/her house knows that the force of the law is behind the final decision of the authority to refuse, they are more likely to reconsider their application. *'The snake in the grass must be slayed - before it becomes a giant snake'* as it were.

Yes, the authority currently has statutory rights under a number of acts, and there are many relevant policies, but no clear and formal procedures have been established and implemented so far to protect native place names.

Influence

By and large, the challenge we are facing as an authority is to protect Welsh names not from the influence of English names as such, but any names that are unsuitable in a Welsh community or Welsh landscape. Of course, cases of *new* English names (or any other language for that matter) that fit the landscape perfectly in Gwynedd are very rare. But, some English names have become accepted here. The English name 'Victoria' is the origin of the name 'Y Fic', Llithfaen, a public house that could not be more Welsh. There are many a *London House* (Llithfaen, Harlech, Dolgellau and Barmouth) and *Manchester House* (Y Felinheli, Blaenau Ffestiniog and Cwm-y-glo), each one telling the story of local industry and trade.

Next door to *London House*, Llithfaen there is *London Bach*, which begs the question whether *London Bach* is an English or Welsh name? Therefore, caution is needed as a few old houses with an English name can be more Welsh in nature and culturally richer than the new bungalow next door with a monoglot Welsh name.

3. Next Steps

A work programme has been written, with the project effectively been split into two work streams: the internal work that needs to be done to get some order and consistency within the Council, and external work to raise awareness and nurture public interest in the work.

Internal work

An initial meeting was held with various officers within the Council in order to establish the Project Group, with the aim of moving forward with clear procedures that will, hopefully, meet the need for clarity in the field. The main stumbling block is that Council departments use different software systems and each of those uses different versions of place names. Additionally, a number of those systems are maintained by external companies. Therefore, it is not easy to reconcile the use of names between one and the other.

One option that would take us in the right direction would be adopting one database of names to be used internally and externally by the Council.

The initial work on the project has also involved a considerable amount of reading and research, to find out what happens in other areas and what potential leads are there for the Council to pursue. It

must be acknowledged that this is not only a problem and concern for Gwynedd, and that there is a possibility for us to see good practices in other areas.

The first thing that was done was to look beyond the county and on other councils to see what their approach was towards house names. It soon became apparent that there was a great difference in the policies of different councils across Britain. There could be lessons to learn and models to follow.

For example, the Borough Council of West Norfolk insists that new street names must end with specific suffixes listed by the Council. Here are a few examples, of many, that also include further restrictions on the use of those names:

- **'Street'** may be used for any thoroughfare
- **'Way'** may be used for major roads
- **'Close'** To be used for a cul-de-sac only

West Norfolk also insists that there is a historical connection, where possible, in a name:

'...they must be consistent with the following protocols:

- *the name(s) should, when possible, have a proven historical connection to the land intended for development*
- *if no suitable historical name can be found for the land then a historical name related to an adjacent area may be suitable*

Of course, it can be argued that it is possible to find a historical connection anywhere. The guidelines of West Norfolk proceed to note that it refuses some specific suffixes on names:

'End', 'Cross', 'Side', 'View', 'Wharf', 'Walk', 'Park', 'Meadow' are not considered to be suitable. With regards to naming buildings, it insists on specific suffixes. Here are some examples from the many listed in their policy.

All new building names should end with one of the following:

- **'House'** block offices or residential only
- **'Lodge'** residential only
- **'Point'** high block residential only
- **'Heights'** block offices or residential only

Preferably, no building name should start with 'The'.

It is clear, therefore, that West Norfolk is confident that their policies hold up. We don't know yet in accordance with what Act, or based on what policy, West Norfolk are operating, but the above highlights the fact that there is scope to impose restrictions on the use of new names on buildings and streets/developments.

So the main work of the project will be to try and to make the best of current legislation and policies and finding ways to use them to our advantage.

We will start at our own doorstep, looking at the way the Council itself uses the Welsh versions of its names, buildings and signs, and then we will, step by step, work our way outwards, to try and influence others.

External work

There will also be more public work to promote and encourage the use of Welsh names.

One way to generate the good will of the public is to consider what the Welsh Language Promotion Plan 2018-2013 states, namely that it should be ensured that *'Different social cohorts, and less willing speakers feel they are part of the Welsh community'*. The Team has already been discussing many ways to generate interest in the field, which include:

- Using the Council intranet and social media websites to raise awareness of the origin of place names among colleagues and the public. Excerpts will be published regularly under the title *'Yr Enw a'r Hanes'*, explaining the origin of some interesting names. We will start, for example, with the origin of the name Gwynedd. We will also publish news snippets about the work of the Team and articles of interest.
- Engage with schools in order to propose ideas and activities that will fit into the *'Fy Milltir Sgwâr'* (My Local Area) theme of the New Curriculum, which will become statutory in 2022. This could include a competition for young people to create new fables based on an imaginary place name, as well as creating a lesson plan for teachers that encourages pupils to search for the history behind the wealth of place names that are local to them.
- Hold events at grass roots' level, in the community, in order to generate a discussion and to include the public in the project. A series of 4 interactive sessions have already been arranged for the winter, working alongside Hunaniaith, looking at the origins of place names - these will be sessions on *Zoom* with the Project Officer, discussing place names in a non-academic manner, as a kind of 'presentation on the origin of place names' and aimed at people with an interest in the field but who want to find out more.
- Ensuring that the project receives regular attention in the press - some attention has already been received following the announcement of the appointment of the Project Officer, in the press and on social media websites. The attention that was totally positive.

The role of external bodies and organisations

The aspirations of the authority to protect place names rely heavily on the goodwill of residents and prospective Gwynedd residents, but also on having the same enthusiasm and goodwill among external bodies and organisations. A *Contacts Directory* has been established by the Team to facilitate access to relevant key staff within the authority and externally. We will also closely monitor the work that is being undertaken by the Snowdonia National Park, and a working relationship has already been established with the relevant officer there. The Place-Name Society will also have a key role to play in the work and an informal conversation has already taken place between Dylan Foster Evans, the Chair of the Society and Meirion MacIntyre Huws, the Project Officer, regarding the project direction and how both can work together to achieving the aim.

4. Onwards

Of course, there is a lot of work ahead, and a few stumbling blocks to overcome, but things have already started moving in the right direction in a little over a month. At least with the growing momentum of the Project, the tapestry is back on the wall once again, for all to see, with an enthusiastic team standing in front of it ready to repair it and, most importantly, working tirelessly to protect it.