

HISTORIC COUNTIES OF THE UNITED KINGDOM BILL

A BILL

to amend the Interpretation Act 1978 to make provision for a standard definition of the historic counties of the United Kingdom; to amend the Lieutenancies Act 1997 to appoint the lord-lieutenants of Great Britain to the historic counties; and for connected purposes.

Be it enacted by the King’s most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:—

1 Statutory definition of ‘historic county’

(1) The Interpretation Act 1978 is amended as follows.

(2) After the definition for ‘High Court’ insert —

“ ‘Historic county’ means one of the ancient or geographical counties of the United Kingdom as described by Definition A of the “Historic Counties Standard” (ISBN 978-1-0686875-0-1) published by the Historic Counties Trust. ”

2 Realigning lieutenancy areas with historic counties

(1) The Lieutenancies Act 1997 is amended as follows.

(2) Paragraph 2 of Schedule 1 is repealed and replaced by -

“The counties in England for the purposes of this Act are the historic counties in England.”

(3) Paragraph 3 of Schedule 1 is repealed.

(4) Paragraph 6 of Schedule 1 is repealed and replaced by —

“The counties in Wales for the purposes of this Act are the historic counties in Wales.”

(5) Paragraph 7 of Schedule 1 is repealed and replaced by —

“The areas in Scotland for the purposes of this Act are -

(a) the cities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow; and

(b) the historic counties in Scotland.”

(6) Paragraph 8 and 9 of Schedule 1 are repealed.

3 Extent, commencement and short title

(1) This Act extends to England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

(2) This Act comes into force on 1st April 2028.

(3) This Act may be cited as the Historic Counties of the United Kingdom Act 2026.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

Section 1 inserts a definition of the phrase ‘*historic county*’ into the Interpretation Act 1978. Such a formal, legal definition of ‘historic county’ is necessary:

- to clarify the difference in kind between the historic counties and those various administrative entities which have been given the label ‘county’ in legislation since the 19th century;
- to provide a clear understanding of the term ‘historic county’ as used within existing and future legislation and guidance, e.g. *Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012*, *Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016*, *Celebrating the Historic Counties of England guidance 2019*, *Advertisements guidance 2019* and *Flying Flags: A Plain English Guide 2021*.
- to ensure the consistent use of the historic counties across Government and its agencies, within the heritage sector and also more widely as a general-purpose geography for the UK.

The definition is based on the Historic Counties Standard^[1], the standard definition of the names, areas and borders of the historic counties, e.g. as used by the Office for National Statistics^[2].

Section 2 amends the Lieutenancies Act 1997, effectively returning the appointment of the office of lord-lieutenant to the historic counties, recognising the importance of both the historic counties and the office of lord-lieutenant.

[1] The Historic Counties Standard, 2024, Historic Counties Trust (ISBN 978-1-0686875-0-1)
https://historiccountiestrust.co.uk/Historic_Counties_Standard.pdf

[2] Index of Place Names in Great Britain, 2024, Office for National Statistics, 2023
<https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/6cb9092a37da4b5ea1b5f8b054c343aa/about>

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