

IN THE OMAGH BOMBING INQUIRY

OPENING

Introduction

1. This is an opening statement on behalf of the following core participants ('CPs'):
 - i. The family of Brenda Logue
 - ii. The family of Gareth Conway
 - iii. The family of Breda Devine
 - iv. The family of Fernando Blasco Baselga
 - v. The family of Veda Short
 - vi. Caroline McKinney
 - vii. Niamh McKinney
 - viii. Pauline Harte
 - ix. Emmet Tunney
 - x. Nicola Hamilton
 - xi. Laura Hamilton
 - xii. Maria Sonsoles Lumbreras Oreja-Egaña
2. Each of the above CPs has collective aims and hopes for the Inquiry but they also have their individual aims and hopes. What they have in common is that they are a group of individuals whose lives were irreversibly altered by the catastrophic events in Omagh on 15 August 1998. They are bereaved families who lost sons and daughters, mothers, brothers and sisters; and survivors who, though they lived, continue to carry the pain, trauma and devastation of that day in their minds, bodies, and hearts.
3. Among the dead were men, women and children who were citizens of this island and beyond. Some were unborn. All were innocent. The passage of nearly twenty-seven years has not dulled the agony of that day. For the families we represent, the grief remains as piercing as it was in the aftermath. The survivors we represent continue to suffer not just from physical wounds, but from the terrible memory of what they saw, heard, and lost.

4. Their pain is aggravated by the lingering, unanswered question as to whether this atrocity could have been prevented.
5. These CPs are represented by three firms of solicitors all based within 20 miles of Omagh itself: Logan & Corry, Campbell & Haughey and Roche McBride.

The nature and function of this Public Inquiry

6. Public inquiries in the United Kingdom have long served a vital democratic function: they are mechanisms for transparency, truth-telling, and accountability in the wake of national tragedies. They do not exist to assign criminal liability, but to reveal what went wrong, why it went wrong, and how to ensure it never happens again. They are, at their best, cathartic exercises in collective reckoning.
7. This Inquiry, established under the Inquiries Act 2005, is unprecedented. It is the first public inquiry to examine potential preventability failures involving both UK and Irish state agencies regarding an atrocity committed by non-state actors. It asks whether state authorities knew or should have known enough to stop the Omagh bombing and whether reasonable actions were taken - or not taken - given that knowledge.
8. While the commitment of the Republic of Ireland to cooperate with this Inquiry¹ is welcome, it is viewed with some caution by the CPs. Their position is that a parallel Inquiry in that jurisdiction was the only guaranteed way to fully expose the truth. There is nothing more that the Inquiry team can do to bring that about but it does leave a lingering concern that aspects of the Inquiry will be hampered due to this continuing failure by the Irish State.
9. Despite the foregoing issue, the Inquiry will consider:
 - i. Intelligence held prior to the attack.
 - ii. The adequacy of information-sharing between agencies.
 - iii. The operational decisions of UK and Irish authorities.
 - iv. Whether actions taken were reasonable in light of the threat.

¹ Memorandum of Understanding dated 15 April 2025

10. It is not tasked with identifying individual criminal guilt, but rather with ensuring a full accounting of institutional responsibility. This is a form of justice that does not reside in courtrooms. It is justice in the form of truth.
11. The guidance note for the opening statements requests that CPs provide an efficient and focused statement for an informed reader. In light of that direction, the CPs confirm that they have considered the detailed provisional list of issues that was updated on 31 March 2025. We endorse that list of issues as they capture almost all of the concerns raised by the CPs we represent, and note that it will be relied upon throughout the Inquiry.

Historical context and the Omagh bombing

12. The Omagh bombing was the deadliest single atrocity of the Northern Ireland Troubles. The car bomb that exploded on Market Street on 15 August 1998 came just months after the optimism of the Good Friday Agreement. But even in that hopeful context, dissident groups like the Real IRA continued their campaign.
13. The Inquiry will examine 31 incidents in the lead up to Omagh. These were not isolated incidents; they were part of an escalating campaign by dissident republicans after the Good Friday Agreement. The CPs want to understand what information was available from those attacks and in what way it was stored, communicated and used in order to prevent future attacks. The CPs are also concerned and wish to understand more about the flow of information between the security forces in Ireland and their counterparts in the UK in respect of the activities of the Real IRA.
14. The techniques and strategies used by the Real IRA were known: vehicle bombs placed in busy town centres in order to cause maximum damage before the bomb could be made safe. The leading personalities were also known, including the bombmakers, from their days in the Provisional IRA. The security services were not operating in the dark. Despite this, the very same bombers succeeded in placing a vehicle in the heart of Omagh's commercial district on a busy Saturday afternoon. Warnings were phoned in, but miscommunication and flawed assessments led police to evacuate people towards the very location of the bomb.

15. The result was catastrophic. The CPs want to know whether it was possible for things to have been done differently and whether that may have resulted in a different outcome.

The long struggle for an Inquiry

16. In the years following the bombing, families sought answers. There was no criminal conviction. The only man prosecuted for murder was acquitted after a trial in 2007². Families were devastated by this failure of justice. Yet, undeterred, some pursued civil action and, in 2009, succeeded in holding four men liable on the balance of probabilities³. It was an extraordinary act of resolve, but it could not substitute for the full truth.

17. That truth, they believed, lay in the actions and inactions of the state. They still needed to know what the police and security services knew, and whether the bombing could have been stopped.

18. Years of campaigning followed. Michael Gallagher led a persistent, honourable effort to force a public inquiry. He and other families carried the burden of a fight they should never have had to wage alone. Their perseverance culminated in the High Court's 2021 ruling⁴ that there were plausible arguments that there was a real prospect of preventing the Omagh bombing. That ruling laid the foundation for this Inquiry.

Key Issues Before the Inquiry

19. In accordance with the terms of reference, the CPs wish to highlight the following matters of concern to them (grouped into chapters and general areas of concern that apply across those chapters):

- i. **Chapter 3 and the bombing of Omagh** – Some CPs wish to better understand the actual bombing of Omagh. It should be made clear that the CPs we represent do not wish for any police officer at the scene to be criticised in any way. Each and every person – civilians and emergency services personnel –

² [2007] NICC 49, INQ000261

³ [2009] NIQB 50, INQ000253

⁴ [2021] NIQB 85, INQ000281

who assisted in the aftermath of the bomb is considered a hero to the CPs we represent. Instead, any focus of reproach is very much upon the intelligence failings that will be dealt with in chapter 7.

- ii. **Chapter 4 and the previous incidents (overt material)** – This is a matter of concern to almost all of the CPs we represent. They want rigorous testing of the evidence to understand whether any of these previous attacks should have led to more disruption of the Real IRA bombers who went on to plant the Omagh bomb. The CPs want to know if the earlier 31 incidents were indicative of a trend that was misinterpreted or disregarded. They want to understand whether the authorities recognised patterns that could have prompted proactive intervention. While the disclosure of the details of these previous attacks is not complete, the CPs are particularly concerned at the allegation made by Norman Baxter to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee on 11 November 2009⁵.
- iii. **Chapter 5 and the security normalisation** – the CPs wish to better understand how the context of that time affected decision making. They want to know whether political or policy shifts under the peace process led to operational hesitations about disrupting dissident republican activity or whether deliberate decisions were taken for political reasons not to disrupt the activities of the Real IRA.
- iv. **Chapter 6 and the previous incidents (covert material)** – The same concerns exist as those expressed in chapter 4 above.
- v. **Chapter 7 and the intelligence failings** – Evidence will show that agents, including Kevin Fulton and David Rupert, provided specific information to MI5 and the FBI. Other warnings came from Irish sources, including Garda informants. GCHQ reportedly had live intercepts of phone calls during the bombers' journey. Our CPs want to know if these pieces of intelligence were adequately analysed, shared, and acted upon.

General issues of concern

⁵ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmniaf/374/9111102.htm>

- vi. **Cross-border failures** – The bomb was assembled in the Republic of Ireland and transported into Northern Ireland. Intelligence, resources, and suspects moved freely across the border. The CPs want to know whether adequate systems of cooperation between British and Irish authorities were in place, and whether operational boundaries hindered effective action. They want to know whether sovereignty concerns or institutional rivalry obstructed the intelligence cooperation in a way that contributed to this bombing.
- vii. **Institutional fragmentation** – There are credible allegations that Special Branch withheld critical intelligence from investigators, which left detectives in the dark. The CPs want to know whether internal rivalries within the Security Forces prevented coherent strategy. The CPs want to know if institutional culture or policy created blind spots that had fatal consequences.
- viii. **Accountability and disclosure** – The CPs expect robust engagement when restriction orders are sought on the basis of national security. While they respect the fact that closed hearings are a reality in an Inquiry of this nature, they respectfully submit that secrecy cannot become a mechanism to withhold truth. The victims deserve answers, not redactions. To this end, the CPs welcome both the approach by the Inquiry Legal Team to the recent application and the Chairman’s ruling on redaction of documents dated 2 June 2025.
- ix. **Unanswered questions** – The mechanism of release of previously unknown information by television documentary⁶ and newspaper reporting⁷, the subsequent findings to the contrary presented in the Gibson report⁸, the public disagreement between the Police Ombudsman and the Chief Constable, and the revelations of missing pieces of evidence⁹ are all drivers of suspicion and skepticism among the CPs. Coupled with these experiences, the Kenova investigation has provided a recent example of the security services failing to provide all relevant material¹⁰. The CPs therefore agree with the breadth of the Inquiry terms of reference, the detail included in the provisional list of issues circulated and appreciate the voiced determination of the Inquiry team.

⁶ John Ware, Panorama 9 October 2000 & 5 September 2008, INQ000264 & INQ000267

⁷ INQ000265 & INQ000266

⁸ INQ011915, paras 27-33

⁹ INQ000036 at para 9, INQ001164

¹⁰ INQ000321, para 30.5 & <https://www.kenova.co.uk.concerns-raised-after-fresh-material-disclosed-by-mi5>

The emotional weight of this Inquiry

16. It is not possible to speak of Omagh without speaking of the grief it left behind.
17. Gareth Conway died as he shopped for new jeans and intended to pick up new contact lenses for a date with his girlfriend later that evening. Life was unbearable for the Conway family after his loss. It is cruel that a teenager looking so forward to the rest of his life was taken in this way. He left behind a legacy of love, hard work and quiet strength.
18. The Logue family lost Brenda, a vibrant 17-year-old, and Mary Logue, Brenda's mother, never recovered. Mary passed away in the recent past, heartbroken that she never got to see the truth fully emerge. Her son Cathal testified, honouring his sister and the weight his mother carried to her grave - the weight of a daughter's absence and the belief that her death might have been preventable.
19. Breda Devine was the second-youngest victim of the bomb, who was due to be the flower girl at the wedding of her uncle and his fiancée. Her mother, Tracey Devine was only able to grieve for her 20-month-old daughter after she came out of a two-month coma caused by the blast. Unfortunately, in another tragedy for the Devine family, Tracey passed away during the commemorative hearings.
20. Veda Short lost her life on the day after her grandson Lee had been born. She was a woman with a deep faith who was active within her church. She never said a bad word about anybody and lived her life in accordance with her Christian values. She left behind a devastated family who miss her every day.
21. Fernando Blasco Baselga was 12 years old when he died. Norman Haslett described him as a "beautiful wee boy", whose death has had a "profound and lasting effect" on him as a first responder. Fernando's family are people of deep faith. It was no surprise to them to learn that Fernando was once asked in his catechism group what was important to him, and his response was "to reach heaven", pointing with an arrow upwards toward the word GOD. He was an innocent and wonderful child who is sorely missed.

22. Pauline Harte was a 19-year-old art student when she was buried under the engine block of the bomb car. She lost a leg and was badly burnt. Her voice still trembles as she speaks of the sounds, the fire, and a memory that never fades. What she suffered was simply horrendous. Despite that, the dignity and compassion for others that she displayed during the commemorative hearings will live long in the memory of those present.

23. Caroline McKinney, who had brought her baby daughter Niamh to work that day, was injured and separated from her child in the chaos. Niamh, barely a year old, was hospitalised with shrapnel in her brain. Years later, she developed epilepsy. Caroline spoke of the moment they were reunited - their bond ruptured. She has never stopped protecting her. Both Caroline and Niamh suffered terrible anxiety after the reliving that awful day through the commemorative hearings. It was a shock to be reminded that Niamh was the youngest survivor. Looking back, they had held their emotions in for years and it was important progress for them to speak about it publicly.

24. These are not abstract cases. They are families who wake each morning to an empty chair, a missed voice, a wound unhealed. This Inquiry is not simply about intelligence reports. It is about human lives.

Our role and expectations

25. We, as solicitors and counsel for the victims and survivors, come not merely as lawyers. We come as voices of the lost and the living. We are here to insist on a process that is fearless, transparent, and complete. We know that the Inquiry team share these aims.

26. We expect this Inquiry to:

- i. Identify the intelligence available to UK and Irish authorities prior to the bombing.
- ii. Scrutinise the systems, policies, and failures that led to inaction.
- iii. Demand accountability from those responsible.
- iv. Assess cooperation between agencies, both domestic and cross-border.
- v. Recommend structural reforms to prevent such a failure again.

27. We will press for truth in open hearings, challenge claims of secrecy where they arise, and ensure that national security does not become a euphemism for evasion.

Comparative and legal context

28. This Inquiry joins a lineage of major UK public inquiries: from Bloody Sunday, to the Manchester Arena Bombing, to Hillsborough - each tasked with piercing state secrecy and restoring public confidence. Like them, it bears a duty to make public what was hidden, to confront the errors of institutions, and to provide a legacy of lessons.

29. Under the Inquiries Act 2005, this Inquiry has the power to compel evidence, summon witnesses, and request classified material. It operates within the framework of Article 2 ECHR, with obligations for independence, thoroughness, and public accountability. It also carries the weight of expectation from a community long burdened by silence. From families who have waited too long. From a society that must decide whether peace can endure without truth.

Conclusion

30. This Inquiry must ask the hardest of questions: not only about what was known, but about what was done - and what was not. It must examine the culture of compartmentalised intelligence, the missed connections, and the failure of joint strategy. It must weigh not only the technical decisions made, but the moral obligations owed to every person who died or were wounded on that street in Omagh.

31. This Inquiry is not an academic exercise. It is the last best chance to provide dignity, truth, and peace to those who have carried the burden of this atrocity. It must be rigorous, transparent, and fearless. It must honour the lives lost, and the lives forever changed. It must confront uncomfortable truths and ensure that the mistakes of the past are never repeated. This is not a legal formality. It is a historic opportunity. The victims, the survivors, and the public deserve answers - not in generalities, but in facts. Not behind redactions, but in full.

32. We approach this process with solemn purpose, unwavering resolve, and deep respect for those whose lives were changed forever. We owe it to those who died, and those who live on with the loss. Our role will be to test the evidence fearlessly, to challenge where challenge is due, and to cooperate fully with this Inquiry in its task.

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