

Robert Hamill Inquiry

Chair's publication note

14 September 2026

1. The Inquiry's final report has been delivered to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It was laid before Parliament today and is now available on our website. The Inquiry's terms of reference were to:

"inquire into the death of Robert Hamill with a view to determining whether any wrongful act or omission by or within the Royal Ulster Constabulary facilitated his death or obstructed the investigation of it, or whether attempts were made to do so; whether any such act or omission was intentional or negligent; whether the investigation of his death was carried out with due diligence; and to make recommendations."

2. Before summarising the conclusions of the final report, I must first comment on and explain the considerable delay in its publication.
3. The Inquiry was established on 16 November 2004. Between January and December 2009, the Inquiry held 77 days of full public hearings during which it heard from 174 witnesses and received statements from a further 37 witnesses.
4. On 12 March 2010, the Inquiry published an Interim Report recommending that the Director of Public Prosecutions should reconsider the decision whether or not to prosecute Robert Atkinson for conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. As a result of that interim report, on 21 December 2010, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland notified the Inquiry that it had reviewed its decision to discontinue proceedings against certain persons arising from the circumstances of the death of Robert Hamill. The review concluded that the test for prosecution was met in respect of two persons for an offence of conspiracy to pervert the course of public justice and one person for doing an act with intent to pervert the course of public justice.

5. The Inquiry's final report was completed in readiness for publication in February 2011. It was however agreed that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would not publish the report until the conclusion of the criminal proceedings. This was to avoid jeopardising the individuals' right to a fair trial. The report remained in the formal custody of the Inquiry and was placed in a secure independent location.
6. It is a matter of considerable regret to the Inquiry that those criminal proceedings did not conclude until 14 June 2024, when Robert Atkinson was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment for conspiring to do an act with intent to pervert the course of public justice.
7. I must acknowledge the considerable strain that this delay has no doubt put on the family, and pay tribute to the dignity, patience and co-operation they have shown both throughout the Inquiry and during their long wait for the publication of this final report. For them, today is deeply personal and I hope that the Inquiry's report answers some of their questions, although it cannot alleviate their pain or lessen the loss of Robert Hamill.
8. I outline briefly below the findings of the Inquiry's report. The report is 290 pages long. To fully understand and appreciate the findings, there is no substitute for reading the full text. What follows is therefore a compressed and highly abbreviated version of the report itself, without the detailed reasoning which underpins the conclusions.
9. Robert Hamill died on 8 May 1997, having never regained consciousness following injuries he received in a violent incident in the early hours of 27 April 1997 in Portadown, County Armagh.
10. The Inquiry's Terms of Reference do not extend to identifying those responsible for Robert Hamill's death, and the Inquiry was therefore careful not to identify suspects and deal with their actions more than was necessary to examine the circumstances of Robert Hamill's death. In particular, section 2 of the Inquiries Act 2005 precludes the Inquiry from ruling on or determining any person's criminal or civil liability. Within those parameters, the Inquiry finds that the head injuries that Robert Hamill suffered during or immediately after the violence that broke out between Catholic and Protestant groups at the bottom of Thomas Street directly caused his

death. The Inquiry is also satisfied that Robert Hamill's death was murder because those who assaulted him must have at least intended to cause him serious injury.

11. Turning to the actions of the Royal Ulster Constabulary ("the RUC"), the Inquiry finds that although the RUC Land Rover crew parked near to the outbreak of violence were distracted talking to two members of the public, this did not facilitate Robert Hamill's death. Nor were the officers in the Land Rover guilty of any wrongful act or omission in relation to the death of Robert Hamill (albeit Sir Edwin Jowitt expressed a dissenting view).
12. The Inquiry has however found that serving RUC officers were guilty of wrongful omissions, and that those omissions arose both at the scene and during the initial investigation in the period 27 April – 7 May 1997. These included:
 - a. failure to carry out an initial debriefing both at the scene and immediately upon return to the police station, with multiple officers finishing their shifts or going onto other duties without recording what had happened – this had a serious and significant impact on the murder investigation and these omissions were negligent;
 - b. failure to carry out a full debriefing of all officers who had been at the scene once it became clear that Robert Hamill's injuries were life threatening – this omission was negligent;
 - c. a wrongful omission by two officers to supply relevant information in relation to an individual they had seen at the scene – this inhibited and obstructed the investigation and was, in the case of one officer, negligent and in the case of the other, deliberate;
13. The Inquiry finds that one RUC officer, Robert Atkinson, is guilty of a wrongful act for making a telephone call to the home of Allister Hanvey, which resulted in that individual destroying or putting beyond the reach of police the clothes he had been wearing that night ("the tip off allegation"). This obstructed the investigation and was deliberate. Mr Atkinson subsequently conspired in September and October 1997 to cover up the tip-off telephone call at an important

point in the murder investigation. The conspiracy amounted to an obstruction of the murder investigation and was deliberate.

14. On 8 May 1997, following Robert Hamill's death, a murder investigation was opened. The Inquiry finds that there were multiple wrongful omissions in that investigation, as follows:
 - a. Failure to keep a policy book recording decisions taken in the investigation after 30 May 1997 – this obstructed the murder investigation and meant the investigation was not properly overseen by senior officers, the Independent Police Complaints Commission (the ICPC) and the Director of Public Prosecutions (the DPP) – it was negligent;
 - b. Failure to properly search the home of a key suspect on 10 May 1997 for signs of destroyed clothing or for all shoes that might have been worn. These omissions amounted to a lack of due diligence.
 - c. Failure to properly develop the murder investigation in multiple ways after the arrest of six suspects in May 1997. This amounted to an obstruction and was negligent. The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions considered whether there was evidence to proceed with a charge against any of those arrested, and concluded there was not, save in the case of Mr Marc Hobson who was convicted of affray.
15. The Inquiry finds that there were multiple wrongful omissions in the way the investigation of the tip-off allegation was handled by the RUC in 1997. In particular, there was a failure to ensure that the tip-off allegation was supervised by the ICPC, to regard the tip-off allegation as an inherent part of the murder investigation, or to properly investigate it between 16 May and 9 September 1997. This was negligent. On 22 December, a file was delivered to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions recommending no prosecution and stating that every effort had been made to prove or disprove the tip-off allegation. This was not correct and its submission in this form was a deliberate wrongful act. The failure to treat the tip-off allegation as part of the murder investigation was negligent.
16. A subsequent prosecution of Robert and Eleanor Atkinson for conspiracy to pervert the course of justice (arising out of the tip off allegation), was discontinued by the Director of Public Prosecutions on 19 March 2004. The Inquiry finds that the ODPP failed to act with

due diligence and that a prosecution would have been likely to succeed on the strength of the evidence at that time. The DPP and the Attorney General were wrongly led to believe that there was no corroboration of important evidence and that without that evidence, the prosecution's case was unlikely to succeed. The DPP's decision to discontinue the prosecution prevented the RUC from being able to advance the murder investigation by asking Robert Atkinson to tell the truth about what he had seen Allister Hanvey do on the morning of 27 April 1997.

17. Chapter 11 of the Inquiry's report sets out the Inquiry's recommendations. I must acknowledge that the Inquiry did not receive further evidence on the matter of recommendations following its initial preparation in 2011. Even in 2011, the RUC's replacement by PSNI had led to considerable changes of practice which had already dealt with many of the Inquiry's concerns. It is likely that even more has changed since then.
18. I would like to close these publishing remarks by paying tribute to Sir Edwin Jowitt, who sadly died on 22 June 2026. Sir Edwin chaired this inquiry from its inception in 2004, until October 2024 when he was unfortunately unable to continue in this role. The report published today is to a large degree the product of his efforts.