


# Acknowledgement and its Role in Preventing Future Violence

## Discussion Paper and Proposal

Healing Through Remembering  
September 2006





a c k n o w l e d g e m e n t & i t s r o l e i n p r e v e n t i n g f u t u r e v i o l e n c e

PRODUCED AND PUBLISHED BY HEALING THROUGH REMEMBERING

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The report has been edited by the Truth Recovery and Acknowledgement Sub Group of  
Healing Through Remembering.

SEPTEMBER 2006

ISBN 1 905882 03 3 (10 digit)  
ISBN 978 1 905882 03 8 (13 digit)

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## • Preface

In the Healing Through Remembering Report of 2002 “Acknowledgement” was one of the recommendations for ways in which to address the past. The Report stated that various organisations and institutions across the society, as well as the UK and Republic of Ireland governments, “should honestly and publicly acknowledge their various responsibilities for the conflicts of the past”.

In 2004, Healing Through Remembering (HTR) formed five Sub Groups to address each of the areas recommended in the 2002 Report. The sub group considering Truth Recovery and Acknowledgment agreed that the Report had not fully defined the process of “Acknowledgment”. We therefore undertook to consider what it might be and how it would operate.

We commissioned a study to gather views, impressions and suggestions that would help in the drafting of a formulation for the structure and content of a process of acknowledgement. Once preliminary ideas had been agreed a selection of interviewees were identified from across a wide spectrum of civil and political society.

Based on the views of the interviewees, the research identified various aspects of the concept of acknowledgement including, purpose, issues and problems, practical process, assessment of the current situation, statements of intention and judgement. The research concluded with clear recommendations, including the aims and practicalities for a process of acknowledgement. We have structured these in the form of a proposal in the document presented here.

We now wish to further gauge opinion and engage in dialogue on this more developed proposal on “Acknowledgment”.

The extent of this proposal is due to the conscientious research carried out by Brian Gormally. His robust revision of the formulation for the structure and content of a process of acknowledgement is the essence of this proposal. The Sub Group are grateful to him for his patience, professionalism and diligence.

We produce this discussion paper in order to engage with a wider audience and are keen to gather views and opinions. In particular we would like feedback from organisations which might consider a process of Acknowledgement as part of their contribution to a more peaceful future.

Truth Recovery and Acknowledgement Sub Group  
September 2006

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acknowledgement & its role in preventing future violence

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# 1 Introduction

## 1. Introduction

Since 1969 more than 3,700 people have been killed and many thousands more injured as a result of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. In recent years the level of violence has decreased dramatically and many changes have been made to move towards a peaceful future. However, there are still fears about a return to violence, which places an obligation on us all to explore every possibility to prevent its re-emergence.

In 2002 Healing Through Remembering (HTR) produced a report, following a public consultation on ways of dealing with the past. The Report made several recommendations, one of which relates to the concept of “acknowledgement”. This is a process whereby organisations throughout society would take responsibility for their actions during the conflict. This report explores this idea and its potential to help prevent future conflict. It is based on research consisting of a series of interviews which are then used to make a proposal around the concept of acknowledgement.

We are seeking the views of all interested organisations and individuals on this report, and specifically on the proposal we make in section four.

## 2 Methodology

### 2. Methodology

#### 2.1 Objectives

The objectives we set in conducting the research were to:

1. develop a detailed report, based on interviews with key leaders and individuals in a range of institutions, that outlines:
  - a. different institutional views on the HTR recommendation on acknowledgement;
  - b. the obstacles and impediments to implementing the recommendation; and
  - c. the factors contributing towards implementing it;
2. provide an overall analysis of the potential for the implementation of the HTR recommendation on acknowledgement; and
3. make recommendations on how to further the implementation of the HTR recommendation on acknowledgement.

The recommendation on acknowledgement is contained in the *Report of the Healing Through Remembering Project* published in June 2002 (available from the organisation and online at [www.healingthroughremembering.org](http://www.healingthroughremembering.org)). It states that organisations and institutions in civil and political society, including the UK and Republic of Ireland governments, should engage in a process of acknowledgement. The Report says that various institutions "should honestly and publicly acknowledge their various responsibilities for the conflicts of the past". The organisations and institutions referred to include "churches, political parties, the media, health services, judiciary, police, educational bodies and republican and loyalist organisations". In subsequent discussions it has been made clear that the process would be appropriate for all organisations in civil society, including the business, trade union and voluntary and community sectors.

This was one of six recommendations about the ways in which people might contribute to a peaceful future by examining and remembering the past. Each recommendation is being pursued by a sub group of the Healing Through Remembering organisation.

#### 2.2 Focus of this report

Our analysis of the research was not an audit of positive and negative opinions on the concept of acknowledgement. We felt a listing of those "for" and "against" would not be helpful in building consensus at this stage. Nor would it have been useful to have organisations go on record as opposed to the concept at this early stage. Rather we saw this as a scoping study aimed at gathering views, impressions and suggestions that would help the Truth Recovery & Acknowledgement Sub Group draft a formulation of the structure and content of a process of acknowledgement. Once we had this clearer formulation we would be in a better position to gauge opinion and engage in dialogue in a concrete rather than abstract form.

#### 2.3 What is acknowledgement?

As was noted above, we sought – through interviews with key individuals in institutions – views on the notion of acknowledgement. However, in order to engage in a discussion on acknowledgement the Sub Group had to do some work in outlining what might be meant by the term. We came up with the following points which were presented to interviewees:



## 2 Methodology

- Acknowledgement does not necessarily have to be part of a truth process, though some might see it as a step in that direction.
- Acknowledgement does not necessarily have to involve engagement with others – it is about individual agencies, organisations or institutions taking responsibility for their own acts or omissions over the years.
- Acknowledgement does not necessarily have to involve accepting guilt or expressing contrition.
- Acknowledgement does not have to be just about direct violence – it is about the overall role of an organisation during the conflict.

There is a minimum that acknowledgement might well involve if it is to be meaningful.

- Acknowledgement does indicate the taking of responsibility. To take responsibility is an act that, in itself, does not imply culpability but does imply recognition of the consequences, negative as well as positive, that flow from judgements and decisions consciously made. This also implies free and full disclosure of past deeds (though at this stage in general terms) – one cannot take responsibility for acts which remain hidden. This is not a legal concept, it is about organisations collectively recognising and owning their history.
- It is suggested that it would be appropriate for statements of acknowledgement to include reference to the needs and feelings of any victims or, perhaps more generally, of any persons hurt by the acts or omissions of the agency.

### 2.4 Preliminary definition

We thus formulated our preliminary ideas on the principle and practice of acknowledgement in the following way:

- The process of acknowledgement is separate from and prior to any possible “truth-recovery” process. It is about organisations, not individuals, taking responsibility for their actions during the conflict. It does not necessarily involve confessing guilt or making an apology. To take responsibility is an act that, in itself, does not necessarily imply culpability but does imply recognition of the consequences, negative as well as positive, that flow from judgements and decisions consciously made. It is about disclosing the acts and omissions and positions taken by organisations in relation to the conflict, accepting that alternative choices were available and taking responsibility for the ones that were made. It is about organisations owning and recognising their own history.
- The practical process is likely to involve some internal discussion or consultation within an organisation designed to produce a brief or summary narrative of its actions and policies during the conflict. The extent to which organisations wish to express any criticism, regret, remorse or to express their conviction that all their past actions were fully justified has to be a matter for them. There is likely to be a public statement taking responsibility for all the actions described. Organisations might be encouraged to make reference to victims or any people their actions may have harmed.

As this was a scoping study, the Sub Group agreed to a selection of interviewees from across a wide spectrum of civil and political society (those who gave interviews are listed in Appendix A). We asked these people to give us their views in a personal capacity on the concept of acknowledgement as formulated above, and to comment widely, but obviously drawing on their knowledge of their particular organisation or sector. The list of questions we specifically asked is attached as Appendix B, though interviews rarely rigorously followed that format. Interviews were thus semi-structured qualitative interviews. Interviews were conducted on the basis that a note would be taken but that no view or statement would be attributed to a particular person.

## 3 Findings

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Introduction

This part of the report is divided into six sections reflecting how the responses from interviewees were categorised:

- Purpose
- Issues and problems with acknowledgement
- The practical process of acknowledgement
- Assessment of the current situation
- Statements of intention and judgement
- Recommendations

#### 3.2 Purpose

We must assume that an overall purpose of acknowledgement is to help prevent the re-emergence of violent political conflict. In putting it this way we emphasise that it is the violence, rather than healthy non-violent political conflict in general, that we wish to banish from our society. The question then is: "In what way can acknowledgement help prevent the re-emergence of political violence?"

One of the most important themes was the extent to which the process of acknowledgement was designed in the interests of, or more specifically, to bring closure to victims.

The concept of acknowledgement as we have formulated it, is about organisations, not individuals. This makes it unlikely that individual cases of death or injury will be referred to. In our preliminary conceptualisation of acknowledgement no individual victim, therefore, will hear acknowledgement of their particular hurt.

In all of this the fundamental problem is the understandable desire of victims to have what happened to them recognised as being wrong. Unfortunately, in most cases this will not happen. Some individual perpetrators may now feel that what they did was wrong, but it is highly unlikely that any organisation or institution will completely disown or condemn what its members did during the conflict.

It is, of course, possible to hope that some victims will be helped by the process of broad acknowledgement. Furthermore, the formulation of acknowledgement we discussed with our interviewees encouraged organisations "to make reference to victims or any people their actions may have harmed".

In the information on our formulation of the concept of acknowledgement that we sent to interviewees, we noted:

Acknowledgement does not necessarily have to be part of a truth process, though some might see it as a step in that direction – these could be seen as separate processes with distinct issues associated with them.

Even though the 2002 Healing Through Remembering Report talked of acknowledgement as a "first step" towards a truth process, we felt that to conflate the two processes would mobilise all the opposition to a truth process against what was a very different and, potentially, much less threatening proposal. This concern was articulated by one respondent:

### 3 Findings

*“The idea of a truth process is being used as a political weapon at present. I am concerned that the concept of acknowledgement does not belong to any one side ... It is not about making presumptions that all are guilty or complicit. It is trying to say, we have all experienced the conflict ...”*

There was, however, some support for the idea of “preparing the way” for a truth-recovery initiative:

*“I think acknowledgement can clear the ground for some form of discussion to take place. I see it as an indication of a willingness to move. What I don't think has been helpful is the theological discussions around remorse and repentance because that is not where it is at. I would say, as a first step [to a truth process], acknowledgement would be interesting.”*

The research clearly found the view that the only point of looking backwards was to move forward. In other words, one clear purpose of acknowledgement was to clarify future direction. It was argued that, if an organisation or institution wanted to chart a clear way forward – to develop plans for the future – it would have to understand where it had come from in the immediate past.

*“It is important for an organisation to articulate its journey ... Acknowledgement could be an opportunity to record the process of change it has gone through – the distance travelled.”*

If we see acknowledgement as one of those processes that mark the transition from a violent political conflict to a peaceful society (a theme we return to later), then now is the time to make plans for living in and contributing to that society. Organisations might ask themselves what the pressures and distortions were during the conflict, and what good and bad choices were made. They might then reflect on what opportunities peace (or relative absence of violence) has brought and how they might contribute to strengthening it. We would argue that this process would be of positive benefit to the organisations involved.

One goal of acknowledgement might therefore be to produce a diverse but realistic and practical series of commitments to building a new, peaceful society.

Connected to this concept is the theme of acknowledgement as a recognition of efforts and progress made.

*“Admitting to a learning process is to declare a strength.”*

In another way, a reflection on the past can be an object lesson to future generations. As one interviewee noted:

*“The next generation can be romantic and naive about the past. A realistic narrative can expose those now in a safe environment to the horror and pain and tragedy. It was realisation of mutual pain that brought people to the peace process so it would be useful for an acknowledgement process to deal with the past in the right context.”*

In several conversations the particular role of the governments and especially the UK Government, was stressed. One element of this was to kick-start the process:

*“I would like government to do it – to get it moving.”*

It is also important to recognise that a government – understood as the political leadership of a state – has a continuing general responsibility for political and social life, distinct from the particular concerns of any other kind of organisation. It is also true that a formal statement by a government will have a greater impact, for good or ill, than any opinion held by competing political factions.

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Accepting the reality of a lack of trust within our divided society, it has been argued that acknowledgement can itself make a contribution to the perception that the violent conflict is over.

If we develop this perspective, we start to see acknowledgement as, partly at least, a collective process of declaring the end of the violent conflict.

We might strengthen the possibility of such narratives being produced by urging participants to write them in such a way as to best explain their position to other and potentially hostile elements in society. We might also ask them to look backwards from their current position – which we assume involves a commitment to a peaceful and fair society – and ask them to describe the process of getting there.

Perhaps, then, one of the main purposes of acknowledgement is to give the opportunity to all organisations and institutions in civil and political society to tell their narratives/stories. If we produce a series of narratives and statements that sincerely try to explain the perspectives and motivations of different organised groupings of people over the years, we may be producing the basis for a process that can develop a shared perspective for the future. That could make a serious contribution to preventing the re-emergence of political violence.

### 3.3 Issues and problems with acknowledgement

This section considers the issues, problems and suggestions about the principle of acknowledgement that arose during the dialogue with interviewees.

For convenience we repeat here the way we had formulated this principle: this wording was given in advance to interviewees:

The process of acknowledgement is separate from and prior to any possible “truth-recovery” process. It is about organisations, not individuals, taking responsibility for their past actions during the conflict. It does not necessarily involve confessing guilt or making an apology. To take responsibility is an act that, in itself, does not necessarily imply culpability but does imply recognition of the consequences, negative as well as positive, that flow from judgements and decisions consciously made. It is about disclosing the acts and omissions and positions taken by organisations in relation to the conflict, accepting that alternative choices were available and taking responsibility for the ones that were made. It is about organisations owning and recognising their own history.

A significant issue was the connotations of the term “acknowledgement.” It has to be said that for some respondents the term “acknowledgement” immediately suggested that the project was focused on victims. Despite our explanation that our first formulation was not about individuals or individual cases, some respondents saw the role of victims and victims groups as central. This then raised for them all the problems we discussed in the previous section, especially the unlikelihood of victims, of either armed groups or the State, getting an acknowledgement that what happened to them was wrong.

Some respondents who saw the process as victim focused were nonetheless very positive. It is possible that some victims will feel that a series of reasonably self-critical narratives extending across society, that mark the definitive end of the violent conflict and make pledges for a peaceful future, will demonstrate a social recognition of the harm done by the conflict.

Another significant theme was scepticism about the extent and depth of self-criticism. Several respondents made this point:



### 3 Findings

*“Here we are not most effective at being self-reflective. The posture of the last 30 years has been defending and justifying, so it is asking a lot in this context for any self-criticism.”*

Clearly a published narrative would be judged for its self-serving character by public opinion. However, there may be aspects of the practical process that could be developed to include a “challenge” element. We will return to this in the section on the practical process.

Another theme that emerged was the fear of abuse by opponents. Some people felt that to be self-critical would be seen as an admission of weakness that would be seized upon and exploited by political enemies.

Again, one must accept that these are real difficulties for the process that we have developed. However, they may not be insurmountable and there is an alternative, positive way of looking at it.

It is suggested that this idea of acknowledgement as an opportunity for political generosity is a useful one that we may consider including in our formulation of the concept.

There is general agreement that we would need a “critical mass” of organisations to make the process credible – a subject to which we will return.

Another particular point worth recording is the view that acknowledgement cannot provide absolution. There is, of course, no legal impact from the process as we have described it, but also, in this particular sense at least, no moral impact either. One respondent said:

*“You need to make it clear that the process is not a vehicle for absolution; that it cannot give absolution.”*

The idea of narrative was well-received:

*“I think the narrative truth is something which appeals to me in terms of understanding the ‘Troubles’. As an [organisation] we would like to see that process taking place – storytelling in a public arena and placed within official record and as a contemporaneous acknowledgement – a testimony. We need to look at a format which would have demonstrable value. This is a key task we would wish to see – to get the maximum number of people to tell their story. This is a very important process in reconciliation.”*

A caveat on this subject was also introduced. One respondent warned:

*“You cannot expect there to be a consensus narrative in any organisation or institution. Distinct narratives exist – we need to recognise that they exist and are genuinely held.”*

The voluntary character of the process was emphasised by some:

*“We can only encourage people to do it. There is no compulsion.”*

The concepts of a journey and the distance travelled have support:

*“‘Journey’ is a very clever idea – hard to argue with that. Everyone has moved – all have been on a journey.”*

In general, the problems and difficulties that have been raised do not invalidate the basic concept of acknowledgement as we have formulated it. With some amendments suggested by the discussions, the formulation of the principle seems to be robust enough to go forward for wider consultation.



## 3 Findings

### 3.4 Practical process of acknowledgement

One purpose of this scoping study was to move discussion away from rhetoric and metaphor towards an understanding of how a process of acknowledgement might actually be put into practice.

As in the previous section, we repeat here our preliminary ideas on the practical process which we put to interviewees in advance:

The practical process is likely to involve some internal discussion or consultation within an organisation designed to produce a brief or summary narrative of its actions and policies during the conflict. The extent to which organisations wish to express any criticism, regret, remorse or to express their conviction that all their past actions were fully justified has to be a matter for them. There is likely to be a public statement taking responsibility for all the actions described. Organisations might be encouraged to make reference to victims or any people their actions may have harmed.

The key elements of this formulation of the process are:

- Internal consultation
- Production of a narrative of the conflict
- Publication of the narrative
- Organisations have control of the content of the narrative
- Organisations are encouraged to refer to any victims

As we indicated in the previous section, most respondents felt that this idea of constructing an organisational narrative was a novel and intriguing way of approaching the matter. It does, however, raise a significant number of practical issues.

A preliminary question is whether the focus of the process should be on organisations or sectors? We had assumed that organisations would be the basic subjects of the process but there are problems with this in some sectors. Certain organisations in civil society might feel that this was a political process in which it would be inappropriate for them to participate, though their members or employees could take part in a sectoral debate.

Clearly, if the process of taking responsibility is to have any meaning, some major organisations and institutions would have to produce their own account, not lose it amongst the generalisations of a wider history. On the other hand, if inclusivity is a principle, we may want to examine other forms of practical process for certain areas. It is suggested that this should be subject to wider consultation.

There were several reflections on the nature of internal consultation. One respondent noted that:

*“Each organisation needs to design its own process.”*

Another said:

*“There needs to be more than one approach to the process.”*

Clearly, the practical process will differ from one organisation to another, depending on size, role and ethos. This raises an issue that we came to call “quality control”, but we have to accept a level of diversity.

Some respondents pointed to the difficulties that might arise in the process of internal debate:

### 3 Findings

*“Until recently we had never engaged with staff on how the conflict was impacting upon them. Have we the expertise to provide a safe and therefore fruitful environment for staff during this debate?”*

This points to the need for some central point for advice and support when the process gets underway – a point to which we will return.

Other difficulties will have to be dealt with by the organisations themselves:

*“One of the difficulties of internal reflection is that the ethos of not criticising the leadership or dead comrades still exists. However there is still value in reflection, in justifying incidents or not as the case may be...”*

The question has arisen several times: “How can a current leadership take responsibility for past actions by other people?” This may have certain difficulties in practice for some organisations but in principle we believe that where there is continuity of authority there is continuity of responsibility. When any new leadership succeeds to authority in an organisation, it has the opportunity and duty to maintain what is right and to change what is wrong. In making these judgements it takes responsibility for building the future on the successes and mistakes of the past. Acknowledgement can be seen simply as an open account of the history of these judgements.

In a number of discussions we touched on how a process might operate practically in the particular organisation. Obviously precise mechanisms will vary but there may be some common features. Internal debate and reflection before producing a narrative is important, as is the support of key players in the organisation. Some kind of internal steering group may often be appropriate.

Interlinked topics that arose in discussing the practical process were those of challenge, facilitation and quality control. This was part of a general view that:

*“... ensuring there is some form of credibility in the process is vital.”*

Several respondents argued for there to be an element of challenge to possible organisational complacency included in the process. Some thought that some kind of independent facilitation might be useful. One said:

*“An independent element could be the challenge mechanism. Certain individuals having an empathy with particular organisations, their culture and ethos, and respected by them in turn could have a role in, for example, ‘taking the temperature’ or producing an analysis to aid discussion and debate.”*

Another was:

*“... adamant about using an external facilitator – otherwise it would be seen as the organisation furthering its own agenda.”*

One person thought that:

*“There are a number of individuals around who could produce a paper, put forward their views, challenge and make such a process more workable.”*

A particular point about this process of organisational review is that it might be necessary for some organisations or sectors to recognise the possibility that there might be more than one narrative. One respondent said:

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*“A corporate statement would be difficult – individual or group stories might be better to deal with the complexity.”*

These distinct narratives might be the product of ideological differences within an organisation, different experiences over time or in role, distinctions between current and past members or maybe a positive desire for diversity.

A significant area of discussion was the nature and extent of participation in the process. All agreed that it should be as wide as possible:

*“The process shouldn’t be left to the combatants alone. It should involve trade unions, civil society etc. It needs to involve many organisations – including those organisations which may not even see themselves as having a role in the conflict. There is more to the conflict than actual acts of violence.”*

There was general agreement that the process should be as inclusive as possible but also, given its voluntary character, an acceptance that participation should not be conditional on the participation of some other organisation. The only exception to that was the question of the participation of the governments, in particular the UK Government. Without this:

*“It would be difficult for it to be a meaningful process.”*

One respondent reinforced this point in introducing the concept of “critical mass” which several other people also used:

*“You couldn’t do it without a critical mass. You need several bodies involved to start the ball rolling. I think governments need to take the lead in this.”*

One person said that we should:

*“... hope for a sufficient critical mass to create a political imperative to deliver. For organisations, not wanting to be seen not to participate might be the main spur.”*

One respondent elaborated:

*“Nothing beats the height of fashion – we should use the visual media to make doing this the height of fashion. We maybe need to put more emphasis on an overall strategy, the need to create a favourable ‘climate’.”*

In terms of the physical product of the process, most of the comments were specific to the organisations under discussion. In general terms, however, it was accepted that the product would consist of a summary narrative of an organisation’s role during the conflict. These should be made public, probably on a website. Whether such a site should provide opportunities for comment and discussion is perhaps a matter for further consultation.

Clearly such a process would have to have elements of central organisation and co-ordination. The nature of this was a matter of some debate:

*“There have been enough ‘high wire acts’ by international experts. The Northern Ireland people should do it themselves. Not someone who would fly in and out again.”*

*“Certainly it shouldn’t be the UK Government leading the process. It would be very important for a process of acknowledgement to be seen as neutral and independent – possibly international.”*

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*"I believe the political negotiations will be the process through which a lot of this could be set up."*

There is therefore a diversity of views on the leadership issue. As regards the governments, people seem to want them to take the lead in participation but not to organise the process. The elements that appear to be needed from a central organiser are:

- A publicity campaign
- A central point for advice, information and support
- The collation of narratives and maintenance of a website
- Organising training for facilitators

There may also be a funding role. Modest funding to help organisations carry through the consultation and production of a narrative would, for some, be an incentive to take part. Furthermore, the conditions of grant and the application process could act as a further mechanism of quality control.

In terms of the structure or location of this central organising and assisting function, it seems clear that it should not be a statutory agency. It may also be that existing voluntary organisations may be seen to have baggage or to lack the necessary clout. Perhaps a specially created, broad-based body, independent of government but adequately funded by it, might be created to carry out this function.

### 3.5 Assessment of the current situation

In the course of our discussions, which took place during May 2005 to January 2006, most of the interviewees reflected on the current political and social situation. This arose both from our question on their views on the timing of any process of acknowledgement and from the dynamics of the dialogue. In this section we will give a flavour of these reflections.

On the whole, respondents were relatively upbeat about the current situation in general. For example:

*"Since the 'Troubles' have died down and with improvement in the security situation there has been an increasing confidence within the ... community, there has been progress in stabilising communities."*

Some people gave the impression that their organisations – and perhaps society in general – were ready for both an evaluation of the past and planning for the future.

*"The time is right now to explore a different approach because key influencers within communities take a more strategic view, recognising that this is a process of transformation."*

*"The climate and subsequently the debate have changed, thereby allowing the organisation to do something different."*

When it came to the question of the timing of any process of acknowledgement, there was a range of opinions. Some respondents tended towards caution:

*"My fundamental concern is timing. Is acknowledgement possible before political stability is achieved and adversarial analysis has calmed down enough? Only then will organisations be allowed to be more courageous and thorough ..."*

*"It is difficult to see it happening in the short to medium term."*

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However, another person said:

*"The sooner the better. There is a fine balance between opening a can of worms and letting issues fester indefinitely."*

Another commented that his organisation felt that:

*"... the can was already open and they needed to deal with it."*

Another said:

*"The sooner the better! It should have been done ages ago – we have waited too long."*

One respondent commented:

*"This process is about creating the space where people can acknowledge their own part in the conditions which created the conflict – the point is we now can say these things."*

Another stressed the importance of momentum:

*"We need more activity round it, not to lose momentum, to keep it on the front foot. The time is never right – just do it!"*

Opinion was also divided on whether the acknowledgement process needed to wait on a durable political settlement.

*"I do think timing is very important. I think for this type of process to work we need to reach a point where there is political settlement. We haven't yet reached that point. There is more likelihood that people will feel free to do these sorts of things if there was. To put a time limit on it now would be useless at this point."*

Another said:

*"The argument that the conflict is over is hard. Hopefully the violence is over, but the same ingredients of the conflict are still here. Legislation might have dealt with a lot of the discrimination but sectarianism is still here and the two politically irreconcilable positions are still here."*

In contrast, as we indicated in the section on purpose, some people felt that acknowledgement might be part of the "end of conflict".

*"From our discussions, some are willing to move on with the process. Some feel the conflict has to be over before you can move on this. I personally believe that it can help to dissipate the conflict."*

Other people felt that the initiative should be taken regardless of our analysis of the current situation:

*"My instinct is that if you wait for the political settlement you will be waiting for a long time."*

*"The present always blocks acknowledgement of the past. The conflict isn't over, just continues in a changed form. There is never a right time for this type of process."*

In reflecting on these thoughts however, we have come to the opinion that perhaps a debate about timing misses the point. In one sense it is obvious that there will always be an element of instability in society, however much better it might become than before. There can never be "a right time", only one that is



## 3 Findings

better than others. Perhaps the real issue is a judgement as to whether a process of acknowledgement would be a stabilising or a destabilising experience. If it is the former, then it is hard to see a reason for delay. If it is the latter, then we would need to question whether it was worth doing at all.

### 3.6 Statements of intention and judgement

This scoping study was not meant to be a comprehensive or in any sense statistically significant survey of organisations. It was designed as a qualitative exercise to “test the waters” and to engage in a series of dialogues that would aid the process of creating a more robust formulation of acknowledgement. Nevertheless, and though we cannot record individual organisational responses, we thought it right to give some indication of the opinions of our respondents about the concept in general and the likelihood of their organisation in particular taking part.

There was considerable support and praise for the concept and the way we had formulated it.

There were some reservations and criticisms about the idea. Some felt it was impractical. There were, however, no definite and authoritative refusals and several organisations expressed a desire to continue the dialogue without, at this stage, committing themselves.

In so far as it is possible to make a judgement based on our limited discussions, we believe that our concept of acknowledgement, as amended as a result of the dialogue, could achieve a wide degree of support. It is crucial, however, that the concept is carefully explained and clearly distinguished from a truth-recovery or justice process.

### 3.7 Where to now?

As a result of the discussions on the concept of acknowledgement and on the practical process, we have amended our original formulation, which is presented below in the form of a proposal.

We present this formulation for discussion and the considered views of any interested organisations or individuals.

## 4 Our proposal

### 4. Our proposal

We propose that all organisations and institutions in civil and political society (for example, churches, political parties, the media, the business community, trade union and voluntary and community sectors, health services, judiciary, police, educational bodies and republican and loyalist organisations), as well as the UK and Republic of Ireland governments, should engage in a process of acknowledgement. The overall aim of such a process should be to help prevent the re-emergence of violent political conflict. The process should seek to:

- produce a diverse but realistic and practical series of commitments to building a new, peaceful society;
- increase self-confidence for participating organisations in moving forward to a new society;
- produce narratives that are realistic and explicit about the impact of the violent conflict and that emphasise the need to avoid it in the future;
- encourage the two governments to give a realistic and sensitive account of their roles during the conflict;
- mark definitively the end of the violent conflict; and
- increase knowledge and understanding of the range of perspectives on the conflict and the desired nature of future society.

Specifically we see the process of acknowledgement as separate from and prior to any possible truth-recovery process. It is about organisations, not individuals, taking responsibility for their actions during the conflict. It is a record of the distance travelled by the organisation on its journey through the history of the past few decades. It does not necessarily involve confessing guilt or making an apology but it is an opportunity for moral or political generosity to those who might be perceived to be opponents, competitors or those harmed by an organisation's actions. To take responsibility is an act that, in itself, does not necessarily imply culpability but does imply recognition of the consequences, negative as well as positive, that flow from judgements and decisions consciously made. It is about disclosing the acts and omissions and positions taken by organisations in relation to the conflict, accepting that alternative choices were available and taking responsibility for the ones that were made. It is about organisations owning and recognising their own history.

Practically the process would involve some internal discussion or consultation within an organisation designed to produce a brief or summary narrative of its actions and policies during the conflict. Organisations would appoint a facilitator of their choice who would join with those from other organisations for training and agreeing common principles. The extent to which organisations wish to express any criticism, regret, remorse or to express their conviction that all their past actions were fully justified has to be a matter for them. There is likely to be a public statement taking responsibility for all the actions described. The resulting narratives would be collated on a website and released publicly. Organisations are encouraged to make reference to victims or any people their actions may have harmed.

The process would be organised by a dedicated, broad-based organisation, funded by, but independent of, government. It would carry out the following functions:

- A publicity campaign
- A central point for advice, information and support
- The collation of narratives and maintenance of a website
- Training of facilitators
- The public release of organisation narratives

Funding would be made available to organisations participating on the basis of application to either the central organisation or another non-governmental body.

## A Appendix A - List of Interviewees

Fr Timothy Bartlett	Catholic Commission on Social Affairs
Eileen Bell MLA	Deputy Leader and Spokesperson for Victims and Survivors, Alliance Party
Joe Blake	Consultant, Diversity Challenges
Board Members and Project Co-ordinator	Trauma Recovery Network
Michael Boyd	Head of Community Relations, IFA
Peter Bunting	Assistant General Secretary, Irish Congress of Trade Unions
Anna Carragher	Controller, BBC Northern Ireland
Kevin Cooper	On behalf of NUJ
Michael Earle	Individual capacity
Niall Fitzduff	Former Director, Rural Community Network
Arlene Foster MLA	DUP Spokesperson for Victims Issues
Carmel Gallagher	Manager for Curriculum and Assessment Development, CCEA
Tom Holland	Sinn Féin member
Bill Jeffrey	Federation of Small Businesses
CLlr Danny Kennedy MLA	Ulster Unionist Party
Seamus McAleavey	Chief Executive, NICVA
Tony McDermot-Roe	British-Irish Joint Secretariat
Philip McGuigan	Sinn Féin Spokesperson for Truth Recovery and Victims
Vivian McIver CBE	Assistant Chief Inspector, Education & Training Inspectorate N. Ireland
Alban Maginness MLA	SDLP Spokesperson on Justice
Drew Nelson	Grand Secretary, Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland
Elma Newberry	Housing Policy Manager, Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Officials from the Northern Ireland Office	Northern Ireland Office
Sir Hugh Orde OBE	Chief Constable, Police Service of Northern Ireland
Peter Quinn	Former GAA President
Mike Ritchie	Director, Coiste na nIarchimi
Tom Roberts	Director, EPIC
Maurice Rooney	Housing Policy Manager, Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Gerry Ruddy	Community Worker, Teach Na Failte

## B Appendix B - List of questions for interviews

### Questions (not given in advance but raised in interview)

1. You recently received a letter from us outlining some ideas on the issue of acknowledgement. What were your initial reactions to this?
2. We summarised our current thinking on the concept of acknowledgement in the letter, saying that we thought it might be about organisations taking responsibility for their history and actions over the past thirty odd years. Can you give me your first reactions to this type of a request for acknowledgement – perhaps first generally and then in respect of your own organisation?
3. Our current ideas about how the process might actually work were also described in the letter. We thought that the practical process might involve some internal discussion or consultation within an organisation designed to produce a brief or summary narrative taking responsibility for its actions and policies during the conflict and that organisations might be encouraged to make reference to victims or any people their actions may have harmed.

What do you think of this kind of autonomous process that would mean an organisation developing a narrative of engagement with the conflict, commenting on significant acts, omissions or events for which it feels it bears some responsibility?

4. Can you imagine your own organisation taking part in such a process? If so can you describe what problems or difficulties you might face? If not, can you give the reasons, or describe the obstacles to your taking part?
5. Can you see a useful purpose being served by such a process? If so, can you describe it? If not, why not?
6. Are there any changes or amendments to the idea or practical process of acknowledgement that would make it more acceptable or realistic?

[If positive response or willing to continue discussion even if only on a hypothetical basis]

7. Can I ask your views on the following options:
  - 7.1 Should the process be completely designed by each individual organisation, or should it be part of an overall process, with some kind of standardisation?
  - 7.2 In principle, would your organisation wish to involve a facilitator or interlocutor from outside? If so, would you wish to involve an historian, a human rights commentator, a conflict resolution specialist or perhaps individuals or groups from an opposed perspective?
  - 7.3 Should government organise the process or should it be a voluntary organisation or coalition?
  - 7.4 Should we collate and publish the narratives produced by the organisations?
  - 7.5 How wide or narrow do you think the process should be in terms of participating organisations?
8. Finally, when do you think such a process should take place? Are there any political or other considerations that should decide the timing?

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acknowledgement & its role in preventing future violence





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