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Police board calls in independent experts to re-examine Omagh bombing evidence

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The Northern Ireland Policing Board last night agreed to appoint a team of independent experts to re-examine evidence from the Omagh bombing, in an attempt to bring to justice those responsible for the 1998 atrocity.

The unanimous vote for an external overview of past investigations came after a five-hour meeting in Belfast, and as the Police Ombudsman's office confirmed that it had passed to the Public Prosecution Service files on two officers accused of misleading the court during the trial of Sean Hoey, 38, the south Armagh electrician last month acquitted of the bombing in which 29 people were killed.

Board member Jeffrey Donaldson said the overview would look afresh at the case. "The objective is to re-focus on the evidence, and bring the focus back again on the need to secure a prosecution."

After the meeting, chief constable Sir Hugh Orde defended his decision to allow the two scene-of-crime officers severely criticised in the trial to remain serving in the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

The trial judge accused one officer of "beefing up"

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evidence against Hoey. In his damning judgment after dismissing 58 charges against Hoey, Mr Justice Weir highlighted serious errors by both the police and forensic services.

Policing board chair Sir Des Rea said the independent panel would also examine whether these failings had since been addressed by the police service.

The chief constable accepted that the judge's remarks were "rightly damning" but stressed the two officers were entitled to remain serving while the Police Ombudsman had still been investigating the conduct of the inquiry. He said he would take action against anyone criticised in the Ombudsman's second report on the bombing. Orde repeated his belief that as a result of the Hoey trial no one else would be prosecuted in relation to the Omagh bomb. He said the failure of low copy number DNA in the case against Hoey would have "international implications" for criminal prosecutions.

But he defended the police decision to use this type of evidence despite doubts from the start of the trial. The chief constable was speaking after a closed meeting with the board, during which he outlined his force's response to the Omagh trial.

Relatives of the Omagh bomb victims have called on Hoey to attend any future public inquiry into the worst atrocity of the Troubles. Hoey said yesterday that he supported the relatives' demand for a cross-border independent investigation into the Real IRA bomb attack.

Michael Gallagher, whose son Aidan died in the car bombing, welcomed Hoey's support but challenged him to co-operate with any future inquiry. The Omagh victims campaigner thought an independent inquiry was unlikely. He said victims' families were still planning to pursue their civil case against men they allege were involved.

Hoey said: "I have been fully cleared by the courts and would ask that people respect that."

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