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## First Minister questioned on the progress of victims body

By Noel McAdam  
Tuesday, 13 January 2009

Questions over the work and achievements of Northern Ireland's four victims commissioners were raised in the Assembly yesterday — almost a year after their appointment.

The SDLP's Alex Attwood asked if delays in the First Minister's Office had hit aid for victims groups, who might not have to accept interim funding to survive.

But First Minister Peter Robinson insisted the commission, which has still to find permanent premises, is ready to move ahead.

Further pressed by Ulster Unionist Danny Kennedy, he said only one issue between his office and the commission — over-staffing — remains to be resolved, and that, he added, should be sorted out by the end of this week.

Mr Robinson also said a summary of the consultation exercise initiated by the commissioners last summer, which concluded on October 31, had been sent to the Assembly scrutiny committee chaired by Mr Kennedy.

Asked to spell out the achievements of the commissioners so far, Mr Robinson said they had completed an initial work programme which had been amended following the consultations, and their work programme had now been revised and updated.

Mr Attwood, however, asked if there had been a delay in signing off the work programme in the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers that had had a six-month knock-on effect on implementation of a strategy for victims.

The West Belfast MLA further inquired whether the impact of the delay would be that victims and survivors groups who receive funding will require interim funding "to ensure their funding does not cease" — and what arrangements have been put in place.

Mr Robinson said if Mr Attwood looked at the work of the commission more closely he would see it had no role in funding for the various groups with which it has made contact, and it also held a number of public meetings.

Initially the Executive wanted only a single commissioner on a £65,000-a-year salary, but after a recruitment process which took almost a full year, the First and Deputy First Ministers compromised on four — former interim commissioner Bertha McDougal; Patricia MacBride, whose brother Tony was one of two IRA members killed by the SAS in 1984; Brendan McAllister, the Director of Mediation Northern Ireland and Mike Nesbitt, a former UTV news anchorman.

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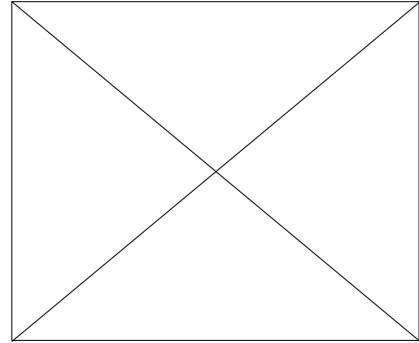
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