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Omagh inquiry chief announces resignation

EXCLUSIVE

By Diana Rusk

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THE most senior investigating officer in the Omagh bomb inquiry, Detective Chief Inspector Norman Baxter, is to stand down from his post today.

Mr Baxter, who will retire from the PSNI under the terms of the Patten agreement, refused to discuss his decision last night saying only that his "tenure has come to an end" and that it was "very personal".

It is understood that he will be replaced by senior police officer Detective Chief Inspector Derek Williamson.

But last night the father of a victim of the 1998 Real IRA atrocity said the development was "the end of the line for Omagh".

Since 2002 Mr Baxter has headed the inquiry into the bomb that claimed the lives of 29 people, including a woman pregnant with twins.

There has been heavy criticism of the policing handling of the case over the past 10 years, both by the RUC under chief constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan and during the trial of suspect Sean Hoey, who was acquitted of the Omagh murders last year.

During that trial Mr Justice Weir criticised two PSNI officers, Fiona Cooper and Philip Marshall, found to have "beefed up" witness statements and they are now being

investigated by the police ombudsman.

Mr Baxter held a final meeting with relatives of those killed in the atrocity last week ahead of his retirement.

Michael Gallagher, whose son Aidan died in the bomb, said the retirement severed the "final link between the police and Omagh".

"There's no doubt in my mind what will happen with the investigation now," he said.

"I think his retirement marks the end of the line for Omagh as far as the police are concerned. They have thrown in the towel. Omagh has been consigned to the archives.

"I think that for some reason they were convinced that Hoey would be convicted even though we as families were not surprised when he wasn't."

Mr Gallagher said he had written a letter to Mr Baxter outlining how disappointed he was in the police investigation.

Mr Baxter has led many other high profile investigations including the disappearance of 14-year-old Arlene Arkinson in 1994, whose father died this week without knowing what had happened to her.

He was also the senior investigating officer for the murder of Gerry McGinley in his Co Fermanagh home and brought to justice his wife Julie McGinley and her lover Michael Monaghan for the killing in 2000.

Mr Baxter was reluctant to speak about this retirement yesterday.

“My tenure has come to an end,” he said.

“I have done my time and there should be nothing read into that at all.

“I have taken a conscious decision not to talk to the press. It is all very personal.”

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