

BACKGROUND TO THE APPOINTMENT - READVERTISED

The post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors relates to those who have suffered as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland, sometimes referred to as the 'Troubles'. The appointment will be made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in accordance with the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 (the 'Order').

The Order sets out the framework for the post and a copy is included in this information pack. The principal aim of the Commissioner appointed under the Order will be to promote the interests of victims and survivors. It is intended that victims and survivors should have a strong independent voice and that the Commissioner will be able to contribute to the development of policies which address the longer-term needs of those who have suffered as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

During the last forty years or so of the conflict it is estimated that over 3,500 people have been killed and many thousands have suffered injury or bereavement. The Order provides that the term 'victims and survivors' relates to someone who has been physically or psychologically injured, someone who cares for them, or someone bereaved, as a result of a 'conflict related' incident. Those who have witnessed a conflict – related incident and those who provided emergency assistance are also included in the interpretation if they have been physically injured.

The post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors was advertised on 25 January 2007 and applications invited from those interested in undertaking this difficult and challenging work. A number of candidates were deemed suitable for appointment by an interview panel.

In a joint statement by the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 8 October 2007 the Ministers indicated their intention to extend the appointments process and to re-advertise the position of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. A copy of the joint statement set out below.

JOINT STATEMENT BY THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER ON THE POST OF COMMISSIONER FOR VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS

FIRST MINISTER

Good morning. We have asked you here today to tell you how we intend to move forward to the appointment of a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. We thought it was important that we should do that together, to demonstrate that on this issue we speak with one voice.

I know there has been a lot of ill-informed speculation that the deputy First Minister and I have been at loggerheads over the appointment but that simply isn't true. Yes, we have taken time to consider the best way forward but that is just as it should be.

This is an important appointment impacting on some of the most vulnerable people in our society and we need to know that victims and survivors, who have suffered so much for so long, are represented by the very best person for the job.

That person will have an enormously difficult, sensitive and vital job to do for all those who have been touched by the events of our troubled past. Many of them have told us that they feel left behind as society here has moved forward. We are here today to say that no-one will be left behind, least of all those who have paid such a personal and harrowing price.

We inherited a process commenced under direct rule ministers. However, we are now operating under a new political dispensation which has democratic endorsement and support across the community. We want to take full ownership and full responsibility for this process. It is important that the person appointed to this post has the full democratic endorsement associated with a process taken forward under our administration.

To put it bluntly, we believe that some potential applicants may have been deterred from putting themselves forward for the post during direct rule because they could not be confident of securing the broad political support of the local parties that they would need to become a true champion for

victims and survivors in Northern Ireland.

DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

That is why we have decided that we should extend the appointment process and re-advertise the position. We believe that re-advertising the post now against the background of a fully functioning Executive will bring forward a greater number of candidates. Victims and survivors are a key priority for us and we want them to see that we are searching as widely as possible.

The successful candidate will also know that they will have the unwavering support of the First Minister and myself as they address the needs of all those who have suffered great personal loss over the years. This morning we are appealing for all those who believe they have a contribution to make to this vitally important task to come forward and apply.

We would like to stress at this point that this decision in no way reflects on the people who were deemed appointable under the direct rule process. We fully acknowledge both their calibre and commitment. In fact we are asking those individuals if they would agree to their names being carried forward into this newly extended process. They won't have to reapply, will not be re-interviewed, and will be considered along with any further applicants who are deemed appointable.

The final stage of the process will involve a presentation to Dr Paisley and myself personally by all candidates deemed appointable before a final decision is made. We consider this to be an essential new element of the appointment process.

In making our decision we have consulted fully with the Commissioner for Public Appointments and she is content with our approach. What we have decided is designed to serve the public interest and to achieve the statutory purpose to the fullest.

We have already asked our officials to take this newly extended process forward. This will entail, among other things, a further advertisement for the post. We intend to announce the new Commissioner for Victims and Survivors before the end of the year.

In closing, we would like to say that we have not played politics with this issue – it is much too important to us. We have simply done what the people would expect us to do; we have deliberated long and hard before jointly coming to what we both emphatically believe to be the right decision for everyone. There has already been too much ill-informed comment and

controversy about this issue. We must avoid compromising the appointment procedure and are therefore not going to make any further comment today. All we ask now is that no one else should play political games with our decision. We think everyone would agree that the victims and survivors deserve better than that. Thank you.