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Omagh Judge to help investigation

The Omagh Bomb Trial judge could be interviewed as part of a police ombudsman investigation into how two crucial crime witnesses changed their statements.

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Fiona Cooper, a forensics officer, and Detective Chief Inspector Philip Marshall have both admitted strengthening their original accounts on evidence gathering.

The pair were called as part of the prosecution case against Sean Hoey, 37, a south Armagh electrician who denies 56 terrorist charges, including the 29 murders in the August 1998 Omagh atrocity.

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Both were heavily criticised for their conduct by Mr Justice Weir, the trial judge, who ordered an investigation into how some statements were altered and others lost.

During the hearing at Belfast Crown Court, which has sat for more than

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50 days, the two witnesses admitted beefing up their original accounts to suggest specialist forensic precautions were taken at one of the explosives finds allegedly connected to Hoey, when in reality they had not.

Defence lawyer Orlando Pownall QC had demanded their evidence should be thrown out, claiming it was dishonest.

Even senior Crown counsel Gordon Kerr QC accepted that the evidence should be treated with caution.

After Mr Justice Weir called for an investigation, a spokesman for Nuala O`Loan, the Northern Ireland police ombudsman, confirmed her team has launched a formal investigation.

It was said to be likely that investigators would seek to speak with the judge to establish his exact concerns.

The non-jury trial, which has become one of the biggest criminal proceedings in British legal history, is expected to finish this week.

But Mr Justice Weir will reserve his judgment for several weeks.

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