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Monday, 23rd June 2008

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Loyalists boycott Victims' Commission meeting

THE first public meeting organised by the Victims' Commission attracted less than a dozen people when it met in the Joey Dunlop Leisure Centre last Wednesday night.

Commissioners apologised after admitting that the meeting was not properly advertised. However, it has emerged that loyalists locally had no intention of taking part.

A source told the Times: "It was a definite no-go area for loyalists because they disagree fundamentally with the make-up of the Commission. Maybe it would have been badly attended anyway, but loyalists are making it clear they wanted nothing to do with it."

The event was intended to allow people in the Co Antrim and east Derry areas to tell the four victims' commissioners – Patricia MacBride, Brendan McAllister, Bertha McDougall and Mike Nesbitt – about their opinions on their draft work programme.

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Mr McAllister said the Commission had been advised to place notices advertising the meeting in all local papers.

"And I thought they had," he said.

However, it later emerged that space had only been booked in two papers – the Ballymena Guardian and Ballymoney Chronicle.

The commission also sent out press releases to the Ballymoney Chronicle, Ballymoney Times, Ballymena Guardian, Coleraine Chronicle and Coleraine Times.

Mr McAllister said he recognised the meeting should have been widely advertised.

"There has been an omission and we apologise for that oversight," he said.

Local MLA Mervyn Storey said he was not aware of the meeting until just before the event.

"The first I heard about this event was when correspondence came to my office on Monday. So i would agree that it was not at all well advertised.

"Communicating with the public is essential. If this is the standard of communication then you wonder."

The meeting was the first of five to be held across the North this month.

The others will be in Belfast, Derry and Enniskillen next week and Newry the following week. The commission has set itself ambitious targets in its draft work programme, such as investigating the health needs of victims and survivors of the Troubles and encouraging businesses to provide practical support.

Mr McAllister said the commission aimed to have all responses gathered by June 30. It will then decide how to progress the programme by the end of July.

The full article contains 381 words and appears in n/a newspaper.

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