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Local & National

New victims commissioner 'to be appointed by Christmas'

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Claim none of shortlisted six will get job

Thursday, September 27, 2007

By Noel McAdam

The First Ministers Office has denied it plans to launch a new hunt for a Victims Commissioner - and insisted an appointment will be made by Christmas.

It comes amid speculation that the current competition for the post has almost run into the sand and none of the six names on the shortlist has been deemed suitable.

The Office of the First and Deputy First Minister is also believed to be uneasy over inheriting the process from the direct rule team, according to senior sources.

But an OFMDFM spokesman said: "There is no intention to readvertise the position and the issue is still with the First and Deputy First Minister."

The long-running failure to find a replacement for interim commissioner Bertha McDougall descended further into confusion today as Alan McBride of the WAVE victims organisation said it was losing faith in the present process.

He said if First Minister Ian Paisley and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness needed to readvertise, they should come out and say so.

The possibility of readvertising the position was also raised yesterday at the Stormont committee which examines the First Ministers Office.

Indicating a new trawl may be necessary, deputy Alliance leader Naomi Long said: "This must be a merit based appointment, not a political appointment. If the processes are flawed then we need to start again."

Mr Paisley and MrMcGuinness had planned to fill the post by July - but it is now likely to take until Christmas, at the earliest, a senior OFMDFM source said.

The First Minister's Office is understood to have sought legal advice amid concerns the move to re-advertise could bring another High Court challenge, potentially from those already on the shortlist for the post.

But a senior source said: "As things stand, the First and Deputy First Minister are agreed that none of the current applications are suitable and they intend to go for a wider pool of people."

Another source said that while a final decision still had to be taken: " We are confident that if it is re-advertised, an appointment can be made by Christmas."

In all, 13 applicants were interviewed for the high-profile job in mid-February, not long after after the High Court ruling that declared that Mrs McDougall's interim appointment was an illegal political favour to the DUP.

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