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Victims' post: so why are we still waiting?

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Ulster First Ministers holding back data three months on

Monday, December 10, 2007

By Chris Thornton

First Ministers Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness are taking three months to answer eight questions about the delayed appointment of a Victims' Commissioner.

The Ministers' office has already missed three deadlines for responding to a Belfast Telegraph Freedom of Information request about the year-long job hunt.

They have indicated they may ultimately withhold the information, but need more time to consider whether it should be released because there are "still several factors which are under consideration".

The Telegraph asked OFMDFM to spell out those factors last week, but by yesterday afternoon they had not responded.

Assembly member Dolores Kelly described the delay as "appalling" and said it raised implications for future appointments by the First Ministers.

The £65,000-a-year Victims Commissioner's job has long been shrouded in controversy.

The woman who held the interim version of the job, Bertha McDougall, was picked by Mr Paisley and given the job by direct rule ministers as a political favour to the DUP.

After her appointment was declared illegal by the High Court, the then Secretary of State Peter Hain advertised for a permanent replacement at the start of 2007.

A shortlist from that round of applications was handed to Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness shortly after they entered office in May.

But they made no move on the appointment for the next five months and denied disagreeing about a suitable candidate.

Then they suddenly announced in October that there would be a new round of applications.

They said candidates who had already been shortlisted would still be considered for the post, but one - former Alliance Assemblyman Seamus Close - withdrew in protest at the move.

The Telegraph submitted the eight Freedom of Information questions before the announcement of the new process. They were received by the First Ministers' office on September 26.

They should have answered the questions by October 24, but by that date they declared that they were performing a "public interest test" to determine if it would be in the public interest to answer the questions.

That brought the deadline back to November 13. Then they wrote to the Telegraph saying the test would take longer and an answer would be provided by November 27.

Last week they revised the date again, saying an answer would be provided on December 18, three months after the questions were submitted.

Officials in OFMDFM say the information could be legally withheld because it could prejudice the "effective conduct of public affairs".

But they are still considering whether the questions can be answered.

Mrs Kelly said: "It's appalling that questions clearly in the public interest take so long to answer.

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"They're not complicated. It's not like a lot of research is needed. They should have been able to answer them within the statutory time limit.

"It does nothing to inspire confidence in this administration we're forced to endure.

"The media are quite right to ask questions. We have also tabled questions in the Assembly.

"Like the Belfast Telegraph, the SDLP will continue to ask questions about these matters."

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