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Wednesday, December 3, 2008

£7.7m gap in PSNI budget to be closed

DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor

THE NORTHERN Ireland Office and the policing board have moved to plug a £7.7 million (€9.03 million) gap in the PSNI budget, but only by using funds allocated to the next financial year.

The cost of so-called legacy issues, investigations dating from the Troubles, continues to dog the financing of day-to-day policing and the PSNI's longer-term investment programme. The police budget was shy by some £24.4 million but cuts of more than £15.3 million and other measures helped reduce this to £7.7 million.

Security minister Paul Goggins insisted no additional money would be forthcoming so he allowed some of next year's funds to be drawn down early.

Policing board chairman Prof Sir Desmond Rea said: "Whilst the gap has been bridged with minimum impact to the delivery of frontline policing service, the ability to invest in infrastructure for the future will be affected."

It is understood investment projects linked to station upgrades, IT services and other schemes will be affected.

However, a policing board representative said the planned policing college, called for by the Patten Commission, is not due for completion until 2012 and should not be affected by the decision to use next year's funds.

The police service still faces questions related to the funding of the Historical Enquiries Team which is investigating more than 3,000 unsolved murders between 1968 and 1998. It will also have to deal with an estimated £87 million claim for damages from an alleged failure to provide adequate ear protection to officers undertaking weapons training.

Sinn Féin policing board member Daithí McKay said: "As the devolution of policing and justice is rolled out . . . it is important that the new Justice Department and the policing board gets to grip with how to deal with 'legacy' issues such as hearing loss claims from former police officers."

DUP policing board member Ian Paisley jnr said the financing measures were merely a short-term fix.

"Whilst today's arrangement gets us over the short-term problem of balancing our budget there is an inevitable consequence that we will be back in a budget crisis very soon," he said. "Let me make it abundantly clear the Northern Ireland Office has to be honest with the Northern Ireland people and provide us with sustainable finance to address the legacy issues that currently eat into vast chunks of our current budget."



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