

NEWS RELEASES

THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

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NEW LEGISLATION HERALDS CHAMPION FOR VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS

A House of Commons Committee has today considered legislation which will pave the way for a Victims and Survivors Commissioner for Northern Ireland.

Speaking after the debate Victims Minister, David Hanson MP, said: **"We have now taken a further step in highlighting the needs of all who have suffered during the troubles. The legislation will pave the way for the appointment of a victims and survivors champion who will build on the work of Bertha McDougall, the Interim Commissioner who took up her appointment in December 2005."**

Paying tribute to the work of Mrs McDougall the Minister added:

"I am grateful for the work Bertha McDougall has been carrying out as Interim Commissioner. The government is committed to giving a strong voice to victims and survivors into the future."

"No-one can forget the past and all those who have suffered so much over the years, but we must also look to a better future. The legislation which has been debated today fulfils a commitment in the St Andrews Agreement and is an early sign of the Government's continuing commitment to progress in building a stable and peaceful future for all the people of Northern Ireland."

It is intended that the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors will be advertised within the next few weeks and it is anticipated that an appointment will be made early in the New Year.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. All media enquiries to OFMDFM Press Office 028 9052 2659.

2. The following are the main features of the Victims and Survivors Order:

- To provide for the establishment of a position of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors to be appointed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, acting jointly (Secretary of State under direct rule).
- The term 'victim and survivor' to relate to conflict-related incidents and to mean those physically or psychologically injured; those bereaved; those who provide substantial care on a regular basis for someone who has been physically or psychologically injured; those who are psychologically injured because they have witnessed a conflict related incident or as a result of their providing emergency assistance in connection with a conflict related incident.
- For the purposes of the draft Order 'conflict related' means incidents occurring in or after 1966.
- The Commissioner to have a principle aim of promoting the interests of victims and survivors with a range of duties and powers in support of this. These include keeping under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice affecting the interests of victims and survivors; keeping under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for them; providing advice to the Secretary of State, the Executive Committee of the Assembly and others; commissioning or undertaking research. The Commissioner will have a duty to take forward a Victims and Survivors Forum.
- The activities of the Commissioner will be the subject of a work programme to be agreed with

the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Secretary of State under direct rule).

- The Commissioner will be appointed for a period of four years with the possibility of appointment for one further period of four years.
- Provision for there no longer to be a post of Commissioner should such a post no longer be deemed necessary; this is an Order making power exercisable by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister acting jointly - or the Secretary of State under direct rule.
- Provision for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (with the approval of DFP) to pay grants for the purpose of assisting victims and survivors.

3. It is intended that the position of Victims and Survivors Commissioner will be advertised shortly and applications invited. The process of appointment will be carried out in accordance with the Code of Practice of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

4. Mrs Bertha McDougall was appointed as Interim Victims Commissioner in October 2005 and took up her post in December 2005. Her remit is to look at issues concerning the organisation and funding of services for victims and survivors of the troubles. She is also tasked with considering practical arrangements for a victims and survivors forum and is expected to report on her findings early in the New Year.



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