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## **NIAMH AIMS TO 'CHANGE YOUR MIND' WITH THE LAUNCH OF A NEW MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS CAMPAIGN**

*Almost 60% of people in Northern Ireland admit that if they were to experience a mental health problem they wouldn't want others to know about it, according to Public Health Agency research. For many, the stigma of having a mental health problem is harder to deal with than the illness itself.*

This was the stark message issued by Niamh (Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health) as it launched its 'Change Your Mind' campaign as part of World Mental Health Week (10-14 October 2011). 'Change your Mind' aims to tackle the stigma associated with mental health issues in Northern Ireland.

Niamh launched the campaign at Stormont to an audience of MLAs, including Health Minister Edwin Poots, Chair of the Health Committee Michelle Gildernew, Mark H Durkan, Dr Stephen Farry, all of whom spoke in support of the campaign. Other delegates included health professionals, and those who have used Niamh's support services. Local Journalist Letitia Fitzpatrick is supporting the 'Change your Mind' campaign, speaking of her own experience of mental illness she hopes to help highlight the issues and to explain how early intervention and professional help were instrumental in her recovery.

Commenting at the launch, Peter McBride, Niamh CEO, said "The effects of modern day living - busy lifestyles, financial worries, family issues - have resulted in many of us experiencing heightened levels of pressure. The cumulative nature of these, mean that almost anyone can develop a form of mental illness. At Niamh we recognise these pressures and are proactively promoting a greater understanding of mental health and to eliminate the stigma that currently surrounds it.

"People that have suffered from a mental illness often reference the stigma and reactions of friends and family as being harder to deal with than the illness itself. Niamh aims to address this at a local level. Each local community is different, so we plan to target the communities where our services are based so we can understand how those that use our services experience stigma and how best to address this. In each community we plan to work with organisations such as local schools, colleges, hospitals and businesses."

With Northern Ireland experiencing 30% higher levels of mental illness than the rest of the UK, the ultimate vision for Niamh's 'Change your Mind' campaign is to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness, so society can value and support those who suffer from mental ill-health.

Letitia Fitzpatrick commented, “Having experienced a mental health issue myself, I am aware of the stigma attached to mental health problems in Northern Ireland. It’s never really talked about; yet one in four people will experience a mental health concern at some point in their life. There is nothing to be ashamed of and it’s important for people to know that, and for the public to understand that it could happen to anyone. I am delighted to have the opportunity to work with Niamh on a project that is close to my heart and to help raise awareness of mental health.”