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From: Katrina Godfrey  
Health Promotion Branch

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Date: 9 February 1999

gva

PS/Mr McFall (DHSS)

**SUICIDES: PRESS STATEMENT FOLLOWING MEETING WITH  
CORONERS**

**Issue:** Minister has agreed to issue a press statement following his meeting this morning with two local coroners to discuss the issue of suicide

**Timescale:** Immediate

**Recommendation:** That Minister approves the attached press statement

**Introduction**

1. The Minister met this morning with John Leckey and Dan Thompson, Coroners for Greater Belfast and South Down respectively. During the discussion, the Minister indicated that he would issue a press statement following the meeting which would highlight the nature of the discussion which had taken place and point to action currently underway and to be taken in the light of the meeting.

**Background**

2. Today's meeting comes at a time when there is significant attention being paid in the media and elsewhere to the issue of suicide. Tonight sees the broadcast

of a UTV Insight programme dealing with the subject which includes interviews with the Minister, Mr Thompson and others.

3. The purpose of the press statement is to provide an opportunity for the Minister to voice his concerns over the issue of suicide and refer publicly to outcome of the meeting with the coroners. It will also highlight the work already underway to tackle the issue, in particular the work of the mental health promotion task force. The Information Office suggests that the statement should issue immediately as a response to public concerns and to the Insight programme being shown later tonight.

**Recommendation**

4. The Minister is asked to approve the attached press statement for issue later today. It has been cleared with colleagues in the Information Office.

*Katrina Godfrey*

**KATRINA GODFREY**

☎ 22219

**Copy distribution**

PS/Mr McFall (DENI)

Secretary

CMO

CNO

CI(SS1)

Mr Hill

Dr Smith

Mr Frew

Dr Mock

Mr Orr (SSI)

Mrs Garrett

DRAFT PRESS RELEASE

## HEALTH MINISTER VOICES CONCERNS OVER SUICIDE

Health Minister, John McFall, met today with two local coroners to discuss concerns over the number of people in Northern Ireland who commit suicide each year. Speaking after the meeting, Mr McFall said: "Last year 124 deaths in Northern Ireland were recorded as suicides: of these 28 were young people under the age of 25. It is vital that we continue to work together to identify and tackle the underlying factors that could be contributing to these tragic deaths".

The Minister went on to comment on his discussions with the coroners, John Leckey and Daniel Thompson, saying: "Today I have had an opportunity to hear an assessment from two of our local coroners of the current situation. Through the inquests they conduct, they see at first hand the personal tragedy that lies behind the figures and I value their contribution to the debate on how we handle this sensitive issue. They have raised with me some professional concerns over how suicides are recorded and these will be followed up with the Registrar General's Office."

Pointing to the work already underway, Mr McFall said: "We are acutely aware of the importance of promoting positive health and wellbeing - both mental and physical.

"For this reason, I established a multi-disciplinary task force last October to develop a strategy and action plan to promote positive mental health. I also pointed to the need for this task force to focus specifically on the issue of suicide in this context and on the particular needs of young people.

Following today's meeting, I will be reminding the Task Force of the importance of the element of its work which relates to suicide and asking it to ensure that it seeks input from both community and professional sources, including the local coroners, as it develops recommendations on how we might prevent further tragic suicides.

"I will also be looking at steps which might be taken within both health and education sectors to ensure that people who need support during vulnerable times of their lives receive appropriate help, advice and information. In doing this, I will want to make sure that we develop closer partnerships with the voluntary sector which already provides such a valuable service in this area"

Mr McFall also highlighted the importance of local initiatives which involve partnership between statutory, voluntary and community sectors. "The importance of taking local action in response to local problems cannot be overstated and I know that excellent work is being done on the ground in a number of areas. We were fortunate to be joined at today's meeting by Richard Black, Chief Executive of North & West Belfast Trust. This Trust set up a Task Group last summer to address the factors contributing to an apparent increase in youth suicides in west Belfast. I very much welcome this work, and other projects like it."

### **Editors' notes**

Figures from the Registrar General's Office show the number of suicides recorded in 1998 as 124. Of these, 96 were males and 28 females while 28 were young people under the age of 25.

The Minister met today with John Leckey, Coroner for Greater Belfast, and Daniel Thompson, Coroner for South Down. They were also joined at the meeting by Richard Black, Chief Executive of North & West Belfast Health &

Social Services Trust, and Dr Paul Darragh, Consultant in Public Health Medicine at the Eastern Health & Social Services Board.

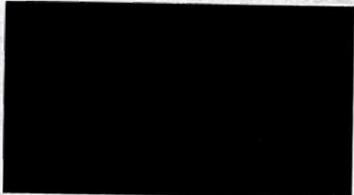
The Minister's Task Force is chaired by Dr Brian Gaffney, Chief Executive of the Health Promotion Agency, and includes medical and nursing professionals, representatives from social work, health promotion and the education sector, a suicide awareness officer, and voluntary/community sector representatives with experience in providing counselling, young people's support services and services for older persons.

The Task Force is currently undertaking a series of consultation exercises with a wide range of individuals and organisations from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. It is due to report to the Minister in May.



SECRETARY OF STATE  
FOR  
NORTHERN IRELAND

J D Thompson Esq CBE  
HM Coroner for South Down



Dear Mr Thompson,

Thank you for your letter of 21 January in which you expressed concern over recent suicides across Northern Ireland, particularly those involving young people, and asked me to take action to address this issue.

The issue of suicide is one which concerns me and, although figures over recent years do not show any real increase, equally they do not reflect the downward trend I would wish to see. Like you I am keen that we act to identify the factors that contribute to the decision of an individual to commit suicide and the action that might be taken to prevent further tragic loss of life.

We have already taken such action across a number of fronts. This includes participation in a national Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness. It has also involved health and education sectors working closely together on initiatives such as recent guidance on managing suicide and on bullying which has issued to all schools.

Following research commissioned by DHSS which found that suicide rarely occurs in the absence of a mental disorder, we have also been focusing in particular on the promotion of good mental health and, indeed, have recently established a multidisciplinary taskforce to draw up a strategy and action plan in this area. The taskforce comprises individuals from a range of backgrounds. It includes medical and nursing professionals with expertise in the area of mental health, representatives from social work, health

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at suicide  
SP 1784/98

- cc. Ps/SofS (B&L)
- Ps/Mr McFall (DHSS & L)
- Mr Goudy
- A Campbell
- Miss S Hill
- Mr McCoy
- Mr D Hill
- Mr McCusker
- Mr Kelly
- Dr Smith

- Mr Frew
- Mrs Godfrey
- Dr Gaffney

10 FEB 1999

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11 MILLBANK  
LONDON  
SW1P 4QE

Joe

8 February 1999



promotion and the education sector, a suicide awareness officer, and voluntary/community sector representatives with experience in providing counselling, young people's support services and services for older persons.

The group is being led by Dr Brian Gaffney, Chief Executive of the Health Promotion Agency, and John McFall has already asked it to focus specifically on the issue of suicide and the particular mental health needs of young people.

The taskforce is due to report by May of this year and we will be looking closely at its recommendations. While at this stage in its work programme I would be reluctant to set up a separate taskforce to look at suicides, we will certainly wish to consider once the group reports whether such an approach would be beneficial in taking forward any recommendations specifically aimed at preventing further suicidal deaths.

I also welcome the action which has been taken to respond to particular local needs. This includes the steps which North and West Belfast Trust has taken following a number of apparent suicides by young people in that area. The Western Board has also developed its own suicide prevention strategy and appointed dedicated suicide awareness officers to work within the community. These, and other similar projects, all involve the sort of multi-agency approach I know you wish to see.

You will be aware that John Leckey, Coroner for Greater Belfast, has also been in contact with John McFall to express concerns very similar to your own. I understand that John has arranged to meet both you and Mr Leckey shortly to discuss these concerns and hear your own assessment of the possible factors and circumstances which surround tragic deaths of this nature. I have also asked Dr Gaffney to brief you on progress made to date by the mental health promotion taskforce.



I hope this letter reassures you that we are acutely aware of the problem of suicide, particularly where it affects younger people, and are committed to taking action to prevent more families suffering the tragedy of suicide.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Marjorie Mowlam'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

MARJORIE MOWLAM