



# Youth Assembly

For Northern Ireland

**OFFICIAL REPORT**

## **2nd sitting of the Youth Assembly**

At 11.00 am on Saturday 6 November 2021  
Great Hall, Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast





## Members of the Youth Assembly

Abraham, Hannah (Upper Bann)  
Anderson, David (North Antrim)  
Bateson, Dominic (Mid Ulster)  
Bogdans, Richard (South Antrim)  
Bond, Lauren (North Antrim)  
Brown, Jamie (North Down)  
Burns, Calum (East Londonderry)  
Caldwell, Kaitlin (Belfast North)  
Campbell, Clíodhna (North Down)  
Campbell, Euan (Strangford)  
Clarke, Oran (Mid Ulster)  
Clenaghan, Oisín (Lagan Valley)  
Copeland, Euan (Belfast South)  
Craig, Niamh (South Antrim)  
Crawford, Hasely (West Tyrone)  
Cregan, Fionn (Belfast West)  
Curran, Martha (South Antrim)  
Da Costa, Clelia (Mid Ulster)  
Davis, Patrick (Strangford)  
Flanagan, Grace (Belfast South)  
Folliard, Jack (West Tyrone)  
Freaney, Alannah (Foyle)  
Frew, Thomas (East Londonderry)  
Gallagher-Beard, Alicia (Belfast North)  
Gaston, Ciaran (Belfast North)  
Gilmartin, Ciara (East Antrim)  
Gilmore, Zach (Strangford)  
Gorman, Aideen (South Down)  
Gregory, Caolán (Newry and Armagh)  
Hanna, Gráinne (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)  
Hills, Maddison (North Antrim)  
Hutchinson, Adam (North Antrim)  
Jablonowski, Aleksander (Upper Bann)  
Kane, John (Belfast East)  
Kelly, Aimee (West Tyrone)  
Kelly, Sarah (Lagan Valley)  
Lafferty, Órla (East Londonderry)  
Lamont, Alannah (Lagan Valley)  
Large, Tyler (North Down)  
Lennox, Jonathan (Belfast East)  
Lynch, Ronan (South Down)  
Lynn, Leah-Jade (Foyle)  
Lyons, Nathan (East Londonderry)  
Marcus, John (North Down)  
Martin, Andrew (Newry and Armagh)  
Massey, Luke (Lagan Valley)  
Matchett, Alanna (Belfast West)  
McGouran, Grace (Strangford)  
McAlpine, Eoin (North Down)  
McArdle, Jessica-Elise (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)  
McAreevey, Henry James Kel (Upper Bann)  
McAtee, Abbie (South Down)  
McAuley, Clodagh (Belfast North)  
McCann, Conor (Newry and Armagh)  
McCann, Fionn (Strangford)  
McCarney-Savage, Ruadhan (Belfast South)  
McClenaghan, Rebecca (North Antrim)  
McFetridge, Emer (North Antrim)  
McGucken, Charlotte (Lagan Valley)  
McKibbin, Jack (Belfast North)  
McKinstry, John (Belfast North)  
McLaughlin, Jenna (Foyle)  
McShane, Neamh (Foyle)  
McSherry, Thomas (Upper Bann)  
Mercer, Oliver (East Antrim)  
Mitchell, Micah (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)  
Moore, Jamie (Belfast South)  
Moore, Rebecca (Belfast East)  
Moore, Robert (Newry and Armagh)  
Morris, Coran (East Londonderry)  
Murphy, Aaron (South Down)  
Nelson-Killen, Thomas (Belfast West)  
O'Brien, Tiana (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)  
O'Connor, Hannah (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)  
Olphert, Shanelle (Mid Ulster)  
Osterhus, Holly (West Tyrone)  
Pearce, Oliver (South Antrim)  
Reynolds, Oisín (Foyle)  
Shannon, Eimear (Belfast West)  
Sheridan, Penny (South Antrim)  
Smith, Olivia (East Antrim)  
Torney, Ollie (South Down)  
Walsh, Lisa (West Tyrone)  
Wilkin, Sofia (East Antrim)  
Wilson, Harry (Belfast East)  
Woods, Katie (Belfast West)  
Yip, Emma (East Antrim)  
You, Kelly (Belfast South)



# Contents

<b>Speaker's Welcome .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Confirmation of the Code of Conduct .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Debate on the Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Vote on the Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Junior Ministers' Address.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Result of the Vote on the Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Concluding Remarks.....</b>	<b>18</b>



# Youth Assembly

Saturday 6 November 2021

*The Youth Assembly met at 11.00 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Speaker's Welcome

**Mr Speaker:** OK, Members. That is probably the first time that you have been called "Members" at a meeting like this, so congratulations.

First of all, I welcome all of you the great Parliament Buildings and to the second plenary sitting of the Youth Assembly. Tá fáilte romhaibh uilig anseo inniu. I know that this is not technically the first sitting of the Youth Assembly, but, as this is the first sitting at which we have managed to have you all gathered together in person, I recognise the significance of this moment, and I commend and congratulate you all on becoming Members of our inaugural Youth Assembly. As you will know, it had been our hope that this plenary session would take place in the Assembly Chamber. However, social-distancing regulations and restrictions mean that we could not accommodate all of you in the Chamber and we are, therefore, meeting here in the Great Hall instead. However, it is rather symbolic that we are using this very historic location as the setting for a gathering that very much represents our future.

I recognise that, as we meet today, a rally is taking place in Belfast city centre on the subject of climate change to mark the COP26 summit. That is a great example of an important issue that young people have put their energy behind and have helped to move to the top of the political agenda. That should demonstrate to you all how important your voice is, that people are listening and that this Youth Assembly has every potential to be a really important platform. Not only can this be a tremendous opportunity for each of you individually, but it puts a responsibility on you collectively to make your voice heard.

We will be supported today by the members of the Youth Assembly team and other officials, who have all been very committed to bringing this moment about. I have to say that we may even be more delighted and excited than you are to have you all here in person today. I thank the team in the Assembly who have done so much to get us to this point. Thank you, staff.

My thanks also go to the MLAs and officials of the Assembly Commission, who took the decisions and provided the resources to bring the Youth Assembly to life. It is very significant that there was agreement amongst all the political parties for this project. We have also been given great advice and support from our advisory group, which we established to guide the development of the Youth Assembly, and I want to thank all of them for the time that they set aside and the really useful suggestions that they have given us. A number of them are here this morning to view proceedings. I know that, for the advisory group, attending this plenary meeting is a wonderful reward in itself.

I know that the Commission and Members of the Assembly will be keen to hear about today's business and to engage with you in the weeks and months ahead to get your views on the development of the policies and legislation that will affect you and the other young people whom you collectively represent. I am very pleased to be able to welcome the two junior Ministers, who are here to represent the Executive: Gary Middleton MLA and Declan Kearney MLA. They are seated behind you. I really appreciate their making a point of being here this morning, and I advise you to take the opportunity, when the junior Ministers are here, to speak to them directly if you need to, to make sure that they communicate your views back to the Executive. I have no doubt that they will do that faithfully.

Today is your opportunity to have your voice heard in this place and to play your part. Today is about you. During today's proceedings, you will have the opportunity to spend time in the Assembly Chamber, as well as in the Senate Chamber and the Long Gallery upstairs. As before, I will be chairing the plenary and trying to keep order, although I do not think that there will be any problem in that regard. I will give as many of you as I can the chance to contribute. Do not worry if you have not got a speech prepared; if you just want to make a brief point, or even just say that you agree with someone else, please indicate that, and I will do my best to enable as many of you as possible to contribute. The only times that I am likely to intervene are if we need to keep to time and to ensure that all Members respect the right of others to make a contribution — please listen to what is being said and do not talk over each other — but that is all about trying to make sure that we hear from as many of you as we can.

While the discussion today involves serious subjects, I hope that you will enjoy today's proceedings. Even in the Assembly itself, when you might sometimes see a focus on major and perhaps even contentious issues, there is still normally good humour, banter and, actually, strong personal relationships and friendships between Members on all sides of the House. That all helps to get business done and to cope with difficult situations.

I do hope that you make the most of today and enjoy yourselves. If you need any help at all, please do not hesitate to contact one of the team, who will do their very best so that we can help you today.

## Confirmation of the Code of Conduct

**Mr Speaker:** We will now seek to confirm the code of conduct. Members have discussed the agreed code of conduct that will guide their actions as representatives.

*Moved —*

*“That Members of the Youth Assembly confirm they will abide by the Code of Conduct, as previously agreed through discussion”.*

**Mr Speaker:** Members, please signal your confirmation by saying “Aye”.

**All Members:** Aye.

*Resolved—*

*“That Members of the Youth Assembly confirm they will abide by the Code of Conduct, as previously agreed through discussion”.*

**Mr Speaker:** With Ayes from all Members, the code of conduct is now in effect. Thank you very much for that.

## Debate on the Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly

**Mr Speaker:** Through a survey of Members and other young people, ten issues were identified for discussion at today's plenary sitting. Four rapporteurs will speak on those issues, and then discussion will proceed. Once the rapporteurs have spoken, I will open the floor for about 30 minutes for others to have their say. Members who speak in the open-floor debate should keep their remarks brief to allow as many contributions as possible. Again, Members should not talk over each other and should respect the views of colleagues.

Those who wish to speak should rise in their place, as has been explained. This is part of the normal practice in the Chamber. It simply means standing up in order to attract the attention of the Clerks at the Table so that they understand that you wish to speak. When this happens, I will invite one of you to speak, and everyone else should then sit down. You should rise in your place again when that person finishes speaking. If you do not rise again, we will believe that you no longer wish to speak. When called to speak, please state your name before making your remarks. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

I call Patrick Davis, who will have up to four minutes to speak.

**Patrick Davis:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure to be speaking at this first in-person sitting of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, and I am the representative for group 1. In the vote at the end of our first meeting as a group, we reached a strong consensus on our six top choices from the youth survey. These issues were education; rights and equality; jobs; healthcare; justice; and youth services.

One of the undercurrents of our meeting over Zoom last month was our happiness to see education coming out as a major issue for young people. Although this was a relatively unsurprising result, we felt that Northern Ireland's youth have a unique and well-informed view on our education system that often goes unheard. This is something that we all feel should be addressed. As a group, we also recognise that education is a gateway for young people into a wider discussion on topics ranging from youth facilities to jobs and healthcare.

We also talked at length about healthcare provision in Northern Ireland, particularly regarding abortion services, which we feel are presently being wrongly denied to women and girls in Northern Ireland, forcing them to seek treatment in England due to a lack of facilities at home. We also talked about mental health, with a particular focus on left-behind rural communities. It was our belief that programmes that allow people to socialise with one another, as well as mental health facilities, are currently allocated to areas in such a way as to create a postcode lottery. We would like to see greater provision and equality for those who have been left behind.

Another issue that we looked at was jobs. We felt that employers are in many cases unsympathetic to the fact that many of their young employees are still in full-time education and can therefore not achieve the same flexibility as many adults. Nevertheless, it is more important than ever for young people to gain work experience in order to be competitive in the job market once they leave school, creating a situation where many feel that they have no choice other than to sacrifice grades so that they can attain sufficient work

experience to be employable. I am sure that you can all agree, as we did, that this is an unacceptable situation that we should be attempting to solve.

Finally, we wanted to recognise the important role that schools play in providing youth services in communities where they would otherwise not be available. However, since this is again a postcode lottery, we would like to rectify it. It is our belief that the duty to provide youth services and facilities should not fall solely on schools. There should be wider access to youth services for those who do not live in cities or major towns.

Thank you, everyone, for your time. I look forward to seeing all that we can accomplish for the young people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the second rapporteur, Penny Sheridan.

**Penny Sheridan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would like to say sincerely how pleased I am that we are all finally here in the Assembly, face to face. Although Lucy, Laura and James were fantastic at holding Teams meetings, we can all agree that that is nothing compared with what we are having today.

I have the honour of reporting the results of the group 2 discussion, which was held on 12 October at 7:30 pm. The six issues discussed were education; health; rights and equality; environment; language; and jobs. It was clear that rights and equality were very important issues that concerned everyone, since they ran through so many of the other issues, such as jobs, and, more specifically, the minimum wage for our age group. It is unfair that younger people are not paid the same as older colleagues for doing exactly the same thing. All of us who have a job but are not paid the same wage will agree that that is very annoying. If that were changed, it would be greatly appreciated — I would certainly appreciate it.

Education was also seen as involving our rights. Many of us want the school curriculum to be more inclusive and up to date. It needs to comply with today's society. That includes students having their rights explained to them, as many of us are unaware of what they are. It could also involve our being taught how to widen our horizons.

*[Interruption caused by technical difficulties.]*

Schools should also teach us how to deal with the real-life problems that we may face when we leave school, such as how to budget or do taxes.

Education was a very prominent topic and was discussed throughout the meeting, especially how it is today in COVID times. Many of our friends, and many of us, got behind because of the pandemic, and that has had a domino effect on our work this year. Many students, especially those who are doing GCSEs and A levels, do not understand what is being taught because of the lack of a foundation in place. That needs to be resolved, so that, if another lockdown were to occur — hopefully, that will not happen — those who are struggling would not be left further behind.

As a lot of us know, COVID also impacted on exams and led to much confusion for students and teachers alike. Coronavirus has been here for nearly two years, so it is time to make a clear plan for exams. The plan should involve students and be made known to them, since we are the ones who have to go through the stress and anxiety of the unknown. That stress has led to a dramatic increase in the number of mental health

problems, which is why it is vital that people get the correct help. That help is not always easily accessible in school, and that must be fixed as soon as possible.

The issue of transfer tests and grammar schools was also brought up. Many saw the tests as an unnecessary stress for 10- and 11-year-olds to go through. That is an important subject to many, so it deserves to be talked about when committees are set up. I am sure that education will be a very important issue for us.

The Irish language was discussed as well. It is not taught enough in secondary schools, so many people drop it after coming from an Irish-speaking primary school. It was said that Gaelic games are underfunded by the Government, even though it is a big part of our culture, so that issue should be resolved.

Finally, we talked about how the legal voting age for this country should, possibly, be lowered to 16. While we were told that that cannot be done through Stormont, we could still raise awareness of the issue in the hope that things could change, if that is what we want. When the discussion was finished, we had time to reflect on what had been said, and we voted for our top six issues. Those, in order, were education; health; rights and equality; environment; language; and jobs.

Thank you for listening, and I hope that you all take on board what our group had to say when it comes to voting for the top four issues that we will focus on.

*11.15 am*

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Penny, for that, despite the few disruptions at the beginning of your contribution.

I call John Kane.

**John Kane:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. My name is John Kane. I am 15 and from east Belfast, and I represent group 3. Our group's voting resulted in the following top six issues: education; health; rights, equality and identity; the environment; youth services; and infrastructure and transport.

We specifically discussed the need to rise to the challenge of climate change and set up a specific committee facing that issue, because it is vital to our future as young people. We commend our peers who will be demonstrating on our streets in Belfast today to raise young people's concerns over this issue.

We discussed the expense of public transport and the lack of infrastructure to make it a truly viable option, as it is in other European countries. As a country, we need young people to invest in the idea of public transport over cars to protect our environment and to meet climate change goals.

Our discussions on education, health, youth services, rights and equality were all intertwined. In our view, education is key, but, to educate young people, we must also educate our educators. Teachers are not equipped to recognise the signs of poor mental health and to deal with bullying and complex issues around identity. Our Members also raised concerns over uniform, hair and appearance regulations, which limit the self-expression of young people, especially those with gender identity issues. We strongly advocate for counselling services in schools, as teachers cannot and should not be expected to take on that role. Teachers must be educated not only to identify the signs but to signpost young people to services that can help across Northern Ireland.

COVID has increased academic pressure. Every test and homework adds to that pressure. The reduction in the curriculum to be examined in 2022 simply does not reflect the absence of in-person learning. Moving a science practical is not reflective of losing six months of visible teaching.

Whilst we relish the great opportunity to voice our views today, we all should have proper representation in our schools. School councils have no real voice and are simply for appearance. Engaging young people in our society is crucial, as their voices must be heard throughout our academic journey. Suicide prevention, education on alcohol and drugs, and dealing with poverty, racism, disability and personal expression should be as important as academic learning. A focus on that will develop resilience, lift some academic pressure and work towards creating more healthy and well-rounded citizens. We all should be valued, not just for academic performance and sporting prowess. Allowing young people's voices to be heard in schools in relation to education and the curriculum, educating our teachers and investing in mental health and personal expression is, in our view, vital to the future of Northern Ireland.

Thank you for listening. I look forward to working with all of you to address these issues.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. I call Lauren Bond.

**Lauren Bond:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. My name is Lauren Bond, and I am representing group 4. After much discussion, my group voted that education; rights and equality; health; environment; transport and infrastructure; and jobs were our top six priorities.

Education has been completely transformed in the past two years, and so now, more than ever, we need to work together to improve and create a more manageable and accessible education system for everyone. My group highlighted the negligible amount of education surrounding mental health in schools and discussed the lack of support offered to all students. Students are not taught how to deal with stress, anxiety or hardship. We also discussed how we feel that the curriculum and time given to cover it is unmanageable, especially at exam level. That leaves teachers and students in a difficult position. The curriculum also excludes essential life skills such as first aid and sign language. We also discussed the disadvantage that some students face regarding the cost of uniforms, PE kit and new technologies required for online learning.

Our second topic was rights and equality. We discussed issues faced by different genders, races, communities and those with certain religious or political beliefs. We discussed how, by educating people on issues like racism and sexism, we can prevent those issues and create diversity in our communities. My group discussed the benefit of and need for integrated schools.

Our third priority was health, and that linked in a lot with education. As I previously mentioned, we discussed how education around mental health is inadequate and how teenagers have little support. There is no outlet that allows teenagers to relieve stress and to talk about how they are doing. Not every teenager needs therapy, but we all need someone to talk to on those difficult days. We all know of the connection between mental and physical health, yet schools offer only a small variety of sports that do not suit all abilities, and not every sport is accessible for each gender. There is no equal opportunity. We also discussed the possibility of healthier food options in schools.

Our fourth point was the environment. It is our future that is at stake. We talked about more environmentally friendly vehicles, cutting out unnecessary plastic in supermarkets and cutting down on plastic in schools, whilst ensuring that there are accessible recycling bins. We discussed how using public transport is too expensive, especially for teenagers, and how we can more sustainably produce electric car batteries. We

discussed the benefits of hydrogen technology and ways that we could introduce that in Northern Ireland, as is being done in other countries, such as Scotland.

Our fifth point was transport and infrastructure. We discussed the issue of underinvestment, especially in rural areas. Public infrastructure in Northern Ireland is completely inferior to that in the rest of the UK. For example, you cannot easily access one of our main airports by train. Many children are excluded from free public transport due to the rule about the distance from the nearest grammar school, even if they do not attend that grammar school. That means that many children do not use public transport.

Our sixth and final point was jobs. We discussed how our generation is at an extreme disadvantage. Due to COVID, many of us lack the vital work experience needed to secure a university place or job. Many children are expected to have extracurricular activities, such as music, even though those are a great expense that is not justifiable for every family. My group discussed how they felt that the minimum wage is too low for our age group and how some workplaces can exploit teenagers.

We appreciate the opportunity that the formation of the Youth Assembly gives to our generation and have every confidence that our concerns will be taken on board. Thank you all for your attention and time.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, I will open the Floor for other contributions. If you wish to speak, please rise in your place. When called to speak, please state your name before making your remarks, as there will be an Official Report of this plenary sitting. Again, I ask everyone to keep their remarks as brief as possible to allow for as many contributions as possible.

**Alannah Freaney:** I will try to keep my remarks short. I will draw the attention of the House to a few matters that are far too often neglected. Hello to those who do not know me. My name is Alannah Freaney, and I am from Derry/Londonderry. It is a pleasure to finally be here in person.

A matter that means a lot to me is that of jobs and work — part-time and full-time — for young people and, more specifically, the issue of minimum wage. For those who do not know, minimum wage for under-18s is currently £4.62. That is not even enough for a Big Mac meal, nor is it enough for a taxi to most places and nor is it a true representation of the value of a young person.

Let me give you the practical example of the number of hours that I would need to work to come here. The bus from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast costs £19.50, and I can times that by two, because I brought my mum. I had a bite to eat before coming here, so let us dedicate about a fiver to that — although it actually came to £12. It is likely that lots of people had to buy presentable clothes to wear, and let us say that it cost a tenner for that whole thing. That is £54, overall, meaning that I would have to work 11.68 hours just to be here today. That does not include the bus from the city centre or meals at and transport to my place of work.

That having been said, the main issue is not the figure or the fact that we cannot buy a Big Mac. The main issue is the value that it places on young people. I have worked in many places, but my first job was in a bar. I talked to some kitchen staff and told them my age, and they laughed in my face and said, “You will be sacked when you are 18”. That is when it clicked: I was cheap labour whom they could work to the bone, and, when I quit, another fresh-faced young person would take my place.

It is about worth. Why is a Big Mac worth more than me? We are not asking to be paid six-figure sums; we are just asking to be paid a respectful amount. Work, especially in hospitality, leaves an impact on a person. We invest time in our work, and it can exhaust us and sometimes scar us. This is not about us begging for

more money; it is about us begging for the end of our exploitation. That is just a single aspect of the topic of jobs that we are focusing on. That is why I encourage all of you to vote to make it one of our priorities. We always focus on education — rightly so — but what about the people who choose not to pursue education? Why neglect them? After all, there are 28,000 of us as of December 2020. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Alannah.

**Abbie McAtee:** Hi, I am Abbie. One of the issues that is really important to me is health. I know someone who is almost 14 and suffers from scoliosis. His back started curving when he was only a few days old. He is 13, coming 14 in March, and every day is really difficult. He has waited for surgery for such a long time. Waiting lists are a huge issue. His back curves 70 degrees one way and 80 degrees the other, yet he has been waiting for years. I want to know what more we can do to reduce waiting times.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Abbie.

**Oliver Mercer:** I am Oliver. The environment is crucial to all our futures. Did you know that it has been estimated that, if we do nothing about the environment, by the end of the century, we will have no suicides, healthcare and education will cost the Government nothing and cancer will have been fully eradicated? The price of all that will be the extinction of humans. We cannot waste our precious time waiting for our rise to power so that we can make a difference where the Government will not. We have to act now — now.

**Thomas Nelson-Killen:** I want to mention the jump that people had to make when going from GCSEs into A levels during lockdown. It is a big jump, and not many people have sat actual exams before, especially those who are in upper sixth now. It is a big issue that we are not being taught how to sit exams properly. We are going in to do full A levels at the end of the year not knowing anything about exam techniques or anything like that.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Thomas. Are there any other contributions? Members may have made their minds up about what topics they will vote for, so do not worry about that, if that is the case.

**Ollie Torney:** I want to talk briefly about discrimination in secondary schools. Many of us in this room are part of some form of minority group or part of a group that is often discriminated against. I cannot tell you how often I have heard passing remarks in the corridor about things like sexuality, race, gender and abilities. It simply is not acceptable that that form of bullying is tolerated in schools. It does not just come from pupils; it can come from ignorant teachers. We need to do more to protect those groups and make sure that they feel safe in a place where they are learning how to become functioning members of society.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you very much.

**Alannah Freaney:** I completely agree with that point. I think that we should have some kind of element in education to educate young people about what is appropriate and not appropriate behaviour and, by extension, what is an appropriate or an inappropriate relationship among young people. Young people can get into relationships at a very young age that can completely destroy them. Emotionally, they can have PTSD and things like that. We should have some sort of mandatory education to teach young boys and young girls about what healthy relationships and healthy behaviour are and about what is controlling and unhealthy.

11. 30 am

**Órla Lafferty:** Hi. I am Órla. It is very important to mention that we, as young people, have been kept in the dark about our education during this COVID time. We do not know what is going to determine our grades. I am going to university next year. I do not know what test is going to make up the grade that I need to get into that university. Last year, we were taking tests from Christmas and we were told that they would not count towards our A levels, but they determined part of my AS grade. It is unfair that we were not told at the start of the year how our grades are going to be determined. Thank you very much.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. Any further contributions?

**Dominic Bateson:** My name is Dominic Bateson. There should be more incentives for homes and businesses to implement renewable energy such as solar panels and geothermal heating. That could be accomplished through loans and grants from the Government.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you very much. I wonder whether you will all be as brief when you get into the role of Assembly Member for a wee while. We will see how that goes. Are there any further contributions?

**Hannah O'Connor:** I want to make a point about justice. I have found that young people's voices seem to come last in people's lives. Everyone else's rights come before ours. At the moment, we do not have much of a choice in our lives. It is great that we are able to do this now in order to try to make sure that everyone gets a say in their own life.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you very much, Hannah. That is very much in keeping with the whole ethos of this initiative.

**Robert Moore:** I will speak about climate change. It is quite important, especially with the COP26 negotiations that are going on right now and with the climate protests and demonstrations in Belfast city centre today.

Transport is one big way through which we could achieve net neutrality in our carbon emissions. Most of my family live in rural areas. The only bus that is accessible to them is a school bus. That is not acceptable. The nearest train station to me is 18 miles away, and, for many in Northern Ireland, their nearest station is much further away. We do not strategically plan how we put our buses and trains in motion. We also do not invest enough in electric and hydrogen buses. Only 50 have been ordered in the past five years. That is not acceptable.

**Grace McGouran:** I will speak for a moment about language. Although I do not speak Irish, I think that it is so important that an Irish language Act is passed. The people of this country deserve to speak their language. For many, it is their first language. There is a Welsh Language Act. Why do we not have an Irish language Act when Wales has a Welsh Language Act?

**David Anderson:** I will raise an issue that I do not think has been spoken about yet; the closest that we could relate it to is transport and infrastructure. It is to do with housing. We are still young — we have not considered moving out yet — but how often do we hear about young people leaving home, finishing school, going to university and buying a house? We do not really think about that. We might not have considered it, but most people whom I know who have finished university and education and have moved out to be independent end up renting. They cannot buy a house because it is not possible.

Our society is not really made to allow young people to buy a house, so they end up renting, but when they are renting, they are trapped in a cycle that means they will never be able to save enough to buy a house. We should focus on enabling young people to buy a house.

I study politics. One thing that we covered in classes is that one risk of people not owning property is that they do not feel valued by society, and if people do not feel valued by society, they think, "What's the point in helping or trusting the system?". If they are thinking that, that leads to chaos. We can look to history to see that.

**Tyler Large:** The biggest barrier to education for many parents of young people at secondary and primary schools is the price of transportation and school meals. If you are paying £5 every day for your child to have a meal at school, that adds up to £25 per five-day school week. Many parents just cannot afford that, especially when they have to pay for all the other school costs, such as school uniforms.

**Olivia Smith:** I would like to raise an issue that is sort of about education and sort of about finance, and it is student loans for students in Northern Ireland.

I do not know whether many people know this, but we are permitted a lot less money for our student loans than our counterparts in England and Wales. We are given about £3,000 less to survive at university. That is going to affect a lot of us next year — I am in my final year at the moment. Since a lot of us go abroad for university, we should talk about possibly increasing student loans and the rules under which they are given out, because the situation at the moment is not sustainable.

**Sarah Kelly:** There should be more education in schools on sexual assault. There should also be action against spiking drinks, which has now moved on to using needles. That is really important. It is also important that there be 24-hour transport. That would help with women's safety, especially at night, because you are relying on a sober driver, a taxi or an Uber or something like that, so you are more susceptible to danger. I would like 24-hour transport and would find 24-hour trains really helpful. It would also create many jobs.

**Kelly You:** Due to allergies, I have been in and out of hospital for appointments my entire life. The only appointments that you can get are during school times. Even with an appointment, you have to wait for four hours before getting in. Schools have attendance reports, and mine have not always been great. I have always been really hurt by that because I am missing my right to education as a result of something that I cannot change.

**Alannah Freaney:** I completely agree with the points on infrastructure. Changing it would greatly improve the safety of women. Our infrastructure, as far as trains and buses are concerned, is not up to scratch with that in England and Wales, and Europe, to be honest. We have one station in Derry/Londonderry, and if a train is 20 minutes late, that is just the way it is, whereas for some reason, everywhere else in the world that is unacceptable. Our infrastructure needs to be improved.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Alannah. Are there any further contributions?

**Martha Curran:** Education should be brought to the forefront of our work, because it would help to tackle quite a lot of the issues across the board that have been brought up today, such as climate change, identity and discrimination. Even teaching life skills from a young age, as well as how to pay taxes and manage yourself in the world, would greatly help.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you very much for that, Martha. Are there any further contributions?

**Aideen Gorman:** Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. Is mise Aideen Gorman. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am Aideen Gorman. Not enough is being done for students who are taught through the medium of Irish in primary school and who then have to go to an English-speaking secondary school. Thank you. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Speaker:** Go raibh maith agat, Aideen. Thank you very much for that contribution.

**Tiana O'Brian:** I would like to talk about rights and equality, primarily the age of criminal responsibility. The age of consent in Northern Ireland is 16 and the voting age is 18, but the age of criminal responsibility is only 10, which is two years younger than the age recommended by the UN. That is a really bad indiscretion, and it should be addressed.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Tiana.

**Oliver Mercer:** I would like to second the point on transport and how important it is to provide 24-hour transport across the country, especially in rural areas where people may be disadvantaged due to there being only one bus station every 10 miles and transport only every two hours. I have found myself in that situation, and I hope that it can be avoided in the future. Thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Oliver.

**Tyler Large:** I want to second the point on the voting age. I am 16 and am in an apprenticeship. Taxes come out of my wage, but I am not represented, because I cannot vote. That is taxation without representation, and that is not the way that it should be.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you for that, Tyler.

**Patrick Davis:** A number of people have already spoken about the Irish language, but I would like to expand the point to all languages and, indeed, humanities. In recent years, we have seen a large focus on STEM — science, technology, engineering and maths — but that has been at the expense of other equally important subjects. I would like to know what we could do to help to solve that problem. Thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you for that, Patrick.

**Hannah O'Connor:** I would like to second something that was mentioned earlier about safety and, by way of an advance on that, the safety of young people. Services should listen to the young person whom they are specifically talking to, because they know themselves best. If something has happened to them, they should definitely be listened to. If something has happened but the person is too scared to talk about it, they should know that at least one person is there for them. Thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** Hannah, thank you for that contribution.

**Olivia Smith:** I would like to second the point on a review of all languages and specifically how they are taught. Most of us are taught subjects set by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). There has been a lot of speculation about how difficult the language courses are, especially at A level.

The step from GCSE to A level through the CCEA board is incredibly difficult to make, which discourages a lot of Northern Irish teenagers from taking Irish, Spanish or French at A level. As we know, having languages is an incredible asset to increasing job opportunities, not only in Northern Ireland but outside Northern Ireland, if we want to travel. Changing the curriculum to make it a bit more adaptable between GCSE and A level to encourage more students to take languages at that higher level would be an incredible step to take. Thank you.

*11.45 am*

**Alannah Freaney:** I will expand on the previous point on languages. It should be compulsory for schools to teach sign language to pupils from a young age, even from first year. It is unfair that we cannot speak to those who cannot hear properly. There should be the option to learn either British sign language or Irish sign language, depending on the school, and, obviously, they would make that choice. Thank you.

**Robert Moore:** I will add to the point that Alannah made about transport. It is not just Derry that is left behind but many other towns and cities in Northern Ireland, such as Armagh, Omagh, Enniskillen, Newry, Banbridge and Downpatrick. Those were all major players in the transport network of Northern Ireland, and now they are left behind with a small intercity connection with a bus. A bus can hold only 56 people; a train can hold 100 plus. There is massive demand between those areas. Why are we not meeting it?

**Mr Speaker:** We have just under 10 minutes left in this discussion, before we move to the vote.

**David Anderson:** I want to make a point on infrastructure. I have been listening to what everyone has said, and I certainly agree that everyone knows that it is a serious issue. From listening to the debate, I feel that it is not so much that we are not doing enough but that the resources that we have are being terribly allocated. For example, I live in Ahoghill, a small village outside Ballymena. Not a lot of people live there, yet, when I go to school in the morning, three buses pass by within 20 minutes, whereas we have heard about people who have to get the bus to school, and there is maybe one bus every two hours. Surely it is a terrible way to run the system, if, for some people, there are buses sitting empty or with hardly anyone on them, and, for others, they are late for school if they miss the bus by one minute.

**Ronan Lynch:** I want to talk about support in schools for those with disabilities and special needs. My brother, Tinan, has autism and a lot of disabilities as well. Although he left secondary school in the summer, while he was there, he was disadvantaged not only by his disabilities but by a lack of support for them and for his special needs. We need to do more to make life easier for those who have already been disadvantaged by life.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Ronan, for that contribution on a very important issue.

**Oliver Mercer:** When it comes to health in schools, teachers are not aware of the different issues from which children suffer. I have type 1 diabetes, and, every day, when I need to do something related to that, I find that teachers do not know what is going on and cannot help me. I am fortunate to be in the position that I am OK, and I can do things by myself. However, I am friends with people who are not as fortunate as me in being in that situation, and their lives are made indescribably more difficult by the fact that teachers just do not know their issues or what to do.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Oliver. The next table is table 4.

**Hannah Abraham:** Hello. My name is Hannah. I want to expand on something that was mentioned by someone at table 8 and Alannah: train times. A lot of us are working — for example, yesterday I worked until 10.00 pm — and, for me, there are no buses or trains after 7.00 pm. Many of us who come back from work are susceptible to a lot of dangers, especially when it is that late at night. I sometimes come home at 11.00 pm and, although it gets busier around the weekends, if you live far away from work, it takes a long time to get home. Having no transport that late at night discourages people from working and makes things a lot more difficult for local businesses.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Hannah, for that contribution. Table 1.

**Gráinne Hanna:** My name is Gráinne Hanna, and I want to talk about mental health services in schools. It is important to voice that young people suffer severely with anxiety in school. Having a school counsellor who might come in once a week for a couple of hours is not good enough. My school has over 1,000 people, and I am sure that a lot of them would like to talk to a school counsellor. There is stigma surrounding mental health, and we need to do something to change that. Furthermore, our mental health services are severely overstretched, which means that appointments take place during school hours. However, to a young person who is suffering from mental health difficulties, missing school for an appointment might not be what is best for them. We need to offer more services for young people, such as a 24-hour support line.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you very much for that, Gráinne. Table 4.

**Ollie Torney:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is Ollie again. I second that point. The other day, my friend, whose dog had sadly passed away, had a politics assessment. They were feeling very panicked, so they went to the school nurse to tell them how they were stressed, but they were told, “School is not a place for your mental health”. Treatment like that is unacceptable, especially in an age when so much affects young people’s mental health negatively.

**Mr Speaker:** Ollie, thanks very much for that contribution. Table 1.

**Andrew Martin:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. My name is Andrew Martin and I am at Queen’s University Belfast. I want to highlight the skills of students who are moving to the mainland. There need to be incentives to encourage students to stay in Northern Ireland. I also highlight our extensive student fees — £4,000 — that people in Scotland do not have to pay and the huge amount of debt that I will end up with by the end of my degree as a result. Thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** OK, table two.

**Tyler Large:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is Tyler again. I second Ronan’s point on special educational needs in school. When I was younger, I was diagnosed with dyspraxia, which means that hand-eye coordination is affected by whatever links your brain and can get worse through time. When I was younger, all my teachers in primary school kept telling me how bad my handwriting was, and it was really taking an effect on me because I was behind. I only found out I had dyspraxia because my P4 teacher was given SENCO training, which meant that she could pick up on the signs of special educational needs. That is the only reason why I was diagnosed with dyspraxia. I knew that it was not just my handwriting; there are a lot more issues, such as problems with balance, that have affected my life. It would be good if more teachers were given special educational needs training so that they are able to pick up on problems that would otherwise go undiagnosed until later.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Tyler. Table 7.

**Jamie Brown:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. My name is Jamie Brown. I somewhat disagree with what has been said about mental health provision in schools. I have a mental health class, and, last week, we talked about eating disorders and different ways to cope with anxiety.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Jamie, for that. Alannah.

**Alannah Freaney:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Hello, it is Alannah again. I will expand on the mental health points. This is a Youth Assembly and its work will affect the young. However, adults should be educated on the differences between their generation and our generation. A lot of the time, when I talk about mental health, people just say, "There were not so many mental health issues when I was younger. You are making it up". The fact of the matter is that, when a lot of the older generation was younger, there were not the same kind of stresses. You could not bring your phone home with you. There were not as many exams and social media did not exist. Adults should be informed about that, rather than looking down at young people and saying, "You are doing it for attention. You are making it up".

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Alannah, for that. We have no further contributions. If Members are content, we will close the discussion on the issues.

## Vote on the Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly

**Mr Speaker:** It is now time for Members to vote to decide the issues that will form the basis of the establishment of the Youth Assembly's committees. There are ten issues on which to vote. The four issues that receive the highest numbers of votes will set the priorities of the committees. That means that, although a lot of issues that are important to you have been raised, you will prioritise your focus on four major topics.

Please begin the voting process as directed, and remember to apply the COVID regulations at all times.

*Youth Assembly Members voted.*

## Junior Ministers' Address

**Mr Speaker:** Members, we will now hear from the junior Ministers, Gary Middleton and Declan Kearney.

**Mr Middleton (junior Minister, The Executive Office):** Thanks, everyone, for coming along today. Obviously, I was very proud to listen and to hear everybody speak. I think that Members spoke very well, and I have to say that I am relieved that we are doing it in this format as opposed to a Question Time format, because I think that I would be in difficulties, given the number of issues that have been raised, the manner in which they have been raised and the topics. It is fantastic and very refreshing to hear a lot of the contributions that have been made. There is no doubt that it is more difficult because we are dealing with a pandemic at this time. There are a number of issues that we are dealing with in the Assembly, and many of those have been raised here today. I think that the way that you have conducted yourselves today is a credit to the Youth Assembly, to each and every one of you, and to your parents.

We have had to do things differently in the Assembly. We were forced into the 21st century because, while Assembly business is normally conducted in a very traditional way, we now have the ability to take part in proceedings remotely and to join our Committees remotely. I think that that is very welcome. It feeds in to a lot of flexibility, so that, if there are unforeseen circumstances, people can join proceedings remotely as opposed to having to attend physically. Of course, the pandemic, the Northern Ireland protocol and the climate crisis, which has been mentioned today, are all issues that we deal with and debate in the Assembly. All of you are very much getting an insight into the work of the Assembly and how the business is conducted.

You are also getting a close-up opportunity to see how we go about developing and implementing our policies here in Northern Ireland. You are getting an insight into the work of our Committees and, indeed, the work of the Departments as we continue to try to develop new legislation to address many of the issues that you have raised today. I think that the Youth Assembly is a fantastic mechanism for you not only to develop new leadership skills but to meet new people and to make friends. I have been encouraged at how open people have been. Probably most of you have met physically for the first time today, and how you have interacted and engaged with each other is a credit to each of you and is certainly a bright sign for the future.

I assure you that Declan and I will pass on the content of the debates and conversations here today to the rest of the Executive Ministers. Each and every issue that you raised is equally important, and I look forward to seeing the result of the vote. Whatever the result, I encourage you to keep raising the issues directly with your local representatives, including your MLAs.

*12.15 pm*

I sat at table 8, but I know that there is a diverse range of people at each and every table. I am encouraged to see people from every demographic and every geographic place right across Northern Ireland, particularly, of course, from the Foyle constituency. I am honoured to have been elected to represent the Foyle constituency as one of five MLAs. I hope and pray that there are people in the Great Hall today who will go on to represent their constituencies in the Assembly, whether they are Assembly Members or Ministers. Even if you do not do that, we have some very talented people here who will, no doubt, go on to do great things no matter what field they are in. That is fantastic, and I really wanted to say that.

As mentioned, all eyes this week have been on COP26 and what is happening in Glasgow. Of course, it is not just about what is happening in Glasgow. As mentioned, we have protests in Northern Ireland today at Belfast City Hall. It is important that people have their voices heard. That is how change comes about, and it is important that we, as elected representatives and Ministers, listen to those voices. Sometimes that can be uncomfortable, but we have to listen. That is democracy.

In closing, I thank each and every one of you for coming along. You have all done yourselves and your constituencies very proud. My door is very much open, and, no doubt, you will hear from junior Minister Kearney shortly that his door is also open. I put on record our thanks to the staff in the Assembly, the staff of the Youth Assembly and your top team, Mr Speaker. The meeting has been fantastic and encouraging. It is groundbreaking for Northern Ireland. It took us a bit of time to get here, but I hope that this is not the last Youth Assembly. It will not be, because so many people out there want to have their voices heard. Thank you very much.

**Mr Kearney (junior Minister, The Executive Office):** Gabhaim mo bhuíochas duit, a Cheann Comhairle, as ucht cuireadh a thabhairt domh bheith libh anseo ag Tionól na nÓg ar maidin. Thanks very much, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to attend and share some thoughts with the Youth Assembly this morning.

I will let you into a wee secret: I have been excited about this event all week. The Speaker will tell you that; I have spoken to him twice about it. It is, in fact, the highlight of my week, and I am really pleased to be here. I commend the Speaker and his office for enabling the Youth Assembly to convene this morning and for all the work that has been invested in putting the initiative together.

It is a great initiative that comes at a great time. I have been struck by the confidence with which every young person spoke this morning. I also detected a kindness and a fraternity. That was very uplifting to witness. Your contributions were really thoughtful. You hit all the bases and all the big-ticket items that affect your generation and that will affect future generations unless we get politics and society right for us all.

I want to say a couple of things that are largely about the concept of change and your role in affecting that change. My generation — your parents, grandparents and great-grandparents — lived through some really tough times. We lived through a society that was wracked by conflict and war. Thankfully and happily, we have left that behind us and are looking at a different place, space and future.

We came through those hard times with an awful lot of hope among all sections of the community, but there was very little opportunity. It was difficult to see how we could make that move forward. Today is different, and you are a testament to the difference that we can share as a society. What happened was that we made the unimaginable possible.

When I came into the Great Hall this morning, I reflected. Generally, like Gary, I just pass through this place on the way to Committees or to the Chamber, which is over here to the left, for debates and questions and so on, but there is an iconic moment that will always stay with me, and I go back to 2007-08. That was the moment when Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley — rest in peace both of them — came down the stairs here at the top of the Great Hall. You will probably have heard about that moment, read about it or seen it on television, but it was a really important moment as a turning point in our society, because all the commentators will tell us that they could never have imagined Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley coming together to share office as joint First Ministers in our power-sharing Government. It happened: what was perceived to be the unimaginable became the possible and the deliverable.

We are in a much better space today, but there is an awful lot more to do. You have touched on a number of the issues. We still have divisions in our society. We have to deal with sectarianism. We have to deal with racism. We have to deal with the fact that young people from different sexual orientations are not treated equally in our society. We need to make the North of Ireland a warm place for everybody, regardless of where you are from, whatever place you live in or where you came from. You might be from a family that has come from other places as migrants or refugees fleeing war, famine and pestilence. You may have lived here all your years. If you live here, you have entitlements, a right to be here and a right to be treated well. This initiative today goes a long way to underlining the importance of that.

Why do I mention the moment of Martin and Ian coming down the steps? There is a wee clue in what I say about the unimaginable. We can make the seemingly unimaginable possible, and we do that, as adults and younger people, by thinking big. The key to thinking big is never, ever to let your expectations, aspirations and ambitions be limited.

Change is happening all around us. We live in a very dynamic world and a very dynamic society. There are big discussions taking place about constitutional change on our island. There are important discussions taking place about health; mental health and well-being; public health; issues around rights; issues relating to women's reproductive health rights; issues pertaining to ensuring that every young person has access to

education; infrastructure; transport; and the importance of rurality and rural life and ensuring that people who live in rural areas are included in society. All those issues have been touched on by you today, and that is absolutely fantastic.

There is a lot happening regionally and nationally for us, but there are also big global challenges, and what inspires me about today's younger generation is your sense of appreciating that we live in a global village. We live on a vast planet, but, in reality, we have a real sensitivity and understanding of the key issues. The big issues of the moment are climate, hunger and tax justice across the world, and there are real challenges in places like Afghanistan, Yemen and Gaza in Palestine, where young people like you face massive challenges. That is all part of our world.

It is really important that, at an event like this, we appreciate the local but also think nationally and internationally and realise that we are global citizens. We might be British and Irish as we live here, but we are global citizens with a passport to the world. That is a really important development in today's society.

Politics is often described as a minority sport, which is probably true, but we need to understand that politics is not the only way to effect change. Democratic participation is absolutely key. This event, as a forum of democratic participation, is groundbreaking. I commend every single one of you for taking part in it.

Activism is really important too: political activism; social activism; community activism; and Greta Thunberg, the young people who marched and stood up in Glasgow yesterday, and the young people and older people who will march in Belfast today to take on the existential challenge that is facing every single one of us and future generations, which is to ensure that the planet does not burn up before our very eyes.

Never let your boundaries be challenged. Tá ról lárnach ag achan uile dhuine agaibh sa todhchaí. Is libh an todhchaí. You have a central role in the future, because you own the future. My modest advice to you is this: shape that future in your likeness, because you own the future. Always push the boundaries. Do not let your ambition and aspiration be limited by my expectations. Go beyond that and think bigger. Use your challenge function. Be optimistic, be happy, be positive, be hopeful and be ambitious.

President Barack Obama had a turn of phrase:

*"We are the ones we've been waiting for."*

I will amend that slightly: I believe that all of you are the people whom we have been waiting for. Míle buíochas daoibh go léir, agus ádh mór oraibh leis an Tionól. Enjoy the rest of your day and keep on doing this really important work.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the junior Ministers for their contributions.

## Result of the Vote on the Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly

**Mr Speaker:** It is now time to announce the outcome of the vote on the Youth Assembly's priority issues.

*The votes cast were as follows:*

1. Education	21.9%
2. Environment	14.7%
3. Rights and equality	14.0%
4. Health	13.7%
5. Jobs	11.0%
6. Transport/Infrastructure	8.4%
7. Justice	4.7%
8. Language	4.7%
9. Youth services	4.7%
10. Identity	2.2%

*The priority issues for the Youth Assembly are therefore resolved as being: Education; Environment; Rights and equality; and Health.*

**Mr Speaker:** The issues that you have selected will direct the establishment of the first policy committees of the Youth Assembly. Well done on your selections. Although you have identified those four priority issues, you will, of course, move on to work through other issues that you will all determine, collectively, in the time ahead.

## Concluding Remarks

**Mr Speaker:** The next item in the Order Paper is one that a lot of people look forward to: the end of the sitting. Thank you all, again, for coming here today. I offer my congratulations to you on making your mark and on exercising your mandate. I thank all those people who have made today possible. I thank all your friends and family members who came to share this historic occasion with you. I hope that they appreciate the work that you have put into it and the courage that you have shown by putting yourselves forward to be members of the Youth Assembly. There is a lot of work for you in the time ahead, but I have no doubt that, as you continue to shape the work of the Youth Assembly, you will get your personal and collective rewards and the appreciation of all of us.

We, in the Assembly, will continue to work with you. The setting of the Youth Assembly's agenda, as has been demonstrated today, is entirely in your hands. Do your work in the Youth Assembly; be proud to have been appointed to it; and do your best, working with your colleagues here and on behalf of the young people in the broader community.

We look forward to your coming together in committees and doing all the other work that our officials will continue to take you through. Give yourselves a big round of applause. *[Applause.]*

*Adjourned at 12.30 pm.*

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