



# Youth Assembly

For Northern Ireland

**OFFICIAL REPORT**

## **3rd sitting of the Youth Assembly**

At 11:30 am on Saturday 5 March 2022  
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)  
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)  
Gusmao Taraves, Angelina (Mid Ulster)  
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-James William (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)  
Mc Gouran, Grace (Strangford)  
McAlpine, Eoin (North Down)  
McArdle, Jessica-Elise (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)  
McAreavey, 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, Tom (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)  
Youll, Chloé (East Belfast)

# Contents

<b>Speaker's Welcome .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Report from Committee Rapporteurs .....</b>	<b>2</b>
Environment.....	2
Rights and Equality.....	3
Education.....	3
Health.....	4
Business Committee.....	4
<b>Programme for Government.....</b>	<b>15</b>
Education.....	16
Health.....	20
Environment.....	23
Rights and Equality.....	27
General Contributions.....	30



# Youth Assembly

Saturday 5 March 2022

*The Youth Assembly met at 11.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Speaker's Welcome

**Mr Speaker:** Good morning. You are all very welcome. Tá fáilte romhaibh uilig anseo. It is a great pleasure to welcome you all to the third plenary sitting of the Youth Assembly. It is the first sitting for which we have managed to get you all into the Chamber, so I hope that you enjoy the experience that that should afford you. You are now budding Assembly Members, so it should give you a sense of the atmosphere that you would be working in, within which MLAs have to work.

We have a lot of rules and regulations, but all of those are simply designed to make sure that the place runs efficiently, professionally and effectively and that Members can give their opinions during debates and can argue around whatever issue they want to argue about in a respectful manner, while respecting the rights of others to have an opinion that may not equate with their own.

Yesterday, we held our first meeting of the Women's Parliament. A lot of very important issues were raised that affect women in particular but which are the responsibility of all us in society to tackle and resolve. People spoke very passionately and robustly around some of the issues that they want to address and that they want an Assembly and a future Executive to address. That is very important, and that is why we are all here and why you are all here for the Youth Assembly. It is your opportunity to try to shape things in society, including government policies. Obviously, there are MLAs in all your constituencies, and there are up to eight political parties in the Assembly nowadays. That is all very good because it shows you diversity, a breadth of experience and all the rest of that.

I thank all of you for being here this morning. I thank everybody who has made this possible, from the Assembly Commission to our Youth Assembly team, which you have been working with in the past number of months, and all the staff members and officials here, including the Chief Executive, Lesley Hogg, who is sitting to my right. A lot of work has been put into the Youth Assembly, as I think you know and appreciate. More importantly, you are all here, despite your very busy lives. I am sure that there are a lot of other things that you would normally be doing on a Saturday, but, thankfully, you are here. I thank all the people who brought you here and made sure that you got here: got you out of bed, got you your breakfast and got you your clothes handed to you. I am sure that you were well looked after in your houses. It is great to have you here.

Before we start, I ask Members to stand for a moment or two in solidarity with the victims of the current war in Ukraine. If anybody does not want to stand, please remain comfortably in your seat.

*Members observed a period of silence.*

## Reports from Committee Rapporteurs

**Mr Speaker:** Item 2 in the Order Paper is reports from Committee rapporteurs. There will be a rapporteur from each of the four subject Committees and one from the Business Committee, which is a new addition to the Youth Assembly structure. The rapporteurs will speak on the work of their respective Committees and on the key focus of the work that they are involved in.

Each rapporteur will have five minutes to speak. I always remind Members that, when I say that they have five minutes in which to speak, that means that they have up to five minutes; it is not compulsory to take the full five minutes. You have up to five minutes, and can comfortably take up to five minutes, but I ask Members to respect the time limitations. That will make sure that as many Youth Assembly Members as possible can make contributions.

### Environment Committee

**John Kane:** Since our last plenary meeting in November 2021, the Environment Committee has met three times: on 7 December 2021, 19 January 2022 and 23 February 2022. At the first meeting, we met the Clerk, Peter Hall, to discuss our plans for the meetings ahead. We also discussed the role of Assembly Committees and the Committee Stage of Bills. During that meeting, we had an online tour of the Environment Committee's web page and the AIMS portal.

The Committee discussed the issues that members most wanted to consider in relation to the wider environment portfolio. The topics included a range of issues: transport, including the requirement for better infrastructure, the need for greater access for rural dwellers and young people, the electrification of public transport and cheaper travel for younger people; the use of renewable energy, including greater use of solar energy, greenhouse gases, climate change, rising sea levels and cleaning the oceans; and biodiversity, including the use of plastic, waste and littering, which includes issues around single-use plastics.

At its January meeting, the Committee voted on three key issues: how young people can tackle climate change in daily life, how they can encourage their peers and how lifestyle changes can help to tackle climate change. The majority vote was for raising awareness and incentivising individuals and communities to do their bit to tackle climate change. The Committee also agreed to endeavour to respond to current and live issues relating to the climate, keeping abreast of policy and legislative developments in the Assembly.

Our February meeting was mainly preparation for today. We were also briefed on the future Programme for Government and the motion for debate today, which is that the Youth Assembly support article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

I thank everyone for their attention and hope that I have provided a satisfactory synopsis of what our Committee has done since our last plenary meeting.

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

## Rights and Equality Committee

**Charlotte McGucken:** The Rights and Equality Committee has been brainstorming ideas that members feel are relevant and about which they are passionate. Some of those are: LGBTQIA rights and equality, women's rights, equality for people with disabilities, religious rights and the rights of children and young people.

Members voted to focus on enhancing knowledge to understand children's rights and ensure that they are applied. What would that look like? We want young people to be better educated about their rights and we want to provide guidance that every young person can access.

Young people's rights are being neglected across the world. We are seen as too young to be adults but too old to be children. Can you believe that action plans are made without input from the people whom they directly affect? As a result of that, children are not aware of their rights. We are not informed of the rules that are being imposed on us.

During meetings, members expressed their views about empowering young people. We want to give young people the tools to help them to find their voice. We feel that that is the best outcome, as members can still collaborate on different ideas, while working towards our end goal.

## Education

**Oliver Mercer:** The Education Committee voted on an area of focus for its work. Members decided to focus our attention primarily on curriculum and careers. Our work focuses on ensuring that our young people are prepared in school for life and work. During the three meetings that we have had to date, we discussed: the problems of our current examination system; ways that we could support young people who are struggling with exams and revision; and various Bills going through Stormont that are related to education, including Integrated Education Bill and the Education (Curriculum) (CPR and AED) Bill.

We have identified many problems with the current exam system. However, we did not stop there; we discussed possible solutions. We spent a lot of time discussing how tightly timed exams put excessive amounts of pressure on our young people; how exams have become a simple test of handwriting speed, rather than of understanding; how they value quantity over quality; and how the loosening of timings could help massively. Making sacrifices for your exams is no longer going the extra mile to get a good grade; it is expected, and now required, to pass. Now, we are left to wonder what else we must give after many of us have sacrificed our sleep and social life.

In addition, we discussed many options for how we could help young people with revision skills, exam technique and coping with the stresses and pressures of school and life. We even discussed trying to build our own resources or website to help people directly. Everyone on the Education Committee has had their own experience with exams, the curriculum and the careers system in their respective school. It is our intention to combine those experiences to create practical and useful resources from young people to support other young people.

Some of the legislation that we looked at included the Integrated Education Bill, which is a law that would have all newly created schools be given integrated status, meaning that they are required to have fair representation in the school from unionist and nationalist backgrounds. Another piece of legislation that we

looked at that was linked to the curriculum was the Education (Curriculum) (CPR and AED) Bill. That piece of legislation would amend the curriculum so that young people are taught life-saving skills, such as how to use defibrillators, which are referenced as AEDs, and treat strokes. That would take place in school lessons such as biology, so that they can take those skills with them into the real world and save real lives.

The Education Committee has been coming up with ideas to help young people to prosper and grow in the education system. By focusing our work on careers and curriculum, we feel most able to help with that goal.

## Health

**Kelly You:** Since the last plenary meeting, the Health Committee has had three meetings. During the first of those, we discussed the issues that we felt most strongly about. Those included a wide range of issues, such as waiting lists for treatment, organ donation, social care, long COVID, invisible health conditions and wider issues surrounding the topic of mental health. We were given resources in the form of research papers and debate records to further conduct our own research in preparation for our second meeting.

After having conducted that research, when we came back for our second meeting, every point that was mentioned seemed to revolve around the same issue: mental health. That is not to say that we felt disregard towards other points that were previously raised; we felt instead that, if we were able to better our capacity to deal with mental health, those other issues would, in tandem, improve. Everything seemed to relate back to our ability to deal with mental health. Some physical examples of that are the fact that many people are still suffering from the longer-term mental health effects of isolation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, evidenced by a heartbreaking letter that we received from a young person who is suffering from the effects of long COVID, which have prevented her from attending school and keeping up with sports and other activities.

Many people do not have a safe space in which to talk about their mental health, which is starting to take a toll on their physical health. Hospitals are already, clearly, severely understaffed, but particularly in the mental health departments. Mostly, we felt that there is no awareness of where people can get help in the first place. Many schools do not even have counsellors, and those that do have endless waiting lists. Outside of that, there are an overwhelming number of options that people are not made aware of. The likelihood is that, even if they are aware, people do not know whether those options are worth it.

The Health Committee for the Youth Assembly agreed, through discussion, that our plan is to change these circumstances by creating a mental health toolkit, and we will review mental health services to make sure that we are not promoting services that do not help.

*11.45 am*

## Business Committee

**Martha Curran:** At its most recent meeting, the Business Committee discussed a broad range of topics, not only requests that the Youth Assembly had received but our collective role as the newly appointed Business Committee for the Youth Assembly. We had a short discussion about how we would approach our task of filtering and accepting or declining requests from external bodies to the Youth Assembly. We concluded that we would meet for an hour prior to each drop-in session to filter through and delegate issues and requests.

A total of 14 requests were discussed, assigned or declined. Committee members expressed interest in the Department of Education's independent review of education in Northern Ireland; the review of the Chatbot on the Children's Law Society website to make it more user-friendly; the Department of Education's participation and decision-making project; the Queen's University, Belfast transport study; and correspondence from young people who were asking for input on young people's experience with long COVID. The NI Commissioner for Children and Young People asked for our input to its campaign to protect children from physical punishment. The Committee for the Economy approached us about a private Member's Bill regarding zero-hours contracts and their effect on young people. Finally, Trinity College Dublin expressed an interest in interviewing young people from the Good Friday Agreement generation as part of a research study. There was unanimous agreement that those eight requests were the most interesting and manageable for us to work on collectively as a Youth Assembly.

The six requests that we declined were the 'Linking Generations Northern Ireland' programme; the Commission for Victims and Survivors; the Department for Infrastructure, which approached us about inconsiderate pavement parking, and its equality impact assessment for the draft Budget; the Department of Finance, which asked for our input on the changes to marriage laws; and the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which asked for our input on 'Disability and Parliament'.

Those requests were declined on account of a lack of interest or, more commonly, the fact that we have to manage our workload and cannot oversubscribe ourselves. Now that we are up and running with our plan of approach, we will focus on filtering through further requests at our next meeting, and approaching these various issues either unanimously as a Youth Assembly or by offering them to one of the four Committees.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the Committee reports. Thank you for being succinct in your contributions. It means that we have around 45 minutes before we suspend for the lunchtime break.

Now that the rapporteurs have delivered their reports, I will open the Floor to allow as many Members as possible to have their say on what they heard. Members should keep their remarks as brief as they can to allow for as many contributions as possible, although without constraining yourself in making your point. Members should not talk over each other. However, I have not seen any evidence of that at all on the occasions that you have met since July, so thank you all for that discipline.

If Members want to speak, they should please rise in their places. That is what MLAs do to catch the eye of the Clerks so that they can inform the Speaker of who wants to speak. Members should stand briefly and sit again. It is a matter of catching the eye of the Clerks, who will notify me. That guarantees that Members who want to speak will have their name taken.

**Lauren Bond:** I am a member of the Education Committee. I do not know how to apply for university, write a personal statement or even fill in a résumé, but I can describe, in detail, the process of photosynthesis. I am clueless about finances, taxes and mortgages but can work out the area of a parallelogram in my sleep.

Is this really the best use of my time, force-feeding me information just so that I can regurgitate it in a test? What if schools taught to share, create, develop, design and innovate instead of how to solve for x? What if schools dealt with the what-ifs, the hows and whys, instead of, "How much of this essay can you write in the minimum time?"

I completely agree with the Education Committee's decision to review the curriculum, because the future scientists, designers and decision makers of the world are being taught to think just like everyone else.

The word “education” means to draw out. Each one of us has a gift that, if nurtured and encouraged, could discover the cure for cancer, the next sustainable fuel or even the next planet. Yet, instead, gifts are ignored, and students are judged purely by their scores.

Students may only make up a mere 20% of our population, but they make up 100% of our future.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Lauren. As I say, I am inviting Members to indicate whether they want to speak by rising in their place.

**Ollie Torney:** I would like to talk about the importance of the link between the focus of the Rights and Equality Committee and that of the Education Committee. The reason that there is so little knowledge about the rights of a child is that there are holes in the curriculum. There is a clear issue with that. We have classes that are supposed to teach us about life, so why are we not being taught the fundamental rights that we signed up to when we agreed to article 12? Young people are being undermined, and that is because they do not know their rights and how to use them.

**Oisín Clenaghan:** Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. Is mise Oisín. Thank you, Mr Speaker. My name is Oisín, and I am with the Education Committee. I would like to talk about timing conditions in examinations, as outlined by Oliver Mercer.

Timing conditions in examinations should be reconsidered because they cause too much stress. For example, for the religion A-level exam, six essays are supposed to be done in two hours, which is, I believe, completely unnecessary, and for the history A-level exam, you have two and a half hours for three essays and two source questions. As well as that, as a result of COVID-19, some people’s mental health is not the healthiest. Timed essays cause too much stress.

**Aaron Murphy:** I would like to add to the point about the curriculum but at primary level. In October 2002, Martin McGuinness told the Assembly that the 11-plus test would be abolished. He went to say:

*“The consultation has demonstrated consensus on the need for a common curriculum to age 14”. — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 18, p386, col 2].*

That did not last. Years of debate led to the test being reinstated, only this time it was far worse. Unduly influenced by elite schools and other vested interests, the resulting system was to see children as young as 10 faced with sitting five exams in schools to which they had never been, with teachers they had never met and with none of their friends around them. That created a suboptimal environment that heavily disadvantaged those who are economically disadvantaged and children with additional needs, present or underlying. I put it to you that parents and children should have had a greater say in the development and outcomes of that system, like elite schools and their boards had.

**Mr Speaker:** Next to speak is the young woman in the corner — in the back row. Over there is what we call the naughty corner, by the way. *[Laughter.]*

**Grace McGouran:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. The Education Committee’s idea to improve the curriculum is a really good one. On improving the curriculum, maybe the Environment Committee and the Education Committee could work together on the inclusion of more education on climate change and sustainability, as that would have a big, long-term impact. At the end of the day, education is the

start of change. To sum up: the Education Committee and the Environment Committee should meet and work together to talk about that further.

**Oliver Mercer:** I want to point out to everybody that children have been affected by COVID more than perhaps any of us can imagine. There are children who missed years 1 and 2 at primary school. Can you imagine how essential learning to read is in order to carry on your education? They were never sufficiently taught to read and write, and they are expected to continue their education as if nothing happened. How can we let that stand?

**Alannah Freaney:** I will comment quickly on the Education Committee. Not only is the curriculum insufficient, but its application is insufficient. Along with important life skills, things such as the dangers of drug use and smoking are meant to be taught in learning for life and work (LLW), but they are simply not. Teachers have not been specifically allocated to and trained for LLW. Perhaps the way to move forward is to have a teacher who is dedicated to LLW, rather than a teacher of another subject teaching the class.

**Hannah O'Connor:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I want to add to what the Health Committee is focusing on. It is really important that mental health is focused on, and that can connect to the Rights and Equality Committee, because, even when you find services, there are long waiting lists, and the rights of the child and our rights to get help are not always fully listened to. It is a very important topic to focus on so that everyone can get the help that they need and to which they have the right.

**Jenna McLaughlin:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. There are certain subjects that you are introduced to only at GCSE level, like health and social care etc. I hoped that we would be able to get more preparation — for example, on a certain day through a careers or LLW lesson — that would touch on what we would cover in those subjects, especially for health and social care, as I said. The preparation would cover certain topics that we would not really understand if we were only being thrown in at year 11, with no idea of what it was. Otherwise, we are deciding to choose the subject because we like the sound of it but with absolutely no idea exactly what we are doing.

**Patrick Davis:** I am with the Health Committee. I want to pick up on the Education (Curriculum) (CPR and AED) Bill that was mentioned in the Education Committee's report. My fellow Health Committee members will know that I feel very strongly about that. I will share why. A few weeks ago, a member of my year at school suffered a cardiac arrest. He would not be alive today had one of his peers not undergone that short but essential training to know what to do between that event happening and the ambulance arriving.

As I said, those skills can be taught in a really short time and are vital. I know that, if I asked today, the majority of people in the Chamber would say that they possess those skills, but the fact that it would not be everyone is an absolute travesty in our education.

**Robert Moore:** I am with the Environment Committee. The Executive have budgetary problems at the moment, especially with the withdrawal of EU funding and the cutting of funding by the UK Government. In addition, the move away from road transport will take away road, car and fuel tax, VAT and things like that. We should reconsider spending, because we are throwing money at different projects, they are not working, and we are blaming it on the way that they were built, done or run. We need to spend it right. Spending money right and throwing money at something are very different things. You can spend less money on something, and it will work, but, if you just throw money at it and set up a Standing Committee, it is rushed. Spending money right can save money, save lives and save the planet.

12.00 noon

**Clodagh McAuley:** I am on the Health Committee but I want to comment on an issue from the Education Committee. Many countries teach languages from P1, which means that pupils from those countries are more likely to be bilingual. However, most post-primary schools here only pick up languages in first year, so pupils here are much less likely to become bilingual or have the language skills that can lead to more job opportunities.

**Olivia Smith:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I want to stress the central and crucial importance of the opportunity for cooperation between Youth Assembly Environment Committee members and our Assembly counterparts. We must recognise that significant provisions must be made to protect the long-term future of young people under the climate legislation that is progressing in the Assembly. As Lauren mentioned earlier, young people contribute 100% to our future and we must work now to ensure that the well-being and prosperity of young people can be protected in a constantly changing world.

**Caolán Gregory:** I want to reiterate Kelly's point about long COVID. I have suffered from long COVID over the past two years and every waking moment is hell. I had to force myself every day to go to school to finish my GCSEs and I have received absolutely zero help from the Government and the NHS. At every visit to the hospital or to the doctor, I was told that I was just depressed and that it would disappear. Even then, I was given no help by mental health services. Just this morning, I was so tired and in so much pain that I reconsidered coming here today, but I thought that I should come anyway and discuss the matter. I have been on a waiting list for three months and I am still waiting to see more doctors. Every doctor I have seen has absolutely no idea what is wrong with me, and it has affected my life so badly that I cannot even finish my A levels.

**Rebecca Moore:** I am a member of the Education Committee. On the topic of careers, careers workshops should be introduced in schools from first year. It is essential that children gain a knowledge of the jobs that will be available to them in future. When I picked my GCSEs, I did not have a clue what I wanted to do and even picking my A levels was quite a stressful time. I still do not know what I want to do, so it would be incredibly useful to have some sort of workshop from the beginning at school in order to help kids to decide.

**Mr Speaker:** Alannah, are you back up again? Go ahead.

**Alannah Freaney:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I want to comment very quickly on an Environment Committee issue. We should look at incentivising young people – everyone else for that matter – to use public transport rather than their cars, thereby reducing emissions. It would be helpful to do the little things rather than focus too much on the bigger picture. Even if we do it one step at a time, and present it in that way, it would encourage more people to use public transport rather than their cars.

**Grace Flanagan:** I sit on the Environment Committee. I want to stress the importance of a link between the Environment Committee and the Education Committee. Proper education in schools on climate change can ultimately help children to become aware of problems associated with climate change in their community and alert them to small ways in which, in their family and community, they can help to make a difference to climate change.

**Robert Moore:** I will touch on education this time. In the middle of February, I picked my GCSEs. I was off school at mid-term, so I could not go to my careers teacher for advice on which subjects to pick. We had to pick them by intuition. We were not even given advice on what career links the subjects could have. There

was no preparation. I did not even know what was going to be in the options booklet. I did not have a clue. It is not fair on anybody to be left without a clue. We were told to do our own research, but careers teachers are trained for that. They are trained to help you make that decision. Pupils should not have to do everything by themselves when picking their subjects. In a way, they should, but not totally 100% by themselves. That is all I have to say about that.

**Mr Speaker:** Where are we going next? We need to see some hands up now. Do not be too shy.

**Andrew Martin:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I understand that two climate change Bills are going through the Assembly. There is time pressure, at the end of the mandate, but it is vital that at least one of them gets through. I am of the view that we should focus on one Bill, with a further focus on how we will achieve its goals. The goals must be realistic and recognise the special and important role that agriculture plays in our economy.

**Mr Speaker.** The environment is a very topical issue. There have been two climate change Bills. Over the next three weeks, it will be interesting to see what happens as a result of the debate in the Assembly, which, I can tell you, has been intense. There have been several days of debates on those Bills. The issues are very important, and they are getting the attention that they deserve.

**Kelly You:** I want to touch on picking GCSE subjects and the fact that every school does different GCSEs. Which school you get into depends on the result of your AQE test, which means that a lot of your future depends on a test that you take at the age of 10. That is extremely unfair, because so much growth happens during your time at secondary school. Obviously, you can switch schools, but that is difficult to do. It is unfair that so much depends on how you deal with pressure at such a young age.

**Mr Speaker:** There is a young man at the back who has been anxious to get up for the past couple of minutes. Well done.

**Jonathan Lennox:** I am part of the Rights and Equality Committee. I want to emphasise mental health, which Kelly addressed. I am not sure whether anyone in the Chamber agrees, but, at my school, a designated councillor is not available. We have had one in previous years, but that provision has faded away. Pupils will therefore feel that they are not valued in school. That needs to be addressed a bit more, because, if pupils do not feel valued, they will not feel part of the school.

Mental health is not taken 100% seriously in schools. That could overlap with the Education Committee side of things, because pupils are not being educated fully on the matter. The newly introduced amber flag is another thing. It is only in schools in England. It is a flag that shows that mental health is supported in the school. None has been introduced in a Northern Ireland school; they are all in England.

**Jamie Brown:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. My input is to the Education Committee to stress the need to have a main careers teacher who can give information on careers.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Jamie. That was a very succinct but well-made point.

**Rebecca Moore:** I would add to what Kelly said about exams causing a lot of stress, especially to younger students who are sitting their transfer tests. It would be far more beneficial to have their progress monitored throughout the seven years that they are at primary school.

As someone mentioned earlier, why should 11-year-olds have to go into exam rooms in schools that they have never been to and with teachers they have never seen? Why should they have to go into those schools and sit two or three exams that will define what schools they will end up in and, ultimately, what GCSEs and A levels they will sit?

**Jessica-Elise McArdle:** I am a member of the Education Committee. I propose that all our schools should have classes to teach our younger generation the key skills surrounding relationships, parental guidance and how to finance and run a home. I strongly suggest that that be added to our teaching curriculum. Through my research, I have found that problems in those areas can contribute to mental health issues in young adults. It would make a great change to our future.

**Aaron Murphy:** I will touch on options for GCSEs. I have had an employability class for the whole of my third year. The teacher has only been in twice this year, at the start of September. I have picked my GCSEs without any real help. I understand that, because I attend a Catholic school, I have to take a mandatory GCSE in religion, but I do not understand why I have to take a mandatory GCSE in English literature. It does not make sense to me. With the limited choices and having to take that GCSE in English literature, I found it very tough to choose the subjects that I wanted to take.

**Oisín Clenaghan:** Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. I am with the Education Committee. It should be mandatory for every school in the North to have a careers adviser. I understand that, like me, many students have teachers for careers, but there should always be extra help. In my school, we have a careers adviser. Without the help of that careers adviser, I would not have been able to make many of my choices for university.

**David Anderson:** I am on the Environment Committee, but I will make a point about the Education Committee and its focus on careers advice. I will address the different paths to work and what we are told about them.

I am in my final year of school. I have done some research in the past year or so about different paths to work. Throughout my seven years at my secondary schools, I have been primarily told, or all that I have heard, in my careers classes is that there is one real path to work. That is university. You go to university, get a degree and get a job. I am not saying that university is a bad thing. Many people get university degrees and go on to work in excellent jobs, but there are many more paths. Not everyone is cut out for university but they very rarely hear about the different paths. There are apprenticeships, higher-level apprenticeships and internships. Some people go into trades to learn work and some can just go straight into work. We very rarely hear about those different paths to get into work or a career. We should certainly be taught in schools that it is not just university that is available; there are a lot of different ways.

12.15 pm

**Grace Flanagan:** I would like to touch on the importance of religious equality, as mentioned by the Rights and Equality Committee. Achieving religious equality in Northern Ireland is essential to help maintain a more inclusive society.

**Mr Speaker:** I will go to this young man again. You are popular this morning.

**Robert Moore:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. You will be sick of me up here. *[Laughter.]* Two climate change Bills are going through the Assembly at the moment — the Executive Bill and the private Member's Bill — and

that is slowing down the process, even that involving more important legislation in different areas. When two pieces of legislation are going through, that will obviously slow down the process because you will have to take double the time to look at two Bills. If you were able to merge the Bills, take provisions out of one, merge them with the other and create a sort of super Bill, that would maybe make both sides happy and achieve a better outcome. You could even give that Bill accelerated passage, because it is a massively important issue that concerns the future and stability of Northern Ireland. Frankly, it should be given accelerated passage.

**Mr Speaker:** I will comment on that issue, given that it has gained public attention, which is fair enough and appropriate in light of the importance of the issue. The two Bills are going through the House, and this incoming week will be very important, whether or not one Bill takes prominence over the other. The Members have to decide, and the Members are deciding.

At some of the amending stages, as we call them, over 100 amendments were tabled, and, sometimes, up to 70 amendments have been debated and decided upon. There is a lot of mix and match between one Bill and the other. Members will have the time, but the time is being taken, duly and appropriately in my view, by Assembly Members. There are many views on these matters and many consequences resulting from the decisions that Members take. They have to take all that on board very seriously, including worries about agriculture, other forms of emission and so on.

All that I can say to you, to give you some confidence, is that there are two Bills, and that is OK technically and procedurally. It is a bit challenging, but, nevertheless, the issues are important, and Members know that. I commend Members for taking the necessary time to go through those Bills. They are doing that step by step, and we will have an outcome on those Bills in the next couple of weeks.

Thank you for your comments on that.

**Grace McGouran:** I would like to speak about the issue of exam timetabling and the need for correspondence between exam boards. For example, I do four A levels, and three of the A-level exams are on the same day, resulting in over five hours of A-level exams in one day, each one on a different subject. That causes a lot of excess stress, and I do not think that it is acceptable. That is a common issue for many A-level students who do subjects outside of CCEA, such as sociology, which is not even offered by CCEA. That needs to be resolved by better exam timetabling and communication.

**Jessica-Elise McArdle:** I would like to touch on the pressure of education. I have only had one full year of secondary education — that was in first year — and the last exam that I did was the 11-plus. This year, I am expected to sit all my GCSEs in May and June and know how to revise for them, but I have not had those years of education.

**Olivia Smith:** I would like to talk about rights and equality and the priority of letting children know their rights. The UNCRC outlines that young people are entitled to a voice, yet, in Northern Ireland, school councils are often rendered powerless and voiceless. My own school violates the UNCRC by not having a school council. I have tried to set up a school council, yet, due to the lack of support that I have received, I doubt that my efforts will amount to anything before I leave in June.

Northern Irish children need to have their voices heard, and that is why mandatory school councils should be enforced.

**Katie Woods:** I am a member of the Education Committee. I want to go back to what Oliver said earlier about the pressure of exams. Some of my exams are not based on coursework, which means that the only way that I can get a result is through the one exam that I will sit in May. If someone is having a bad day and is forced to sit the exam, they might mess it up. Courses should not just come down to one test on one day: they should be spread out, whether by tests throughout the year or coursework to back up a test.

**Martha Curran:** I want to touch on some of the issues that have been raised today. I want to express my full support for the independent review of education and the overall curriculum in Northern Ireland. Many of the issues that have been brought up today, such as defibrillator training, comprehensive careers teaching, life skills, including how to pay taxes and get a mortgage, and first aid training could be incorporated into the overall review and could be taught as part of the subjects that are compulsory to study up to third year in school. That would mean that even people who leave school in fifth year after their GCSEs, if they choose not to stay on for A levels, are equipped with the skills to support themselves in the “real world”, for want of a better term.

**Mr Speaker:** Are there any Members who have not spoken yet? We are about to come to the magic hour of 12:30 pm. I want to make sure that anyone who has not contributed and wishes to do so gets the opportunity.

**Micah Mitchell:** I am a member of the Education Committee. I want to touch on the lack of support for those young people who have been home-schooled and who want to continue with their GCSEs in college. There is a lack of government support for young people at home. I know from personal experience, as do many people whom I know, that it is a struggle to get into college to do GCSEs. We have been scoffed at because of the curriculum that we have chosen at home. It is a big struggle for those who have been home-schooled.

**John Kane:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I believe that education on the environment should be mandatory for all school years and not just for those who are taking GCSE geography. Everyone should have the same level of information on this critical issue.

**Oliver Mercer:** I want to point out that health systems in schools are woefully inadequate. I know that from experience because we had a nurse in my school until recently, when she retired. Her replacement works part-time and goes home at 1:30 pm. If you plan on having a medical emergency after lunch, you will just have to wait.

**Caolán Gregory:** I wanted to quickly mention the fact that gay conversion therapy is still legal and still exists in Northern Ireland. Many young people are still being sent to it. When the Health Minister was asked to comment on the issue, he said that he was too busy with COVID to make it illegal.

**Coran Morris:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I want to add to what Alannah said earlier about public transport incentives. I believe that the public can be given incentives for recycling a certain amount of items, which could be money in hand or discounts in local shops. That would not only boost people’s motivation to visit recycling centres but to support their local shops and boost the local economy.

**Alannah Freaney:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I want to make two wee quick points. The Rights and Equality Committee could definitely collaborate with the Education Committee on a new element of the curriculum on managing relationships.

On Caolán's point about gay conversion therapy, that is obviously very relevant to our Committee, and it is something on which we could definitely collaborate and start some kind of project.

**Mr Speaker:** You are chancing your arm today, Robert, but, anyway, you are up. Go ahead.

**Robert Moore:** Thank you for letting me speak again. I want to talk about the state of public transport in Northern Ireland, which is absolutely abysmal, even compared with that in England. I live in Keady, which is 10 minutes from Armagh, but the nearest railway station to it is in Portadown. From where I live, I have to get two separate buses to get to Portadown. Funnily enough, I used to live beside a railway station in Keady. There was a railway running through my town. That was all destroyed in favour of roads and cars. Now we are feeling the pinch because of that. We are feeling the effects, because we have not invested properly in our railway system and our public transport system.

Northern Ireland Railways did not get proper funding until 2001 and was "chronically underfunded". That is how it was put: chronically underfunded. There is — what would you say? — an apartheid in public transport. The railway station in Derry is probably the only one in the west or north-west of Northern Ireland. That is a disgrace, because it leaves hundreds of thousands of people disconnected from the national public transport network. The buses provided are too infrequent and are too small to carry the loads that they need to.

There has been investment in the wrong places, as I said. If a railway was there, people would use it; it is not that they would not do so. That is all that I have to say. Again, thank you for letting me speak again.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. You will know that, given the number of MLAs from rural constituencies, matters affecting the rural community generate a considerable amount of debate and questions to Ministers. If you follow the proceedings, you will see that they are given a lot of prominence, and rightly so, in discussions.

**Oisín Clenaghan:** On that point, I would like to add that trains should run much later. It is ridiculous that you cannot get a train in Belfast after about 11.30 pm. It is especially dangerous for young women who cannot get a lift after that time. That should be fixed.

**Patrick Davis:** The Health Committee has chosen to address, or at least try to address, the issue of mental health. When we look at the proposals set out by the Education Committee regarding exam stress, we have to recognise that, in recent years, the associated anxiety about exams has skyrocketed. You even see it in 10-year-olds who are sitting the AQE. I volunteered at the time of the AQE exams to help guide cars into my school's car park, and the number of children I saw crying before going into those exams was shocking. Surely there is no world in which that is fair and OK.

We cannot address the issue of mental health before we have addressed the root causes of the problem.

**Clodagh McAuley:** I want to touch on the lack of carers in the NHS. My granda had to wait three months for a care package, and, in that time, he really needed one. When he got the care package, there were so many carers who, through no fault of their own, did not show up, either because they had so many things to do beforehand or because they did not have the time as their shift had already ended. We need to do something about that, because it is unacceptable.

*12.30 pm*

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

Nobody is jumping up on their seat. I do not want to look over to that corner again, for now. *[Laughter.]*  
Nobody is indicating that they want to speak, so that concludes the discussion on the work of the Committees.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.*

2.00 pm

On resuming —

## Programme for Government

**Mr Speaker:** I hope that you enjoyed this morning's session and that you enjoyed your lunch. Without further ado, we will kick off the second session.

You have discussed in your Committee sessions over the past weeks what the Programme for Government is, what it is for and how important it is. This session will give you the opportunity to make clear what your views are as young people and that those views must be a key part of the Programme for Government. That is essential, as outlined by article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

During the debate, you can make your views known on each of the subject areas covered by the Youth Assembly Committees. To help the debate, the contributions will be grouped to cover the core themes of education, environment, health, rights and equality, and there will then be more general contributions. Each group will be highlighted in turn, so that what is being discussed is clear.

An Official Report of today's sitting will be published. That is why we ask you to put your name on the record. In due course, reports of the Youth Assembly will become historical public documents. It is good to remember that, in future, you will always be able to say, and historians will be able to say, "This was raised by the Youth Assembly on that date by that person" and so forth.

It is important that the debate be recorded, and the report will be given to the Executive Office after a new Executive is formed following the upcoming elections. It is important that you make your point, argue your case and put your views firmly on the table. We will forward the Official Report of today's session to the Executive to inform their discussions.

If that is clear, we will move on.

*Moved —*

*That the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly supports article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and that their views should be given due weight, and calls on all future Executives to have regard to article 12 and to consult with, and take on board the views of, young people and the Youth Assembly in all aspects of their work, including when preparing future Programmes for Government.*

**Mr Speaker:** The same rules apply as for this morning. Rise in your place to let us know that you want to make a contribution. Do not be shrinking violets. We had 39 contributions this morning, which was brilliant. It is important that we have a spread of opinion, so let us have it. If needs be, I will call on our two stalwarts, Robert and Alannah. *[Laughter.]*

## Education

**Adam Hutchinson:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. On education, I believe that some parts of the curriculum are still motivated by the old religious divide, especially compulsory religious education, which is mandatory at GCSE. How can you compare RE to maths and English, two essential subjects, and still force pupils to do RE? They do not compare at all. We should get rid of the compulsory element and allow people to choose RE if they want, as is the case with history or geography, and make it more of a fair subject.

**Lauren Bond:** I am a member of the Education Committee. Is it time that the Government include young people when preparing future Programmes for Government? Absolutely. For too long, the Government have experimented with our future. For too long, we have been disdained and disparaged and our views have been disregarded. Our education system has us on our knees, because, in the last century, it has refused to change, refused to evolve with the times and refused to prepare us for our future. This ancient institution has outlived its usefulness.

At school, you are told to sit, be quiet and get on with your work, which is perfect for a 20<sup>th</sup> century job on an assembly line. What you are taught in school is the opposite of what it takes to be successful. You have to take tests by yourself, with no collaboration or asking for help: that is cheating.

In life, you have to make mistakes, yet schools punish you for that. That criminal system paralyses our spirit. We cannot share, create or learn from our mistakes. Instead, you have hundreds of kids chasing the one right answer, and there is never one right answer to a problem, although maybe there was 100 years ago.

Curriculums are made by policymakers, most of whom have never taught a day in their life. Who cares what you know or whether you have memorised a fact? We have Google and Siri for that.

The motion has my full support, because how are we supposed to have a future when we are taught to live in the past? Is school just a game to see how many A grades you can collect? If schools teach us today the way that they did yesterday, they rob us of our tomorrow.

**Oliver Mercer:** The way that schools are set up means that children today are too scared to be wrong, and you cannot learn without being wrong. Honestly, being wrong should be encouraged. The Government need to seriously rethink how their education policies actually affect the real people who are involved. We cannot afford to wait until we are the ones who are in government so that we can make the change, because there will be so many more generations between now and then that will lose their lives.

**Fionn Cregan:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I will bring up what was mentioned in the previous session about education on different life skills, students' rights and/or what students are entitled to know about themselves. Furthermore, it is vital that, as young people, we learn about our rights. While some schools provide certain classes and education about those different types of things, it is too scarce for it to be acceptable across our entire community of Northern Ireland.

**Jenna McLaughlin:** I will cover the subject of having to learn unnecessary topics in school, like point, evidence and explanation (PEA) paragraphs in English or learning Pythagoras' theorem in maths. Unless I need those things to become a teacher, I do not think that it is necessary to learn them. Obviously, it is important, but I do not think that it is that important, if I am not considering going down that career path. In

addition, we should have the option to sign up for certain subjects that we can do instead of subjects such as double-award science rather than being nominated to go into them.

**Jamie Brown:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I will talk about the religious education curriculum. I have done three years of religious education, and it is only this week that I learned about a new religion. For too long, we have been stuck in one area. We need to expand our horizons in religious education.

**Rebecca Moore:** I am a member the Education Committee. I will expand on what Oliver said. I believe that the reason that people cheat is because they do not want to fail a class. Without failure, how will anyone learn in life? In addition, when you get into the work world and you are not in school anymore, there are positions of hierarchy. Even in jobs, you work your way up. People will, inevitably, make mistakes. That is why I have a strong opinion that we should have more coursework rather than exams in school, because someone could just have an off day.

**Robert Moore:** I will expand on Jamie's point. He said that he had received religious education in his school for the past three years. I have received religious education since I started primary school. Jamie also said that it was last week that he learned about traditions in another religion. It was only this week for me, and I am older than he is. That is not right.

On choice, religion is compulsory in my school for GCSE. I could have picked geography, which could have gotten me further than religious education, but I had to pick it because I went to a Catholic school. That is taking opportunities and choices away from people who will sit their exams and work hard at what they want to do in their lives. They cannot get that choice. That is awful.

**Olivia Smith:** The discontent that has been expressed by our Members today about the RE curriculum calls for a reconsideration of the bible instruction that is enforced in our secondary schools in Northern Ireland.

**Patrick Davis:** It has been quite interesting to hear the discussions on the RE curriculum, because my school takes a very different approach. It made sure that we studied different religions from the start.

One thing that I can draw a parallel on between all the contributions is that there are very limited cross-community initiatives. Shared education does not go far enough. At no stage during normal 9.00 am to 3.00 pm education have we really looked in depth at the beliefs of those in the Catholic Church, the differences between it and the Protestant Churches and vice versa. That has meant that we do not have the level of understanding we would perhaps like to have of the other, equally important, members of our community. The only way that we can move forward from the past is through increased education on our differences and similarities.

**Alannah Lamont:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. Children in schools are praised for being good at a subject. The children who struggle are always put down and told that they need to try harder, but they really just need help in that subject.

**Aaron Murphy:** There are not nearly enough practical implications for the subjects that we learn in school. Sure, in English, I could study Shakespeare all I want, but, unless I want to be a writer or a poet, I will never really use that. It is the same for maths. If I do not want to be an engineer, when will I ever need to use Pythagoras' theorem? We are not doing enough things to incorporate real-life scenarios into our education system.

**Oisín Clenaghan:** Due to COVID, all courses should be shortened. Many courses have been shortened, but not enough. It is unfair that students should be required to know 80% of their courses if they have been off with COVID. The pandemic has been going on for around two years. I find that completely unfair.

**Fionn Cregan:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I will further Alannah's point. There is too much emphasis on, and praise given to, students who excel in subjects such as STEM subjects, but there is not enough emphasis on, or praise given to, students who are not as good or the best at those subjects.

Schools put too much pressure on students to do well in STEM subjects, but there is not as much emphasis on conventional things like learning a language or, in many schools, learning for life and work (LLW) or business studies. There is nothing wrong with STEM. It is very important regardless of what background you come from, and it is the future of our education, but schools, especially my school, favour students who excel in those subjects over other students in the school.

*2.15 pm*

**Clodagh McAuley:** There is not enough focus on the arts in schools. Personally, I was not exposed to drama until third year, and, when I was, that really helped me with my confidence in speaking. If it was not for drama, I probably would not be here right now; I would be in my room. I would not be able to speak. It has really helped with my confidence. We should have more of that. There should be more focus on the arts subjects, as well as STEM.

**Grace Flanagan:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I want to touch on the importance of a re-evaluation of the 11-plus and transfer test system. It is unfair to have children involved at such a young age in a test that decides such an important part of their future, and that can cause untold stress to children.

**Oliver Mercer:** Especially in controversial subjects, so to speak, that deal with difficult issues, such as RE at GCSE, which has an ethics module, a lot of teaching is tainted by the teacher's personal view. I raised that with my parents, and they told me, "Oh well, it is hard to teach without putting your personal view across", but that is what teaching is. I do not see why it being difficult is a fair justification for biased teaching. That is their job, and they should be held accountable.

**Grace McGouran:** I touched on this in the earlier session, but I would like to further stress the importance of better exam timetabling and the need for correspondence between exam boards in order to prevent students having to sit up to three A-level exams in one day. That causes a lot of stress, simply due to poor timetabling, and could so easily be avoided. That increases pressure and negatively impacts students' performance as, by the time it comes to 3.00 pm and they are sitting their third A level, they will be more fatigued and will not perform as well as those who only have one exam that day.

**Oran Clarke:** On Tuesday morning, my uncle prematurely and suddenly passed due to a heart complication. I would like to offer my support for the Education (Curriculum) (CPR and AED) Bill, and I urge Members of the Assembly to support that Bill. It will save lives.

**Charlotte McGucken:** I want to make the point that all Members' views are equally valid. I believe that we, as an Assembly, should demonstrate that and be an example to society so that, hopefully, a Christian viewpoint will have the same opportunity to be heard as every other viewpoint.

Today's society is rapidly changing, with many new ideas and concepts coming through. A lot of them are a challenge to those of us who hold Christian beliefs. It can be difficult to not always agree with others' choices, but we have a responsibility to treat each other with respect and consideration. It is not always necessary to follow the crowd or adopt the latest popular opinion, but we need to be able to live freely according to our personal beliefs. Ultimately, what view an individual holds, provided that it is within the law, is their decision.

**Olivia Smith:** The independent review of education and the forthcoming Programme for Government must take into consideration the opinions that have been expressed by our Members today. The discontentment that has, evidently, been seen signals a failure by our education system to suitably adapt to the needs of this generation's young people. Our education should not demoralise us. It should not place us in opposition with one another, as so many of us feel that it does. We are motivated to learn only by pressure imposed by exams. Exam-centred learning is not a healthy learning process. It is time for change for the better. We all know deep down that it is needed.

**Robert Moore:** During the first and second lockdowns at the start of 2020 and 2021, an awful lot of pupils and students missed lots of work. It is not that they did not want to do it; it was just that they did not have the resources to do it because they were at home. They also might not have been able to do it because of depression. They lost essential life skills, especially LLW.

The teachers did not care. They did not follow up on students who did not do the work. They did not ask why. They either put them on report or just did nothing about it. They did not care. A teacher is meant to care about a child's education. There has to be some sort of review of education during lockdown and how to improve it if such things were to happen again.

**Adam Hutchinson:** I will raise the issue of sixth form and further education admissions. In my school, people who just happen to pass a subject at GCSE get back into sixth form quite easily while students in other normal high schools who work really hard and get an A\* do not get in because priority is given to past pupils, who may get a grade lower. There should be a system of merit and how well you do, rather than just being a past pupil and happening to do better in the 11-plus test when you were really young.

**Ollie Torney:** Due to the prioritisation of academic subjects over vocational subjects, many students are not able to do the things that they love. In year 10, I was told by a careers counsellor that, if I did any more than one vocational subject, it may scare off universities. As a result, I now do history and geography, which are very demanding and content-heavy subjects. The idea that vocational subjects are unprofessional is outdated and harmful.

**Mr Speaker:** I will probably take one more contribution in this session, and then we need to move on. I will take two.

**Ruadhan McCarney-Savage:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I appreciate the misgivings of my colleagues about the omissions of modern education, and I wish to add to them.

I appreciate the pressures that schools face in teaching the whole content of an exam course. I know that my teachers work very hard to do that. However, if schools' mission is to prepare children for modern education and life, the law oversees life. How can we expect to be good citizens, and model citizens, without knowledge of the law? My ignorance of what a Programme for Government is demonstrates that. When law is mentioned in schools, it is shoehorned into perhaps unfashionable citizenship classes. Therefore, I ask

schools to teach law, not the intricate details of estoppel or fiduciary duties, but what the legislative, Executive and judiciary do, and how they impact us. The old idiom is that ignorance of the law is no excuse. However, if modern education continues to teach children in that way, it may well be.

**Mr Speaker:** I will come back to Fionn, and I will take another one after that in this session.

**Fionn Cregan:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I agree with the point that was made earlier: there is not enough teaching of the issues that are labelled as controversial in today's society. Students should be taught about topics such as racism, transphobia and homophobia with an unbiased view from teachers and their personal opinions.

**Martha Curran:** I feel that, if we are going to look at removing compulsory GCSE subjects such as LLW or religion, we need to take a universal approach to ensure that young people in Northern Ireland receive equal opportunities. The issues regarding the RE curriculum will be addressed by the independent review of education.

I do not believe that we should ever deny ourselves access to education — no matter how useless Pythagoras' theorem may seem — as, on a global level, there are so many people who would give anything for access to it. I believe that our focus should be on enhancing the curriculum as opposed to cutting it.

**Mr Speaker:** OK, Martha. Thank you.

## Health

**Aleksander Jablonowski:** I believe that we do not get enough physical education in school.

**Mr Speaker:** A succinct and important point. Thank you, Aleksander.

**Clodagh McAuley:** Period products should be free, because they are an extra expense that only people who get periods have.

**Mr Speaker:** You will note that legislation in relation to that matter is being debated in the Assembly, so we will see how that unfolds.

**Aaron Murphy:** On the topic of health, I would like to point out that there is not nearly enough support for people who have mental health issues. I have a number of friends who have been struggling with mental health issues over the lockdown; I have struggled myself. There is not nearly enough support for people who struggle. School counselling is not where it should be and outside help is either just not there or it is frowned upon.

**John Kane:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. It is an unfortunate truth that there is a severe lack of school counsellors to manage what, put simply, is an epidemic of mental health issues that have led to preposterously long waiting times. We must make this essential service open and easily accessible to all the young people who may need it.

**Luke Massey:** I am a member of the Health Committee. I am worried about the rise in obesity over the last couple of years. It is a major problem. Children with obesity are in real danger from things like heart attacks and heart disease later in life.

**Caolán Gregory:** As I said this morning, I believe that the Government should pledge to end the barbaric practice of conversion therapy.

**Oliver Mercer:** I would like to point out that, time and time again, politicians have ignored the health of young people and have chronically underfunded the issue. Simply put, young people cannot vote and are therefore ignored by politicians who sometimes only care about votes. That cannot be allowed to continue, because, frankly, we will grow up one day. They will find out the effect of that when they are all kicked out of office, because we are the generation that they ignored.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you for that, Oliver. Hopefully your being a Member of the Youth Assembly will make a contribution to that when you do precisely what you are doing today, which is to make sure that you make your argument and put your point across. The very reason why the Assembly established the Youth Assembly was to give young people like yourselves, who do not have a vote, an opportunity to express your opinion to policymakers. Let us hope that this makes a contribution to that.

**Robert Moore:** I will make a very quick point. The Minister of Health's holding off on giving the go ahead for abortion services is absolutely appalling.

*2.30 pm*

**Kelly You:** An aspect of healthcare that I think is very often overlooked is social care. The case of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes has been on my mind a lot lately, and I think about how horribly failed he was. All children in social care have just as much potential — probably more — as we do, but, because of the disadvantages that they have had in life, they do not get to have the same experiences that we have. I think that that is extremely unfair.

**Jenna McLaughlin:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I want to talk about how people have to be referred to certain people to go and talk in school. I feel that they should have a safe place rather than having to be referred because they think that they are not achieving well in school. I also feel that you should be able to just go and talk to someone without having to feel like something is wrong with you to be referred.

**Ciara Gilmartin:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. My mother became disabled when I was 10 and my sister was seven, and we became young carers for her, with an extreme lack of support. I feel that young carers should not exist and that there should be a lot more support for disabled people, but I think that we should start with support for young carers, especially in the area of social work.

**Patrick Davis:** I would like to address some of the crises that the NHS is going through. They all stem back to the same root problem. Long waiting lists and the inability of some people to access care all stem back to staffing. I find that quite shocking because there are hundreds of graduates coming out of Queen's University every year, and they could be adding to that workforce year-on-year. However, the problem that we face is that so many now come over from England, do their six years of studying here and then return home. We need to advertise for and incentivise medical graduates and, indeed, all graduates to stay in Northern Ireland and contribute to our economy and health service. It is only then that we will see some of these crises being solved.

**Hannah O'Connor:** Following on from Kelly's point about social care, I think that our services that deal with social care issues do not listen nearly enough to the people whom they are dealing with. I feel that that

should definitely be looked into because, with lockdown and stuff, a lot more kids have been at risk because they have been stuck at home and have not been able to go to school and have that free space. I think that it should definitely be looked at that. The people whom it is affecting should be listened. I have heard from other cases that that does not happen, which is absolutely unacceptable.

**Aaron Murphy:** I think that this could go down in a few different contribution groups. I have heard of a number of people who have become pregnant, and they are around my age. I feel that a lot of things are happening at a much younger age. I think that we should be educated about this in school and that it should be talked about more. It is a topic where, if your teacher is uncomfortable with it, you generally will not hear that much about it in school. It is not really focused on a lot, and it needs to be.

**Rebecca Moore:** I am a member of the Education Committee. I feel that education and mental health go together. Throughout COVID, child and adolescent mental health services — CAMHS — have been inundated with referrals. I think that those services should be supported far better, and I think that school counsellors should be supported. I know people who have been on waiting lists for over a year now and are trying to get help with that, so I think that that is a big topic that should be discussed.

**David Anderson:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I want to raise a point regarding not mental health but physical health in schools. It is to do with an issue that is personal to me.

Just over six months ago, I had to change my lifestyle by going on a gluten-free diet due to health issues. One impact that that has had is that if I try to get food in the school canteen, there is nothing for me. There is nothing gluten-free that I can eat. It is not just gluten-free people. There are people who have sugar-free or lactose-free diets, all sorts of unique diets that schools are not really providing for. If young people have issues with diets, they should be able to get food in schools, and not always have to bring it from home.

**Fionn Cregan:** There is too much shame on people who are not physically healthy and mentally stable. There is not enough emphasis on the danger of not looking after physical and mental health. It is too widely accepted that if you are healthy in one respect, you are healthy in the other. That is absolutely untrue as many people I know are physically healthy but have mental health issues, and who are not cared for because they are told that they are healthy because they can play sport.

**Tom McSherry:** Stigma should be taken away from mental health at schools by teaching students about it.

**Ollie Torney:** It should be mandatory that all classrooms in a school, not just a majority or select few, are accessible. The need for accessible resources is well known. However, we often overlook the need for all infrastructure to be available to all. I have always thought that it was good to think of it this way: no one is born disabled; they are made disabled by society and the infrastructure around them. If you woke up one day and everyone could fly, you would not be disadvantaged because, at the end of the day, everything is still the same. You could still walk to the same rooms. However, if buildings had their lifts and stairs removed in favour of saving a couple of coins, you could no longer use most of the resources, and you would find yourself disabled. In school, I saw that 85% of classrooms were wheelchair-accessible. As a result, however, pupils are not able to get to specific classes, like art or chemistry, for example, just because the school did not see fit to install another lift.

**Oliver Pearce:** Many mental health conditions rob individuals of choice. Anorexia is a rising problem, and a mental health condition such as that is difficult for individuals who have it to diagnose it. At that point, they do not have a choice because they are unaware that they are suffering, so they cannot try to combat it. More

effort to try to diagnose such mental health conditions would go a long way to give people the choice to fight them.

**Adam Hutchinson:** I would like to raise the issue of carers' pay. You can be a carer at the age of 18 or a young carer, but carers are paid only £65 per week, which works out at £2 per hour. That is a travesty for the essential service that they provide for the person they are caring for. The Government should pay them more so that they do not have to send in nurses to care for them instead, which would cost the Government a whole lot more.

**Patrick Davis:** Last week, in England, a woman died in the back of an ambulance waiting to be allowed into A&E. If you go past the Ulster Hospital today, you will see the queue of ambulances waiting to bring critically ill patients into the hospital. I work there on a Friday night as a volunteer, and when I am walking in, I would see easily a good 10 ambulances, which could be deployed elsewhere, waiting to drop people off because there is nowhere to put them.

The Executive are in a very enviable position, because it could be so easily fixed. A simple advertising campaign to let people know for what they do and do not need to go to A&E and what other services are available could solve the issue of there being so many walk-ins to A&E, which are taking up the time and resources of the department at the cost of human lives. Surely that is something that can be solved by the next Executive.

**Mr Speaker:** I am happy enough to take another contribution if anyone feels the need to discuss this issue. If not, I will move on to the next topic.

**Oliver Mercer:** Teachers know so little about many different mental and physical illnesses, how to diagnose them and how to help. As a diabetic, I know that from personal experience in school. I am in a very fortunate position in that I have a device that beeps if I am having an emergency. When teachers hear the beeping, however, I get told off and scolded repeatedly for having my phone turned on. That happens on an almost daily basis. It is the same teachers who do it every week. I just do not understand it, because when I told the school about the device, I was told, "Oh, that's OK. We can sort it. We can tell all the teachers". It got to the point where my mum spoke to the school and said, "This isn't acceptable". Why should I need my mum to go in and tell the school what is happening? How many other children across Northern Ireland is that happening to? How many of them have parents who are not doing that and are therefore just sucking it up?

**Alannah Lamont:** In school, we are taught that, if we eat a certain thing, we will be labelled as unhealthy. That affects children's mental health, because they feel as though they are not good enough if they do not fit into what society thinks is healthy. We should try to fix that by showing in school that you should eat what you want but also have a regulated diet.

## Environment

**Robert Moore:** I am going to try to get the first word in here.

**Mr Speaker:** You are also going to try to get the last one in. *[Laughter.]*

**Robert Moore:** Debate about fracking is seeing a resurgence in Northern Ireland, with some major political parties adopting it as a policy. Can we not see how bad fracking is? Fracking has been allowed in America.

Look at the ecosystems in America where that has happened; just look at them. It does as much harm to us as it does to the wildlife in an ecosystem, because we are part of the ecosystem. If we let fracking happen in Northern Ireland and introduce those licences, it will harm us as much as it will harm the wildlife. We have to think about that and take action now.

**Mr Speaker:** I remind other Members who have not yet contributed to think about taking this opportunity to do so and to indicate if they wish to speak.

**Alannah Lamont:** Sustainable energy is too expensive, and people who cannot afford it are not getting enough of it. Electric cars are very expensive, and the price of electric is also going up, so people who are not able to buy them will not do so.

**Grace McGouran:** I want to add to Robert's point. I am also a member of the Environment Committee. We must create a policy to ban petroleum licences in order to stop fracking, as the Hatch Regeneris report acknowledges that fracking in Northern Ireland will pollute groundwater and air, damaging soil and therefore negatively affecting the environment. Everyone on the Environment Committee believes that that must be stopped.

**Aideen Gorman:** We need to consider how big companies are producing energy, because they are one of the really big problems when it comes to climate change. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Speaker:** Go raibh maith agat, Aideen.

*2.45 pm*

**Dominic Bateson:** The Government should focus on renewable energy, as recent, massive fuel price increases have caused families to choose between feeding their children and heating their home. The Government should focus on giving grants and on renewable energy to help those families.

**John Kane:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. We need to increase the subsidies that are available for things such as solar panels and electric cars. They must be made available to not just the fortunate few but the majority of people in Northern Ireland, so that everyone can do their part to help to protect the environment and ourselves.

**Ciara Gilmartin:** I want to focus on renewable energy. Now that gas and oil prices are rising, that is an important place in which to invest our money in order to help the Northern Ireland population afford to heat their houses and have lower living costs. Renewable energy is really important at this time.

**Mr Speaker:** Is there anybody who has not spoken yet? It is not compulsory, but it is helpful if you do. Make your voice heard.

Robert is like a spring box, isn't he? We will take Robert, of course.

**Robert Moore:** Thank you again. You are probably really sick of hearing me. You might want to throw me out.

On electricity, a reason why we are seeing massive price increases may be that we are in the middle of the transition between fossil fuels and renewable electricity. We are where we are because we have not put in place proper price controls and actual control of renewable energy, and because private companies are

trying to make a profit on that renewable energy. We should take action now, take renewable energy fully under state control and plan it like that, because it is an essential service. People need electricity to cook food. You need electricity for oil to heat your home. You need electricity for everything. Why should it be less important than anything else?

**Jenna McLaughlin:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I want to talk about how much the price of diesel and petrol has gone up. The price has gone up from £1.40 to nearly £2 per litre. You would not think that that would make that big a difference, but when you put fuel in your car once a week, the cost goes up a lot. I know that we are going down the electric car route and that there will be more electric cars on the road, but right now, some people cannot afford electric cars and rely on diesel prices. If people run out of diesel because the price has gone up so much, they are less likely to be able to get to school.

**Coran Morris:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I am all for what Robert said about fracking being banned, but, if the job environment, like fracking, is removed for the better of the environment, alternative job options in those areas should be provided to those who will lose their jobs instead of leaving them to fend for themselves in the search for another job or an alternative.

**Grace Flanagan:** I support the point that, I think, Grace made, which was that more support should be provided for people who cannot necessarily afford to live more environmentally friendly lives by, for example, reducing meat consumption, installing solar panels or making use of renewable energy.

**Oliver Mercer:** I would just like to say to the Executive that it is young people's futures that they are playing with when they make their policies on the environment. You know what? They will not listen to us because, honestly, they will be long gone by the time the effects are felt and it will be our generation who feels the effects. Their voters do not care: their voters will not be here. We will be the ones whose lives are cut short by their ignorance, and they need to do the right thing and step up to the call to sort themselves out and sort out the environment.

**Hannah Abraham:** I want to add to what others have said about renewable energy. Yes, we should focus on renewable energy as it is our future. Our voices should be heard and if action is not taken now, then when? I also want to ask about the definition of fracking.

**Oisín Clenaghan:** There should be a cap on the amount of cattle that farmers can own in Northern Ireland. The North has the highest concentration of atmospheric ammonia in all of Europe, which is directly related to agricultural production.

**Jonathan Lennox:** I want to take a moment to acknowledge that schools should play an important part in showing the effects that climate change can have on a child. Some children certainly seem to feel that climate change will not have an effect on them, but the reality is that it will. Schools should play a part in reducing environmental impacts. I know that my school does not make any impact. It does not do any recycling, although it used to: it has just faded away. It seems that children do not care about the environment, but schools need to educate them about it.

**Fionn Cregan:** The current climate crisis was addressed at the COP26 summit in Glasgow. However, too many people have partisan views on the crisis. As the American politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said when she spoke to the US Senate about her green new deal, climate scientific research should not be a partisan issue, regardless of wherever you come from or wherever you stand.

**Olivia Smith:** I agree with the views that have been expressed by other Members today and I express my solidarity with them. Our next Programme for Government must incentivise methods for adapting to climate change. I am a member of the Environment Committee, which has decided that, as part of its main priority for our mandate, its desire is to cooperate effectively to create long-term solutions for climate change for our young people, who will shape our future. Young people now are constantly filled with uncertainty about what our future will look like, and it is time for that to end.

**David Anderson:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I want to make two points, the first of which is about renewable energy. According to statistics, between 2014 and 2020, the amount of renewable energy that was produced in Northern Ireland has risen from 19% of total electricity consumption to 49.2%, which is an increase of over 30% in around six to seven years. That is excellent progress, but, at the same time, we have to bear in mind that it is not enough.

One big thing is that while the government-controlled public-sector industries can work to improve, we need to be aware of private industries. There is a cost involved in moving from fossil fuels to renewable energy, and we should not just assume that because fuel prices are rising, companies will make that move. We need to provide incentives. I cannot advise on what exactly those incentives could be, but I believe that the Executive should address some of them.

Secondly, I want to talk about plastics. Single-use plastics were mentioned in the earlier session. We do not necessarily need a complete ban on plastic, as some people – not Members of this Assembly – have called for, but we need to find ways to reuse it more efficiently. For example, I read an article recently about a man known as “The Plastic Man of India”, who developed a technique using melted-down single-use plastic to produce bricks and tiles for roads. Those roads last longer than tarmac roads, get fewer potholes and are better for the environment because of their production method. The Executive should look at implementing those roads here.

**Ciara Gilmartin:** Agriculture is one of the largest contributors to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in Northern Ireland. I know many farmers who have recently installed windmills that produce renewable electricity. Farmers already receive a large amount of funding from Government through loans etc. There is a renewable energy investment opportunity through farmers having windmills. They have large amounts of land and could decrease their carbon emissions using that method.

**John Kane:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. We must make public transport cheap and accessible to all, including to those who live in rural areas, to incentivise its use. While doing that, we must make the infrastructure that is necessary for the future, such as electric car charging points, free and accessible across the country. We must also disincentivise the use of diesel and petrol cars in order to lower the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> going into the atmosphere.

**Aleksander Jablonowski:** School green flags are distributed left and right. That sets a bad example to pupils because schools do not show a great example for the environment.

**Robert Moore:** I will not even try to make a joke because I have made too many.

The loans for farming are not for buying equipment or going green. It may not say it right in front of your eyes, but, in the text, it states that the larger your herd, the more money you will get. Farms are getting bigger and bigger. Farmers would not be able to afford that on their own, but the Government are helping them to get bigger farms and bigger herds, generating more emissions, than the farmers would have been

able to afford on an ordinary level. Therefore, the Government are contributing to emissions, and they do not even know it.

## Rights and Equality

**Alannah Freaney:** For too long, the rights of the child have been ignored. We have grown up during the terrible COVID-19 pandemic that has claimed the lives of many. One of the positive things that came out of the pandemic was its highlighting of problems in the areas of health, education, rights and equality and the environment.

The holes in legislation concerning young people largely went unnoticed due to the lack of consultation. Now we are here in the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. Please use us to better the decision-making process. We are here and, in a way, we expect you to answer to us. We are young people and, as per article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we have the right to be heard.

For a long time, our views have been undermined, but we are now on the right track. That being said, we rely on you, the adults. I encourage you to listen.

I will give an example. At New Year, I went to A&E, where I sat for 33 hours in terrible pain, vomiting severely. I was told by one doctor that it was gas. When asked by a different doctor to scale the pain, I said, "10", and I was then asked, "Are you sure?" If I had not had emergency surgery, I would have been dead at the age of 17.

As Oliver mentioned, take us seriously. Otherwise, there will be none of us left to take seriously.

*3.00 pm*

**Shanelle Olphert:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I will touch on Aaron's earlier point about health. He highlighted the desperate need for reform of our curriculum to adjust it to today's society, with open conversation and destigmatisation of topics such as birth control, consent and healthy relationships. I believe that that would create an educated and safe generation with knowledge of their own bodies and rights.

**Hannah O'Connor:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I feel that it would be very beneficial for young people and children to have child advocates. Even though we have this Youth Assembly, which is an amazing thing, a lot of adults still do not listen to us. I feel that, if people had the right to a child advocate, more important issues would be listened to and raised, that the child would be able to have their voice heard and that they would be able to speak and be heard properly.

**Aaron Murphy:** There is a lot of stigma in schools around different religions, ethnic backgrounds and sexualities. In my friend groups, being gay is an insult and being a Protestant is also an insult. That is not right and should not continue.

**Lauren Bond:** I am a member of the Education Committee. The last two years have been unimaginably hard for everyone. Some have felt worried, distressed or even angry. Unfortunately, a vast majority of those people have taken those feelings out on our pharmacists, shopworkers and local community workers: the very people who have kept us going. I was horrified and disgusted to see mobs of people on a local community group posting hate about the very people who were feeding us, keeping us going and making

sure that we were healthy. Had it not been for a local MLA, they would possibly still be posting that hate. How can we even think about talking about rights and equality when we cannot even treat the people who let our lives continue as normal with basic human decency and respect?

**Ciaran Gaston:** I hope that immigrants can have better housing when they come to this country, because I believe that they are currently put in bad council houses.

**Mr Speaker:** Next is the young person in the lime green. Is that the colour? Are we right? Is that a lime green top?

**Sofia Wilkin:** Yes.

**Mr Speaker:** OK. We are fashionistas. *[Laughter.]*

**Sofia Wilkin:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I agree with the point that was made about conversion therapy. It is a horrific and disgusting practice that must be abolished. There is nothing therapeutic about that practice.

**Jenna McLaughlin:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I will talk about the subject that Alannah touched on, which was how people need to listen to us more. Another subject that I would like to cover is how we are taken advantage of for being children. A very small example of that is being skipped in shops or being told that we can wait because we have enough time.

**Ollie Mercer:** When we had a Committee meeting about the Programme for Government a few weeks ago, we were asked whether we knew what that actually was. In my group at least, not a single person said yes. We, the young people, cannot do anything to change our country if we are not even aware of how the Government plan and prep for the future. The youth are rarely consulted on Programmes for Government, and, when they are, it is through a single, small and non-diverse panel.

The Government cannot design future plans without considering the thoughts of those who will live with those future plans. As stated in article 12, it is our right to have involvement in those schemes. That right is not being enforced or respected.

**Oliver Mercer:** The UNCRC entitles our views to be given “due weight”. That means having our voices heard. It is borderline tyrannical to ignore 20% of the people you supposedly stand for because they cannot vote because of laws that you control. You cannot just ignore 20% of the people. It does not work. Just because they are not in the majority, does not mean that they can be ignored. That should be reflected in the new Programme for Government.

**Ciara Gilmartin:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. There should be an advancement in accessibility in public transport. My mother, who is disabled, wanted to travel to Belfast by train. She wanted to receive her wheelchair when she arrived at her destination. Despite repeated contact, she did not receive her wheelchair, which is one of many examples of inadequate treatment. There should also be retractable ramps on all buses etc for wheelchair users. An investment in accessibility across all public spaces is essential.

**Robert Moore:** I did not know whether to contribute again. However, lowering the voting age to at least 16 would enable many more young people to have their voice heard. Also, it is only two years away from 18

when they are able to vote. It would enable thousands more people to vote, have their voice heard and have a proper debate by including all sections and ages in society.

**Niamh McShane:** I will talk about minimum wage. It is unacceptable that, at age 16, we are only paid something like £4 per hour. That is almost child labour. We have to balance school, a social life and many other things apart from work, and £4 per hour is not enough. Thank you for listening.

**Patrick Davis:** At this point, we have all agreed that young people — indeed, all people — deserve to have their voices heard. However, at present, in Northern Ireland, it is perhaps fitting that that is not possible. Without a full Executive, there is nobody to hear our voices. I appeal to the next Executive that forms after the next election to try to do their best to set aside their cultural differences and not dissolve every time the going gets particularly tough. In Northern Ireland, we need our full Executive to be working at their best all the time to advance our interests.

**Oisín Clenaghan:** I will talk about refugees, and I will outline the current war in Ukraine. The war has been going on for little over a week, and already hundreds of thousands have fled. I do not doubt that many will come to all over the UK and Ireland. All communities on this island must come together to welcome the refugees with open arms.

**Alannah Freaney:** Further to Oisín's point, to be quite frank, young people are concerned. There is a war on our doorstep, and it feels like the world is setting itself on fire just after we have come out the other end of COVID-19, or near enough. It would be worth it to establish an easier way for young people to contribute to helping refugees of the war. It is not a political issue; it is a humanitarian issue. Although I know that some schools have taken donations, donating should be more accessible for young people, because, after all, it is us who will inherit the world and have to deal with the aftermath of a war, if it does happen.

**Fionn Cregan:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. I believe that there is not enough support across all our constituencies and communities for marginalised groups such as the gay community, various religious groups and especially any immigrants who are coming to our country for refuge, only to be met with discrimination and hate. Further to Oisín and Alannah's points about Ukrainian citizens who are fleeing their country because of the war, we should prepare for and accommodate the huge possibility of those Ukrainian citizens fleeing to our country. Without a doubt, if we are not prepared to help those citizens who are fleeing their country in their time of need and we cannot accommodate them, I do not believe that we are fit to accommodate anyone else.

**Mr Speaker:** We can take another couple of contributors to this session, because there is another one afterwards, and then we will have the vote.

I will call Adam first, and I think that Grace is looking to get in as well. I have a list of four now; I shouldn't have opened my mouth.

**Adam Hutchinson:** I will follow on from Robert's point about the voting age being lowered, especially for people who are 16, in full-time employment and paying taxes. How can it be right to pay taxes but not have a choice in how they are spent? Furthermore, is that not the goal of the Youth Assembly: to have young people's voices heard?

**Robert Moore:** It is totally right that we welcome Ukrainian refugees with open arms, but doing that are the same people, in the Assembly and in wider political conversation in Northern Ireland, who have been critical of refugees of other nationalities.

That is not fair. It is a war. There are no preconditions for war. It is always about guns and violence. It is not a case of saying, "If you are white, you can come to this country". Everybody should be welcome in Northern Ireland and should feel safe here. If people are coming from a war, we should help them. If they want to go back, they can go back. If they come here for refuge, we should give that to anybody who needs it.

**Oisín Clenaghan:** Further to that point, we must also look after Russian refugees, as it is not the Russian people who want the war but the Russian Government. We must make sure that Russian refugees are protected and that the people of the North are educated that it is not the Russian people but the Russian Government who want the war.

**Grace McGouran:** The Executive should outline plans for support for victims of the Troubles. For example, payment of pensions for victims who were injured through no fault of their own was approved almost three years ago. Often, such people's lives were turned upside down, and they had little support from the Government. The Executive should change that.

**Hannah Abraham:** Further to the point on the under-18 vote, increasing publicity to young people on the value of their vote would increase the number of under-18s who understand that and who would also push for a change to the voting age.

**Ruadhan McCarney-Savage:** Further to what another Member said about the minimum wage, with inflation approaching 7%, a wage of about £4-50 per hour is losing spending power every day. I ask that employers not take young workers for granted. Every year in Northern Ireland, the multi-billion-pound service and retail industries are built on the backs of young people such as those in the Chamber. It is time for young people to be adequately compensated for their labour.

## General Contributions

**Mr Speaker:** Before we move to the vote, we have five or six minutes for Members to speak on any important topic that has not been covered this afternoon.

**David Anderson:** I will go back to a point that I wanted to raise on the environment but did not have time. Some Members mentioned loans for farmers for renewable energy. I know that discussing loans to farmers for renewable energy is a bit of a touchy subject in Northern Ireland, with the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scandal that occurred a few years ago, but, while that was a failure of implementation, the concept of a scheme to provide farmers with subsidies to reduce their emissions is a good idea. I believe that the Executive, after the election, should look into a different scheme related to that and seek to implement it properly.

*3.15 pm*

**Oliver Mercer:** This is a very important time for the Youth Assembly because this is the time when we can make a real change. With a new Programme for Government and a new Executive forming soon, after the election, we have an actual opportunity to make a real difference to real people's lives. In the amount of time

that we have left in the Youth Assembly, we should all focus our efforts on helping people and using the opportunity that we have to make a real difference.

**Robert Moore:** I want to speak on the protocol. Although it is very divisive, especially at the moment, with the Executive having collapsed over the issue, I am advocating for its abolition because I believe in no trade barriers between anywhere. I am a nationalist, and I believe in no border along Ireland, although, if people want a border, just keep it open. So, why should I expect that and expect the other side, which has an equal say in the process, to have what they would call their border and their division to be closed in part? I do not think that it is very fair.

**Mr Speaker:** Jenna is next.

**Jenna McLaughlin:** Mr Speaker, my point has been covered.

**Mr Speaker:** A very generous budding Member there. Are there any other contributions?

**Clodagh McAuley:** I want to raise a point on the foster care system, which very much needs to be fixed.

**Hannah O'Connor:** I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. Victims and survivors of child abuse should get more support. They do not get the sufficient support that they need. Growing up is a fundamental stage of life, and if you have been through any terrible, traumatic events, that can stop development and cause a lot of issues in the future. I think that more support should be given. A while ago, the NSPCC was saying that it was going to cut some of its offices and have only one main office up here. It would take people who live far away ages to get up here, and I think that more support should definitely be given to these people because they need that support. It is a very important part of growing up.

**Aaron Murphy:** I want to expand on a point that a Member made about the foster care system. My granny has fostered around five kids in her career as a foster carer, and she has suffered a lot of stress. The kids that she has had have been very problematic, not only from their childhood with their parents but from the children's homes that they were placed in to try to save them from where they were. Children's homes are appalling in the way that they are run.

**Patrick Davis:** Mr Speaker, since this is, most likely, going to be your last chance to host a plenary sitting of the Youth Assembly, I would like to take the opportunity to thank you and, indeed, all the people who have made the inaugural Youth Assembly possible. I am sure that that would be echoed by my fellow Members.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Patrick, for that. I will certainly pass that on to the officials here. I have to say that I am delighted with the work that people have put in and their commitment to this project. I will make sure that that is passed on to all those concerned, some of whom you are already working with. There are always people further behind the front scene, if you like. There is what I call an engine room in the back, and people work flat out all the time to make sure that things like this happen as well as the normal Assembly business that takes place and which, at the minute, is working frantically, and that is what we should be doing.

Thank you, Patrick, for that.

**Robert Moore:** I want to go back to Patrick's point. You will be missed, even in the Assembly. It is your work and that of everybody else that has made this happen. You should go down in the history books for putting

up with me. *[Laughter.]* That is all I have to say. Thank you for everything that you have done. We will be sad to see you go.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Robert. Those are very generous comments.

If Members have no further comments to make, we can move to the vote.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly supports article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and that their views should be given due weight, and calls on all future Executives to have regard to article 12 and to consult with, and take on board the views of, young people and the Youth Assembly in all aspects of their work, including when preparing future Programmes for Government.*

**Mr Speaker:** I congratulate you on the debate today, the vote that you have just carried and the fact that you tabled such a motion for debate. It is very important that you remember the value of this place, and I am glad that you are here to put your opinions across. Every single one of you has made very respectful, very succinct and very articulate contributions. You put them across with passion and very strong commitment.

None of you raised something that you want for yourself. Every one of your contributions, whether about rural communities, young people with mental health issues, people on minimum wage or refugees — no matter what topic you raised — was about other people, and that is to be valued. It commends you to me and suggests that we have a bright future in our community. People who always think of themselves do not get that there are always people worse off than them, no matter the challenges that we personally experience from time to time. Most people will, at some point during their life, face very challenging circumstances, so it is great to hear young people expressing passion and expressing concern about others. That will really stand you well in the future. I have met a number of you in the last number of months, and, as far as I am concerned, you could go to any community or any group of people and you will convince them that you have integrity, that you are honest and that you care about them.

You will not all be politicians. Some of you may never be politicians. However, three or four of you in here are certainly budding politicians, and I say that with great respect. You will be in public service in some shape or form during your life. People are talking about volunteering at the hospital or doing whatever else they are doing. You will spend the next decades working for other people, and that is a great testimony to your upbringing and how you have been reared and the respect that you have had from your family, within your family, within yourselves, within your community and within your peer groups.

Aaron talked about his friends and how there are certain taboos: challenge that. Be respectful, but challenge it. Do not be silent. When people are doing things that are wrong, tell them and maybe try to educate them and convince them that they are wrong. If you are worried about the climate and you want to address climate change, you have to worry about the people who may suffer initially if we do not have what is called a just transition. You will hear that mentioned in debates in here. The agriculture community might suffer more. Historically, it has been a very important part of our community here and a very important element of our economy, even from a selfish point of view. Those people need to be treated respectfully and properly. If we

are to change the way in which society has operated for hundreds of years, we need to do that in a just way to help those people transform and be part of a transformation.

Politics is not always about winning an argument. It is about resolving issues. You will often hear people repeat the old adage, "Politics is the art of the possible." Therefore, if you pass a motion today, you need not expect it to be lifted by an incoming Executive who say, "Yes, we are going to do all that tomorrow morning." You will have to become, in your own way, activists. Anything that you want done has to be fought for. You will have to campaign and lobby for it. You will learn ways of doing that. You are already involved in a process. I have every confidence that the officials here, the Youth Assembly team that works with you on a day-to-day basis, will continue to nurture and develop your capacity in this new role that you find yourselves in.

I will certainly be looking in, in the future, to make sure that you become beacons for our young people. A lot of our young people, whom you will know, do great work in their own communities and sectors. There are different youth organisations, sectors and so on. Be a part of all that, be leaders in it. Do not be shy. You have been appointed in a very important process. You have a historical opportunity, I believe. Keep knocking on the doors of those who have the power to make the change. If you do not do that, you are negating your own power to make change.

You are all under 18 years of age. One of the reasons why we opted for the age cohort of 13 to 17 inclusive is because, at least when you are 18, you have a vote. You will have some kind of say. When you are under 18, you certainly have opinions, but you have no vote. That is why we are trying to give you an opportunity to express yourselves, fight the battles that you think need to be fought, whether on mental health, climate or refugee crises anywhere in the world.

Fair play to every one of you. You have taken time out of your very valuable life. There are other activities that you want to get involved in. Thank your friends, peer groups, parents and families who have helped you get to this point and who have supported you in being here.

I thank all the Assembly officials who have worked on this project for some considerable time. It is now a reality, so it is over to you: the young people. We have helped you and empowered you. As you know, none of us, nobody outside your membership, has a say in what your agenda is, or what you discuss. That is a great liberty. Value that, and I know that you do.

I know that you are still building the capacity of the Youth Assembly. I have every confidence that you will do a great job, reflect well on the community and serve it well. That is what it is all about, service.

Thank you all very much. Safe home, and I hope that you enjoyed yourself today.

*Adjourned at 3.28 pm.*