



Youth Assembly

For Northern Ireland

OFFICIAL REPORT

4th sitting of the Youth Assembly

At 1:30 pm on Saturday 5 November 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)
Da Costa, Clelia (Mid Ulster)
Davis, Patrick (Strangford)
Flanagan, Grace (Belfast South)
Folliard, Jack (West Tyrone)
Freaney, Alannah (Foyle)
Frew, Thomas (East Londonderry)
Gallagher-Beard, Alicia (Belfast North)
Gaston, Ciaran (Belfast North)
Gilmartin, Ciara (East Antrim)
Gilmore, Zach (Strangford)
Gorman, Aideen (South Down)
Gregory, Caolán (Newry and Armagh)
Hanna, Gráinne (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)
Hills, Maddison (North Antrim)
Hutchinson, Adam (North Antrim)
Jablonowski, Aleksander (Upper Bann)
Kane, John (Belfast East)
Kelly, Aimee (West Tyrone)
Kelly, Sarah (Lagan Valley)
Lafferty, Órla (East Londonderry)
Lamont, Alannah (Lagan Valley)
Large, Tyler-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)
McAreevey, Henry James Kel (Upper Bann)
McAtee, Abbie (South Down)
McAuley, Clodagh (Belfast North)
McCann, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
McCann, Fionn (Strangford)
McCarney-Savage, Ruadhan (Belfast South)
McClenaghan, Rebecca (North Antrim)
McFetridge, Emer (North Antrim)
McGucken, Charlotte (Lagan Valley)
McKibbin, Jack (Belfast North)
McKinstry, John (Belfast North)
McLaughlin, Jenna (Foyle)
McShane, Neamh (Foyle)
McSherry, Thomas (Upper Bann)
Mercer, Oliver (East Antrim)
Mitchell, Micah (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)
Moore, Jamie (Belfast South)
Moore, Rebecca (Belfast East)
Moore, Robert (Newry and Armagh)
Morris, Coran (East Londonderry)
Murphy, Aaron (South Down)
Nelson-Killen, Thomas (Belfast West)
O'Brien, Tiana (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)
O'Connor, Hannah (Fermanagh & South Tyrone)
Olphert, Shanelle (Mid Ulster)
Osterhus, Holly (West Tyrone)
Pearce, Oliver (South Antrim)
Reynolds, Oisín (Foyle)
Shannon, Eimear (Belfast West)
Sheridan, Penny (South Antrim)
Smith, Olivia (East Antrim)
Torney, Ollie (South Down)
Walsh, Lisa (West Tyrone)
Wilkin, Sofia (East Antrim)
Wilson, Harry (Belfast East)
Woods, Katie (Belfast West)
Yip, Emma (East Antrim)
You, Kelly (Belfast South)

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Youth Assembly

Saturday 5 November 2022

The Youth Assembly met at 1.30 pm (Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Speaker's Welcome

Mr Speaker: I formally welcome every one of you, Members of the Youth Assembly. You are all very welcome, and I thank you for taking time out on a busy weekend, between your studies, sports and extracurricular activities. Thank you for sticking the pace and for putting the time in to deliberate on important matters. We will come to that in a few minutes.

I would also like to thank everyone who has made it possible for you to be here today: the Youth Assembly team, the Assembly secretariat, the other officials from the advisory group and also the Assembly Commission. I thank everybody for their support, including parents and family members who are here this afternoon. We have a special guest, who met you all over lunchtime, Mr Paul Narain, the US consul general, who is a very good friend of the community. He represents a Government that have been very good friends of all of ours for many's a long year. Hopefully, they will continue to be so in the time ahead.

A number of Assembly Members are here. Some have had to leave. John Blair was here earlier. Diane Forsythe and Minister Naomi Long are here, as is Robin Swann. If I have left anybody out, I apologise; your name will appear on the formal record. Thanks to everybody for being here this afternoon.

There are two items on the agenda today. One is an opportunity for you to update all the Members of the Youth Assembly. We have a number of rapporteurs who will report, giving us an update as to what business you have been doing, what items you have been considering and how you have been getting on generally as Members. We will call each of the rapporteurs in order.

I do not want to detain you unnecessarily with formalities, but I will restate the ground rules. Members must respect other Members while they are making their contributions. Everyone should try to get in and speak if they can. You do that by rising at your seat; you have done that before. This is your fourth plenary, so you are beginning to become old hands. You continue to show your growing experience every time I meet you. Each time we meet, I see further progress. We, the team working with you, are delighted with the progress that you are making, and it is important that you let everyone else know that you have made that progress.

We move swiftly to take the first item of business, which is the rapporteurs. We will call the first rapporteur in a minute. With Members' permission, we are making a change in the order this afternoon. The first rapporteur will be the person who will report on the Irish and Ulster-Scots consultation, Jamie Brown. He has to leave earlier than expected, so we will call him first. We will not call you just yet, Jamie.

Jamie Brown: That is fine.

Mr Speaker: That is what I like: eager Members. Fair play to you. We will call you in just a wee second.

The second part of the plenary will be a debate on a motion relating to the minimum age of criminal responsibility. That debate has been scheduled as a response to a request from the former Justice Minister for the Youth Assembly to consider her Department's consultation regarding an increase in the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years.

We will come to the debate on that. I thank the Minister on your behalf. We should probably now call Naomi the former Justice Minister, but, for the moment, we will not stand on ceremony too much. Naomi has been our Justice Minister for some time, and I am absolutely delighted that, in keeping with the spirit of how the Assembly wants to work with the Youth Assembly, the Minister has formally asked you to consider that policy change. That is an example of how you, as a Youth Assembly, have direct access to shape public policy and even to change it. We will hear a flavour of that when you make your contributions during the debate.

Updates Since the Last Plenary

Irish and Ulster-Scots Consultation

Jamie Brown: As rapporteur for the Irish and Ulster-Scots consultation, I will first provide an overview of what happened at the Irish and Ulster-Scots consultations.

The Northern Ireland Government set up two groups, called expert advisory panels, with members from across academia and from the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and Irish language sectors to look at how we can help people to learn and use the Irish language and how to help Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture.

I will start with the Irish consultation. We met an expert panel of representatives. The goals for 2042, which are the next 20 years, are for 500,000 people to know some Irish, 20,000 to use Irish as their main language, more people to use Irish as their everyday language, and one in 10 children to use Irish in school.

I will now move to the Ulster-Scots consultation. Once again, we met an expert panel of representatives. Goals for the foreseeable future — this is a long list — are for children to be able to learn more about Ulster Scots at school; universities to find out more about the history of Ulster Scots and how we can help more people to understand it; more communities to use Ulster Scots and be involved in its culture; more people to use Ulster Scots in their everyday lives; more TV, radio, newspaper and information online to use Ulster Scots; give people who speak Ulster Scots the same rights as everyone else; and people to have more ways to connect with people in Scotland, and with people who speak Ulster Scots in other countries.

It was a very informative and eye-opening day.

Mr Speaker: I thank Jamie for that. We will return to the Irish and Ulster-Scots consultation at a later point.

Reports from Committee Rapporteurs

Mr Speaker: Without any further ado, we will move to the reports from the Committee rapporteurs, who will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

A rapporteur from each of the four subject Committees will report on their work. After each update, I will open the Floor for five to 10 minutes for questions and comments from Members. That is short, but, hopefully, with your growing experience, your replies will be succinct but important and relevant. Members who speak should keep their remarks brief to allow for as many contributions as possible. Members should not talk over each other and should respect the views of colleagues. Those who wish to speak should rise in their place to attract the attention of the Clerks. I will call Members to speak as indicated by the Clerks. Members should state their name clearly before they speak so that it is on the record.

Education Committee

Martha Curran: I am reporting on behalf of the Education Committee and our work between March and November of this year. We were provided with many opportunities over that period, namely the independent review of education. Many members of the Committee participated in the consultation on the review, in Parliament Buildings on 27 April. That is particularly relevant to the Committee as the review will look at many things, including the curriculum.

It is the view of the Committee that the curriculum needs to be revised to reflect the lived experiences of children at this time. The first section of the review in April focused on the reality of our experiences in education, from primary school through to where we are now, and how we felt those experiences had helped or hindered us. It then discussed a hypothetical perfect education journey, and what we felt that looked like.

A major area for development was learning for life and work (LLW), as most children leave school with no knowledge of mortgages, for example, and limited knowledge of areas such as relationships and sexuality education (RSE). The panel closed with a discussion about the best plan of action for those future developments.

In June, we worked alongside the Children's Law Centre (CLC) on a new module for its online chat function on the CLC website. The chatbot is called REE and is designed for young people under 18 to ask questions about their rights. It can also help to give legal advice if it is needed. We were offered the chance to sit on the period dignity steering group with the Department of Education and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), and Clodagh McAuley, from the Health Committee, has since taken on that role. We have had a series of meetings outside of those events to do our own work in the Committee.

At our meeting on 6 April, the Committee met staff from the office of the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). We discussed children's rights, with a focus on our chosen area of education, which was RSE. We continued the discussion when the Committee met in Parliament Buildings to discuss our focus area of RSE. We had a series of meetings with key stakeholders, starting with the director of curriculum and assessment, Ray Caldwell, from the Department of Education. He explained the wider context, including the education policy, the Northern Ireland curriculum and where RSE sits within the Northern Ireland curriculum, whilst also making us aware of the minimum content that is required to be taught.

We then met Roisin Radcliffe and Deidre Coffey from CCEA. They provided the information on the RSE hub and the resource area of their website for children and teachers. They explained the RSE progression framework, which sets out, in an age-appropriate way, what should be delivered in RSE at each key stage.

Finally, we were briefed by Assembly research officer Niamh Devlin. She discussed definitions of RSE, characteristics of effective RSE, RSE in the context of the NI curriculum, and in the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and across the European Union. She also talked about the findings and recommendations from reviews of RSE in Northern Ireland, and we are looking at future avenues for development and what we can do next in the limited time that we have been given to work on this topic further.

On 19 October, we used the meeting as an opportunity to give feedback to those who could not attend the Committee research day on 30 September, and agree our next steps for future work on this project. In order to further investigate the issue of RSE, the Committee has agreed to talk to a variety of stakeholders, including the Education Authority, initial teacher training institutions, the Education and Training Inspectorate, teachers and, of course, young people. We will present our findings and questions to the relevant Ministers and/or officials in the spring of 2023.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that, Martha. Do any members wish to address that report? It is not compulsory, but the idea is to try to get people to participate and get involved in making contributions. If nobody wants to contribute to this particular section, we can move on to the next rapporteur.

Clodagh McAuley: I just want to ask about LLW. What would you do? Would it be like first aid because that is very important in schools. In my school, there are mental health first-aiders. Obviously, first aid is very important because someone could have a heart attack or anything at any point, and it is very important for everyone to be equipped for that.

Mr Speaker: Martha, you may be able to respond to that. If you cannot, do not worry.

Martha Curran: We were made aware that defibrillator training has been made into law, and the Committee is looking at putting that into place, as far as I am aware.

Mr Speaker: If Members are content, we will move on to the next report. Afterwards, if Members want to speak to that, they should stand up to make sure that Laura can spot you, and then she can advise me accordingly.

Environment Committee

Andrew Martin: I wish to speak on behalf of the Environment Committee to report back to the Assembly on the stakeholder event on 30 November.

First, we met with Barbara Love, a Northern Ireland Assembly Bill Clerk. She gave us an overview of the climate change legislation in Northern Ireland. Then, we met Colin Breen, the director of climate change and green growth policy division at DAERA. He helped to guide us on where we are now and what we need to do in the future. Finally, we met Northern Ireland Assembly research officers Suzie Cave and Mark Allen, who raised some challenges, questions and further considerations about the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

1.45 pm

First, Barbara Love, a Northern Ireland Assembly Clerk, outlined the process by which the Climate Change Act was passed. Although a private Member's Bill had been moved by Clare Bailey MLA, it was later

withdrawn to allow the passage of Minister Edwin Poots's Climate Change (No. 2) Bill, which was introduced in July 2021. The Committee put out its call for evidence over the summer, and the Bill had its Second Stage on 27 September 2021. The Committee decided to scrutinise the Bill over the summer. Doing so meant that it was able to report on the Bill on 20 January 2022. Consideration Stage of the Bill was scheduled for 1 and 2 February 2022, which meant that the Committee had two days of plenary sittings to look at all the Bill's provisions and make amendments. The Bill passed Final Stage on 9 March 2022, received Royal Assent and became an Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Colin Breen, from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, gave us further insight into the Act from the Department's perspective and an overview of the green growth strategy. The Department took account of information from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which gave recommendations on a five-yearly carbon budget that tells us how much carbon we are recommended to emit in a five-year period. The UK Climate Change Committee modelled lots of different scenarios to show where Northern Ireland can realistically get to, but none of those said that Northern Ireland could reach zero emissions by 2050. That is why the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill originally had a target of at least an 82% reduction in emissions. The Department is concerned because it has a legal duty to reach net zero, but has no pathway to get there; it is not laid out in the legislation.

Northern Ireland is a very small part of the puzzle, with 0.04% of all global emissions. When the first climate action plans come in, in December 2023, there will be a range of biodiversity targets. There will be costs to getting to where we have been advised to get to, which is around an 82% reduction in emissions, as I said. Those costs vary from year to year over the trajectory of the plans, but are in the region of £300 million to £400 million a year. The extra costs to get to net zero are much higher. The Department calculated that, towards 2050, the possible costs will rise to up to £900 million. We do not have an answer to the question of where that money will come from; the Committee will, therefore, continue to press the Minister on the issue.

The Climate Change Committee studied a realistic target for Northern Ireland. To avoid an expected 80% reduction in livestock, carbon capture and storage is also mentioned in the Act. Unfortunately, Northern Ireland does not currently have the capacity for carbon capture and storage; it is a new concept, and there is not a lot of scientific research or knowledge about how it could operate. Furthermore, there are no potential CO₂ storage locations offshore in Ireland or Northern Ireland. A small-scale plant in Larne, which is one of the first in the world, is trying to capture carbon directly from the air, but the Department does not believe that it will have anything in place until 2030 that could go at a scale to reach the targets.

A major thing that ordinary people like you and me could do is reduce food waste. If food waste were a country, it would be the third biggest emitter in the world after America and China. As food decomposes, it turns into methane, which is a potent greenhouse gas. Food waste is an unknown major contributor to climate change.

Another issue is textiles. Textiles come next after food waste for the level of emissions that are produced. Previously, Colin worked on a survey that found that there were around one billion items of unworn clothing in people's wardrobes in the UK. On average, that is just over 10 items in a person's wardrobe unworn or possibly worn only once, with the tag still on.

We then received a briefing from Mark Allen and Suzie Cave from the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service. They outlined some of the language of the Act that will need further clarification and will possibly need to be amended. The headline element of the Act is that there are net zero greenhouse gas

emissions targets by 2050 that include reaching 48% by 2030 and the need to set a 2040 target within the next two years. The Act suggests that CO₂ needs to be reduced by at least 100% and methane by no more than 46%. One of the ways to reduce greenhouse gas is with its removal from the atmosphere, and the focus is on peatlands and their ability to act as a sink for carbon. However, in Northern Ireland, our peatlands are actually an emitter rather than a sink. At the moment, in the condition that they are in, they cannot contribute to us achieving net zero. They are actively making it more difficult and adding about 11% of our overall emissions rather than working effectively to reduce the emissions. A lot of our peatlands have dried out and have been broken down to the point at which they are increasing CO₂ levels. A DAERA peatlands strategy is coming out that hopes to bring all our peatlands into repair and under good management, and the Committee will continue to pursue that issue with the Department.

The actual target in the finalised Act is up to 46% reduction in methane, but there is no accurate value on this. Does 2% mean that the target has been met? Seventy-seven per cent of our emissions of methane in Northern Ireland come from agriculture. Take that in the whole UK, and it is 43%. Ireland is slightly higher, because the island of Ireland has a higher proportion of livestock due to our climate and conditions. If we are to begin to reduce livestock, how do we replace that employment? Maybe green jobs are available there but are those going to be available at the minute when you make the decision to close those factories?

Who will be accountable for achieving the targets and could they face sanctions and fines? At the minute, the Department is able to be held responsible, but we do not know what happens if it does not achieve its plans.

In drawing my remarks to a close, I highlight the fact that the Act puts responsibility on all Departments to continue meeting the targets that are contained within it. Perhaps most helpfully, the Act underpins much of what is in the strategy by making it a requirement to develop climate change action plans, ensure a just transition, make climate change a budgetary priority and seek improvement in biodiversity, water quality and air quality.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Andrew, for what is clearly a comprehensive contribution.

Ronan Lynch: You mentioned that food waste and textiles are huge issues for carbon emissions, especially in Northern Ireland. Has the Environment Committee been able to get together to discuss potential ways to combat this challenge?

Andrew Martin: This was brought to the Committee at its last meeting, so we have not had the chance to discuss it at the Committee yet. At our next meeting, we will discuss it.

Mr Speaker: Andrew and Ronan, thank you.

Health Committee

Clodagh McAuley: I am the rapporteur for the Health Committee. For the past few months, our Health Committee has been discussing the large amount of issues needing to be solved around mental health in young people.

On 24 May, we had a Zoom drop-in session and talked with Theo Burton, Pure Mental NI's policy adviser. Theo talked us through the work of Pure Mental NI, focusing on how mental health can be impacted by the various topics that our Committee focuses on.

Our most recent in-person meeting was held on 30 September in Stormont. We met with Northern Ireland Assembly researchers, officials from the Department of Health and the founders of Pure Mental NI. The meeting was to discuss our area of focus: mental health. The Assembly researchers focused discussion on a range of mental health issues, including mental health being different from mental illness, aspects of the mental health strategy and the children and young people strategy. We also discussed how that strategy would impact mental health for schools and us, as young people.

Our discussion with the Department of Health focused mainly on child and adolescent mental health services, most commonly known as CAMHS. We discussed how understaffed and underfunded those services are and how much of the mental health strategy, relevant to young people, will be effective in 2022-23.

We then talked to the charity, Pure Mental NI. The briefing included: the rationale for and setting up of Pure Mental NI; our views on the mental health strategy; fully funding the mental health strategy and continuing it beyond a pilot scheme; and introducing well-being into school life in a holistic way.

We then discussed what our next steps should be. We looked into mental health first-aiders in schools, better signposting of mental health services and the consideration of a set time for mental health learning and care in schools. Ultimately, our Committee would like to develop a set number of recommendations for the relevant Ministers on the actions that we would like them to consider. The recommendations would be presented to and discussed with the relevant Assembly Committees, which would then be asked to endorse them and support them to proceed.

Go raibh maith agat. Thank you for your time.

Mr Speaker: Go raibh maith agat, Clodagh. Are there any other contributors?

Lauren Bond: I am a member of the Education Committee. In a recent mental health report that I was part of, someone described mental health as being fluid. No two people are the same, and neither are their struggles. Mental health is fluid, yet we often take a one-size-fits-all approach. If a doctor prescribed the same medication to everyone, it would be fatal, and yet, with mental health, that is exactly what we do. We see individuals labelled by their conditions, and we fail to see the person underneath.

We desperately need mental health education for young people that is relevant and realistic, and we need to have conversations with young people instead of telling them what to do. Emotional health needs to stop being condensed into the form of a booklet, and it needs to be a regular conversation. No longer can it be one school assembly a year or colourful posters on Mental Health Day. We need to have conversations with young people that meet their needs and understand what they are going through. It is desperately needed, and I really appreciate the Health Committee's decision to do it.

Mr Speaker: Clodagh, do you want to take that up?

Clodagh McAuley: We discussed the need to talk more about mental health in schools. The school system needs help, let us be honest. A lot of the time in learning for life and work, they just put on 'The Apprentice',

and that does not teach us about life or anything. We discussed with Pure Mental NI the possibility of it going into schools for learning for life and work to talk about this stuff. It would not be like being in assembly where you are sometimes scared to speak up because there are so many people. If you are in a classroom setting, you are more likely to speak up. We are looking into that. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Go raibh maith agat, Clodagh. Thank you, Lauren.

Rebecca Moore: I am a member of the Education Committee. In response to what Clodagh said, it is pretty worrying that CAMHS is understaffed and underfunded, especially for children and adolescents in a very important time of their life when they are going through a lot of stress. With exams coming up for students, that is one thing that we definitely need to improve for the young people of Northern Ireland.

2.00 pm

Oliver Mercer: You referred to LLW reform, which is an area of interest that the Education Committee has been looking into. It is a good area for overlap. I know that the Education Committee would certainly support working between Committees on that. Hopefully, we can make that happen soon.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that, Oliver. Clearly, it is an issue that requires a lot more discussion, debate and understanding. If Members are content, we will move on to the next rapporteur.

Rights and Equality Committee

Sofia Wilkin: I would like to take this opportunity to report on the Rights and Equality Committee's work for the period since the last plenary sitting in March 2022.

The Committee's main focus was the proposed change to marriage laws. We met virtually as a Committee with Martin Tyrrell from the Department of Finance, who was looking at a change to the minimum age for marriage from 16 to 18. The consultation period was extended so that the Youth Assembly's views could be taken into consideration. It is the first consultation that the Youth Assembly has taken part in. After the consultation, on 1 July, Minister Conor Murphy gave a written statement in which Youth Assembly Members were mentioned as consultees.

Secondly, a number of Youth Assembly Members have been selected to form a youth panel for the selection process for the new Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. So far, they have taken part in equality and diversity training, will partake in interview training and will sit on the panel for the selection of the new commissioner in February 2023. On 6 April 2022, the Committee met staff from the office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. We discussed children's rights, with a focus on our chosen area of raising awareness of the rights of the child among young people, particularly in schools.

The Committee also met in Parliament Buildings to discuss our focus area of raising awareness of children's rights, particularly in schools. We conducted a series of meetings with key stakeholders, including Stephen Orme, an Assembly research officer, who talked us through the background of human rights and the distinction between general human rights and children's rights. We then met Caroline Perry, a Clerk in the NI Assembly and Clerk to the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights. She gave us an in-depth understanding of what a bill of rights contains, using the South African bill of rights as an example, and how it functions when

applied. Following that, Alex Tennant of the office of the NI Children's Commissioner talked to us about NICCY's role and the work that it carries out to protect and enhance children's rights and presented us with the resources for children and young people to inform them about the rights that they possess.

Recently, on 19 October, we gathered online as a Committee to debrief our findings from 30 September and update fellow members who could not attend. We also took time to discuss next steps and questions that we would like to investigate further within each topic of focus. In order to further investigate our focus on raising awareness of the rights of the child, particularly in schools, we suggested attendance as a Committee at the International Children's Day event that is hosted by NICCY, and we would like to pursue correspondence with the Department of Education and CCEA to ask the important questions that we have regarding this issue. We would also like the opportunity to speak to school principals about the implementation of awareness in schools. Thank you for your time.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Sofia. Do we have any other contributions in this section? If not, we will move on.

Updates Since the Last Plenary

Marriage Law Consultation

Ollie Torney: I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. On 15 March 2022, the Committee met Martin Tyrrell of the Department of Finance to consult on marriage laws. Two main elements were discussed: first, whether we think that belief-based marriages, such as humanist marriages, should have the same legal footing as religious marriages, and, secondly, whether we think that the minimum age at which a person can get married or enter into a civil partnership should be raised from 16 to 18.

Five years ago, a court in Belfast found that a feature of our marriage laws meant that, in practice, they did not treat people equally. At the time, our marriage laws gave people who wanted to get married two options: they could have a religious marriage in their place of worship or a civil ceremony in a registry office. The court said that this arrangement left some people out. Some people have strongly held beliefs that are not religious but that, all the same, impact their daily lives. Humanists are the best-known example of a non-religious belief group. When asked whether we were happy with the amendment to marriage laws to allow belief marriages, the Committee agreed that there is no issue with doing so.

Raising the minimum age at which a person can get married took up the majority of our time. At present, people can marry at the age of 16 or 17, provided that a parent or guardian agrees. The Department of Finance was looking at that area because some important organisations, such as the United Nations, believe that there should be a global minimum age for marriage of 18. People who are under the age of 18 might be more likely to be forced into a marriage against their will, often with someone older. If people under the age of 18 marry, they might miss out on important parts of their childhood, such as education, training or even just the experience of being young and not having to take on the responsibilities of adult life too soon. Governments in most countries also say that, when a person under the age of 18 is allowed to marry, girls are more likely to marry than boys. That means that girls are at greater risk of being forced into marriages and have a greater risk of missing out on education or other essential life-building chances. However, some argued that if a person can pay taxes, join the armed forces or have a job, they should be allowed to marry. Also, very few people actually get married at the age of 16 or 17.

Other issues include whether marriages from other countries involving people under the age of 16 should be recognised in Northern Ireland and whether Northern Ireland should be the first country in the UK to have a minimum age of 18, making it an outlier. Despite all this, the Committee agreed that the minimum age should be raised to 18 to protect vulnerable people from entering a legally binding contract. I speak for the whole Committee in saying that this was an incredibly interesting opportunity to hear about the issue, and being able to influence change and put our fingerprints on new government documents and legislation was an amazing opportunity and an hour well spent. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Ollie. Does anyone else want to speak on the marriage law consultation?

Alannah Freaney: I want to comment on how reassuring it was to see the Committee, almost unanimously, agree with the fact that the minimum age should be raised to 18.

Ronan Lynch: I want to second Ollie's point that it was an amazing opportunity for the Youth Assembly to be able to discuss the matter and share our viewpoints. It was great to share our viewpoints, even when they contrasted. It felt satisfying to take part in the consultation as a member of the Rights and Equality Committee.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Ronan, and thank you to all the contributors.

Meeting with the PSNI Chief Constable

Eoin McAlpine: Along with other Youth Assembly Members, I attended an event with the PSNI Chief Constable, Simon Byrne. In March 2022, Youth Assembly Members were invited to attend an initial meeting with the Chief Constable and other youth organisations. Youth Assembly Members then met Simon Byrne on 26 April. To include the voices of as many young people as possible, the Youth Assembly asked 1,000 people on its consultation forum what they would like to ask the Chief Constable. During the meeting, Members discussed many topics, such as careers in policing, recruitment, local policing, the rise in mental health problems and many other topics.

2.15 pm

On the day, we were split into teams and given three activities to complete, such as caving, climbing and archery. That heightened our trust, communication and support for each other, and those are vital skills for Youth Assembly Members. A few of us also partook in interviews with the media to advertise what the Youth Assembly has achieved in the past year. Being able to speak with MLAs and, of course, with the Speaker, Alex Maskey, has ensured that we, as young people, can be heard and have our opinions and views on important issues, such as the age of criminal responsibility, considered.

On Friday 27 July and 9 August, Youth Assembly Members from all Committees volunteered to work alongside the Children's Law Centre on a new module for the online chat function on its website. The chatbot is called REE and is designed for young people under the age of 18 to ask questions about their rights. It can also help you to get legal advice, if you need it. Any child who wishes to use it can go to the website and type in an issue that they have. The existing modules include, "What age can I?" — for example, asking at what age you can get a tattoo. The others are homelessness, stop-and-search rules, employment, online safety and privacy, welfare benefits and mental health. The Children's Law Centre plans to add education to that list and is working with solicitors from Allen & Overy to develop sample questions and answers.

The Children's Law Centre hosted an online introduction to the project in July, and, on 9 August, Youth Assembly Members went to the CLC offices in Belfast and joined young people from the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI) and the CLC youth advisory panel, which is called Youth@CLC. We read and reviewed some of the questions and answers supplied by the solicitors to make sure that they would be easily understood by young people. Questions were on topics including exams, uniforms, expulsions, suspensions and your rights, as a young person, to education. It is hoped that the new education module will be live on the website soon.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Rebecca. Are there any other contributions? If there are not, we will move on.

NICCY Interview Panel

Jessica-Elise McArdle: I am a representative of the NICCY panel. In August 2022, the Northern Ireland Executive approached the Youth Assembly to nominate three individuals to sit on the panel, the aim of which was to help to appoint the new Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, as the term of the current commissioner, Koulla Yiasouma, will come to an end in March 2023.

While many people entered to take on the role, the applications showed that there was a huge interest and, instead of three panellists, we have seven: Charlotte McGucken, Hannah O'Connor, John Kane, Lauren Bond, Oliver Mercer, Ronan Lynch and me, Jessica-Elise. Since the panel's formation in October, as part of our role and to better understand the nature of the role of Northern Ireland's next Commissioner for Children and Young People, we have undergone training provided by NICCY, met with political representatives and reviewed legislation and policies that affect children and young people. It is important that that individual can promote, safeguard and represent all young people in Northern Ireland. As a move forward in our decision-making process, we will continue to undergo training and to apply our knowledge as we contribute to the new appointment. We will be sure to keep the Assembly up to date as we work through the process.

Mr Speaker: Thanks to Jessica-Elise. Are there any other contributors?

Ronan Lynch: I just want to say what an excellent opportunity it is to take part in the process and that we look forward to continuing with the process.

Mr Speaker: Thanks, Ronan, for that important assertion.

Oliver Mercer: In furtherance of Ronan's point, I think that it is fantastic that young people are involved in the selection of such an important person for advocating for the rights of young people. It is really important that young people are consulted on that and have a voice. I hope that that trend continues into the future.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that, Oliver and Ronan. I again make the point that that it is very important for young people like you, and that is the important opportunity that you have as Members of the Youth Assembly.

It is important that young people, in particular, try to learn how to input into changing social policy and, indeed, legislation. Hopefully, your experience on the Youth Assembly will show you how government works and how you can change public policy and legislation if you think that is necessary. It is about identifying the issue, marshalling your arguments, doing your research, and lobbying and convincing others who do not agree with your view on whatever issue you are dealing with. It is very important.

As I said, I am particularly pleased that the Justice Minister invited you to take part in a consultation and, likewise, I am pleased about your involvement with NICCY. I recognise that the Commissioner for Children and Young People is in the Gallery and arrived here some time ago. Koulla Yiasouma is here this afternoon. Thank you, Koulla, for being here with other important people who have been involved in the wider process.

You will be pleased to hear that we are giving you five minutes for a comfort break — but no more than five minutes, because we need to return to your final debate of the afternoon. You have five minutes, and we are counting.

The sitting was suspended at 14.21 pm.

2.30 pm

On resuming —

Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility

Mr Speaker: OK, folks. We are about to start the debate on the minimum age of criminal responsibility. I will just make a couple of points. If people need to use the bathroom, you are free to go. Just go, if you need to go to the bathroom — you do not have to wait until the session is over — as long as you do not all go together, because there would be a long queue.

Thank you to all of you who contributed to the previous item. It was very interesting for me to hear about all the work of the Youth Assembly so far. The next item of business for this sitting is the debate on the consultation to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years of age. The former Minister of Justice specifically sought the views of Youth Assembly Members on that consultation. Indeed, the former Minister met some Members just last week to discuss the reasons for the consultation and to hear Members' views.

The purpose of this debate is to allow Members to make and hear arguments for the move from 10 years to 14 years of age, as well as arguments for retaining the age at 10 years and those to move it to 12, 16, 18 or another age. The Committees have been split into two groups for the purpose of the debate, with the Education and Health Committees arguing for the change as set out in the consultation, and the Rights and Equality and Environment Committees arguing for staying with 10 years of age or in favour of an age other than 14. Although specific Committee members will argue a particular perspective, the debate will end in a free vote, and it is important for you to understand that. You will be asked to go into the voting Lobbies to vote according to which argument you feel was stronger. That means that you will either support the motion, which means that it will be carried, or you will vote against the motion, which means that it will be rejected or negatived, as it is called sometimes, and it will fall.

You are also encouraged to respond to the Justice Department's consultation on the issue, based on the view that you come to today. As I said before, contributors should keep their remarks brief in order to allow as many contributions as possible. Again, Members should not talk over each other and should respect the views of colleagues. Those who wish to speak should rise in their place to attract the attention of our Clerks. I will call Members to speak as indicated by the Clerks. Contributors will have up to three minutes to speak. If that is clear and people are happy enough with that, we will move on.

Moved —

That this House believes that the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be raised in Northern Ireland from 10 to 14 years.

Oliver Mercer: I sit on the Education Committee and, therefore, I am arguing for the proposition.

Northern Ireland has the lowest minimum age of criminal responsibility in Europe. Why is this? Is it possible that it is because our rules were established over 60 years ago? All the new laws across Europe that have been implemented since that time have had new evidence to take into account, such as the damage that is done to young people at a young age who are brought into the criminal justice system prematurely. Or,

perhaps, it is symptomatic of the deep political divide in Northern Ireland that all too often disables our political infrastructure from acting in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. Either way, it is in our interests, as an instrument of our democracy, to support raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14.

Jenna McLaughlin: I sit on the Rights and Equality Committee and I want to tell you why the criminal age of responsibility either should not change or should change to 12 as a lower age. There are many issues to remember or factor in.

At age 10 and above, you are well aware of your consequences and actions. People are becoming more and more independent at that age, learning the ways and finding out how things work. Things such as stealing, vandalism and drugs are other examples that are talked about. You know that they are bad. You choose to do them. Factors such as peer pressure, friends doing things and things that people have grown up seeing all contribute to their choices. If a 13-year-old steals a car that is worth thousands, they should be punished; they purposefully did that. No one else made them. However, a 15-year-old stealing a loaf of bread that barely costs £1.50 should not be penalised for stealing something that they need.

John Marcus: Children under the age of 14 should not be drawn into the youth justice system, as early contact usually has long negative effects. Studies have shown that early contact with the justice system causes more harm than good. If children are dealt with at an early age, their offending can get worse, rather than better.

Martha Curran: There is a significant difference between saying that a child aged 10 knows right from wrong and saying that they should be criminalised for their behaviour. Any change in policy should be made with the best interests of children at the heart of the decision, as there are a multitude of statistics that support that idea. Research into the development of the brain during adolescence and the implications that that has in relation to risk-taking and the understanding of longer-term consequences supports non-criminal justice interventions for the small number of children aged under 14 who offend. The majority of those things could probably be sorted out by their parents.

Alannah Freaney: I argue that the age should stay at 10 years old. By changing it to 14, we are not making the number of criminals fewer; we are simply ignoring them. I understand that a lot of offenders are often disadvantaged, but why do we have to wait until they offend to suddenly care? By putting in the work early, we can change those young people's lives and reduce the number of offenders. Therefore, there is no need to raise the age. By victimising offenders, we are often losing sight of the actual victim of the crime, if there should be one. The rehab of young offenders already happens in schools or by parents. For example, if you break a chair or scribble on a desk, you are not going to get done for vandalism; it is the school that sorts it out, so the person has no criminal record anyway.

It is quite easy for me to start throwing statistics and cases at your face, such as examples of 10-year-olds murdering, but we know that basing the law around special cases is actually unhelpful. I am going to bring it closer to home a wee bit to something that some of you might have experienced; this happens fairly often, I have discovered. When I was quite young — we will say 13 or 14, for the sake of argument — I had a crime committed against me by a member of my class. He had done the crime to around 40 other girls. I will not go into the grim details, but it makes me sick to my stomach to think that, in the future, he would not be prosecuted. I would not feel safe going to school if the age was raised to 14 or 16.

Andrew Martin: I am sure that that was a very traumatic experience. I agree that it should not be raised to 14. However, I disagree that it should be on more of a case-by-case basis. For more serious crimes, it should be 10 years old, but, in general, it should be 12 years old, as per Scotland and the Republic of Ireland; their legislation provides for that.

Kelly You: Picture in your mind a 10-year-old child being handcuffed, thrown into the back of a police car and whisked off to custody. It is unfathomable. To have a 10-year-old dealing with the full force of the law is unacceptable. I agree that young offenders should be dealt with, but they should not have to face such a traumatic experience. Your brain is still developing severely as a 10-year-old. For it to be thrown into the deep end like that is not OK. Young offenders should have to go to rehab. If such a young child has committed such a terrible crime, something very wrong has clearly happened, and they need help.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Kelly.

Kaitlin Caldwell: The change would affect only a small number of people. Also, this has been the way since 1998. As people, we change, and things around us change with us. Those are a few points about why it should be changed to 14.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Kaitlin. Alannah, I will bring you back in in a wee second.

Hannah O'Connor: The age should stay at 10, or, as a compromise, move to 12. From even a young age, you have a moral compass and know what is right and wrong. Yes, your brain may not be as fully developed as it would be when you are 14, but you are well aware of the consequences of your actions and of what you should and should not do, especially when it comes to the law. You are taught that in primary school, and it is reinforced in secondary school, so it should stay at 10.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Luke Massey: I sit on the Health Committee. The minimum criminal age at which a child can be charged with a crime was set in the 1960s at 10 years old. The age should be raised to 14 because it is outdated and was put into motion at a very different time from where we are now.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Lauren Bond: I sit on the Education Committee. When I was 13 years old, social media companies did not view me as being responsible or old enough to use social media. When I was 14, I was not viewed as being responsible enough to receive adequate RSE. When I was 15, I was not viewed as being responsible enough to receive financial education, and now, at 16, I am not viewed as being responsible enough to vote. At 10 years old, however, I can be held criminally responsible.

The girl standing here today is very different from the girl who spoke at our second plenary meeting a year ago. In fact, I have changed a lot since then, and from my 14- and 13-year-old selves. My life has consisted of making mistakes and learning from them. I have had the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. However, the same opportunity is not granted to those who find themselves in different circumstances from mine. Young people growing up in poverty, in care or in difficult home circumstances often find themselves robbed of the same opportunities as everyone else.

Instead of stopping the problem at the root, once again we wait until it has gone too far. Too often, young people are treated like children whilst being expected to act like adults. Instead of educating, supporting and providing for young people, we criminalise them. What if, instead of trapping young people in a vicious cycle, we focused on creating better circumstances for them? Are they criminals or are they victims of their environment?

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Aaron Murphy: I sit on the Education Committee. A lot of people have said that people aged 10 to 14 are aware of their moral compass and the consequences of their actions. However, people do not always have those consequences at the forefront of their minds, and, oftentimes, when they do come to mind, it is after or during committing a crime. That is not fair. As an adult, you would be more inclined to think of consequences before, but if you are younger, you do not think about that as much.

Mr Speaker: OK, Aaron, thank you. Alannah, I will bring you back in now.

Alannah Freaney: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I want to comment on the image that the Member pointed out of a 10-year-old being thrown into the back of a police vehicle, handcuffed. That would be quite harrowing had it actually happened on a regular basis. The number of young offenders under the age of 14 is quite low. In fact, in 2020, there were only 328, which is quite a small number for the whole of Northern Ireland. I agree that that is a very unfortunate image, but the reality is that that is not the case.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

2.45 pm

Ollie Torney: Following on from what Alannah said, by raising the age to 14, we are not stopping crime; we are just ignoring what is happening. Rather than simply saying, "OK, let's raise the age to 14", we should reconsider how we treat those below a certain age who commit crimes. As Naomi Long said when she was consulting us, most of those under the age of 18 who commit crimes do not do so as a career criminal, so they do not do it with malicious intent; they might do it because they have been put in a particular circumstance. They are children: they do not do it for the reasons that we think that they are. That is why methods like restorative justice and general rehabilitation should be implemented over raising the age at which we hold people accountable. If we leave those under the age of 14 who commit crimes by the wayside and simply ignore what is going on, we will not stop them going down the path of a criminal life. It will, honestly, just push them down a darker path than if we had just treated what is going on at its root.

Robert Moore: I oppose the motion and propose that the age be raised to 16. Those who study sociology will have heard about socialisation and its effect, which is to teach people about the norms, values and culture of society. It happens as a process until you die; it continues for the rest of your life. Leaving it longer for people to be socialised, so that they are aware of their decisions and the social situation that they are in – say, to 16 – would lead to much greater clarity about the consequences and the cause and effect of their actions. It is not, however, a black-and-white situation; it should be done case by case. Some cases are more severe than others. I agree with what the Republic of Ireland did in 2006, when it raised the minimum age from seven to 10. It kept the age at 10 for the most serious offences. That allowed for those criminals – but not everybody – still to be prosecuted and pay for their crimes.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Robert.

Fionn Cregan: I sit on the Rights and Equality Committee. As mentioned, from a young age, children have something of an understanding of a moral compass and of what is right and what is wrong. The threat of children being convicted of a crime and being criminally responsible for their actions and the threat of such a punishment at a young age may be enough to deter them and even other people like drug dealers who use children to carry their product and sell it illegally. That would be enough to deter them from committing a crime in the first place.

Mr Speaker: Go raibh maith agat.

Ronan Lynch: I am 14 years old, which just happens to be the age that we have been talking about today. A lot of discussion today will revolve around the current minimum age of criminal responsibility — 10 — and how young children of that age are potentially negatively impacted by coming into contact with Northern Ireland's justice system. The minimum age of criminal responsibility should be raised to 16. I want to try to view the age of 14 through a similar lens.

As I mentioned, I am 14 years old. The vast majority of people I am with at school and am friends with are in that 14- to 15-year age range. Listening to people in the Chamber today, and before we came here in preparation for the debate, I came to realise that there was a bit of a misconception around the level of maturity that is commonly present in that age range.

When I was participating in the Q&A with Naomi Long last week in preparation for the debate, she said something that stuck with me. To paraphrase, it is not about whether the child knows the difference between right and wrong; it is a matter of knowing the consequences of their actions if they perform wrongdoing. When I look around at the children near me in form class and in maths, English and business studies, I see that there are people who are still “troublemakers”. They do not really care what the teachers say. They collect detention slips like they are Pokémon cards. When I look at them, I do not see people who want to be a nuisance or who will become hardened criminals or anything remotely near that. I see young children who still do not quite have all their sense yet, and that is understandable at that age.

We often talk about the age of 10 and 10-year-olds being loaded into the back of a cop car, but we have not yet discussed how 10 is not the cut-off point for that to become a nasty image to have in your head. We need to consider that there are similar issues for 14-year-olds, too, when it comes to raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility. It is also important to point out that, while the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) accepts 14 as the minimum age of criminal responsibility, it wishes it to be 16.

I understand that 14 is being proposed as a sort of compromise for people who are not particularly willing to raise the age to 16, but we have already heard from many individuals who feel strongly and passionately about what they think the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be. If they are so passionate and believe so strongly in their convictions in this matter, do they not believe that they should stick to their ideals instead of trying to compromise with people they disagree with? That is why the minimum age of criminal responsibility should line up with the UNCRC's recommendations and be raised to 16.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Ronan.

Oliver Mercer: Offences committed below the age of 14 are often symptomatic of deeper problems, and responsibility for those problems lies not with the child but, perhaps, with the adults in their life or with their circumstances. Instead of helping these people out of their dire situations, we are currently dooming them to a life of poverty and unemployment with a criminal record that will plague them. What will that lead to?

Nothing but more crime. The Member to my right said that 328 people under the age of 14 were in the criminal justice system. Do those people's lives not matter? Do those people's futures not matter? Do those people not matter at all? Do their futures just deserve to be damned?

As for the calls for compromise between the ages of 10 and 14 — for example, 12 — I believe that there is a misunderstanding. Fourteen is the agreed-upon compromise. Sixteen was the ideal that many people went into the discussion with, and 16 was not the number that they got, because people disagreed with them. Politics is not a thing of absolutes. Politics requires compromise. Progress requires compromise, and 14 is the compromise, 14 is the progress, and 14 is the answer.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Aaron Murphy: It has to be said that all but three countries in Europe, including us, have a minimum age of criminal responsibility of over 10. Some 23 of them have a minimum age of 14.

Some of the more prosperous countries, such as Luxembourg and Belgium, have responsibility for criminal matters at 18. It has to be said that if every country has an age that is higher than we currently have — some of them could be considered to be doing a lot better than us — is that not the way to go? Keeping it at age 10 or changing it to 12 should not be accepted. Everyone else is doing well. If something is working for everyone else, it should work for us.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

John Marcos: I am from the Health Committee. If children are criminalised from a young age, they are likely to be drawn further and deeper into the criminal justice system. I believe that by raising the age limit to 14, we can improve the outcomes for children by keeping them out of the justice system for as long as possible. By doing this, we can help to remove the burden of a criminal record and of being associated as a young offender.

Sofia Wilkin: I think that, by age 10, the moral compass should be adequately constructed to a basic level. That can, of course, depend upon the parental choices made. For young offenders, putting in the work early may prevent them from offending again and, through the justice system, they may be able to access help to combat or improve their circumstances. For example, they may receive help to stop abuse, homelessness or substance abuse issues.

Also, in response to Alannah's harrowing experience, children who commit crimes should not be infantilised because it completely undermines the possible hurt and trauma inflicted upon others and their victims. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Sarah Kelly: Raising the age promotes criminal activity because there are fewer barriers or limits on behaviour. This relies further on their nature or nurture. Furthermore, especially in Northern Ireland, there is the issue of exploitation by paramilitaries, especially of young people who would be seen as, namely, impenetrable due to the nature in the face of the law. That could be quite *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Sarah.

Rebecca Moore: I argue that the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be raised from 10 to 14. A few points were made previously about how children have an awareness and understanding of what is morally right and wrong at 10 years of age. However, we fail to recognise that there are external factors within the lives of children. There are societal factors and issues at home. Children with troubled upbringings could have more difficulties with the law. Is it really fair to give them a criminal record at 10 years of age that will hinder them for the rest of their life? Thank you.

Alannah Freaney: Further to the Member's point, where she somehow suggested that I do not care or do not think of the 328 children who are under the age of 14 or think that they do not matter. We are losing sight of the actual victims. What about the actual victims of those 328 children? I agree with your point that we should not infantilise criminals. At the end of the day, for someone under 14 to be convicted, they would have had to do something pretty severe, considering the stuff that was mentioned before, such as vandalism. That does not mean that they have been taken to the courts. For the Government to prosecute someone under the age of 14 means that the offence is semi-serious. Has anyone stopped to consider that maybe those 328 children, although they come from disadvantaged backgrounds and deserve to be helped, preferably before they commit crimes, have hurt someone or something? They are probably only convicted because they did a crime. At the end of the day, they recognise what they are doing. Some people would argue that they recognise the consequences. Even if they did not, I do not know what the exact consequence for murdering someone is but it does not mean that I am going to do it. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thanks, Alannah.

3.00 pm

Dominic Bateson: I believe that the age should not be raised. Doing so could cause criminal gangs to use young people to further their own goals, such as transferring drugs and weapons. They will not face the same punishments, so it will not deter them. Is it possible that in raising the age of criminal responsibility, we could inadvertently encourage criminal gangs to target young people?

Kelly You: The opposition has, time and time again, mentioned how crimes committed by children under the age of 14 are going to be ignored. Those crimes will not be ignored. The age of 14 is a blurred line; if it is a serious crime, it is not to say that if you are 13 and turning 14 tomorrow, you are not going to be prosecuted. It is not like that. If you have done something wrong, you will be punished. For a 10-year-old, however, early intervention is needed; it is just that that intervention will not be made by a court of law.

Andrew Martin: My point has already been covered by my colleagues across the way and to my left. It is about the exploitation of children and, more specifically, around drugs. We have seen in recent coverage in Belfast the problems that we have in socially deprived areas. If we raise the age of criminal responsibility, we risk the exploitation of children by drug dealers who try to use those children to spread their hatred.

Martha Curran: I sit on the Education Committee, and I will argue that the age of criminal responsibility should be raised to 14. I wish to emphasise that most 10-year-olds have a limited level of education — they are in P6 — and that is simply due to their age. Knowledge would be considered as power in the rest of the world; surely it is the job of parents, carers, schools or whoever it is who has responsibility for that child to teach them, in a safe environment, right from wrong.

I would also like to point out that a 10-year-old can take the family dog for a walk. If they do not pick up after that dog, it is their parents' fault. Yet, in the eyes of the law, they have criminal responsibility for their actions. Surely that, in itself, is a minor flaw that could be reviewed.

Hannah O'Connor: I want to return to an issue that was mentioned previously, which is the origins of young people who commit crime. They may live in poverty or there may be other factors. Instead of letting them get away with a crime, and letting crime happen, why do we not solve the real reason that they are doing it? Crime is crime and the law is the law.

Fionn Cregan: Further to Alannah's point, everyone is so concerned about the children; they are being convicted, they are too young and they should be pitied. Realistically, if they are being convicted as was previously said, it should be the case that they deserve it. In a sense, if a child does something so bad that it is worth them being locked up, they should be locked up. No one really cares about the victims; they think, "Ach, the poor child, they are only young". What about the people whom they have hurt or affected by committing that crime?

Lauren Bond: I am from the Education Committee. In a cost-of-living crisis, I fear for the young people in my constituency who will — not might — find themselves in difficult situations. It is a proven fact that those who live in areas of deprivation are more likely to find themselves trapped in the system. It is not a matter of moral awareness; it is about the dire situations that many young people find themselves in. These are not criminals; these are children.

Mr Speaker: Before I move on to the next contributor, I advise Members that the names that I have so far are Coran, Aaron, Robert, Alannah and Ollie. Have I left anyone out who has indicated that they want to speak? Oliver, sorry, I left you out. I had your name down. Do any other Members want to add their name to the list? I am conscious of the time. It is now nearly time to end the debate. OK, Neamh, I will call you.

Neamh McShane: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Neamh, we will leave you to speak last because a number of other Members have already spoken. If you are happy enough, we will take you as the final Member to speak.

Coran Morris: I am from the Environment Committee. I want to comment on what Aaron said about the so-called prosperous countries of Luxembourg and Belgium, which have raised their criminal responsibility age to 18. I want to raise the question: are those countries statistically more luxurious or are they actually more luxurious? Are the crimes being swept under the rug because, statistically, they do not actually count?

Aaron Murphy: Before I make my point, I will just reply to that. I am not saying that they are more luxurious as countries. Belgium holds, I think, membership of the European Union. Belgium and Luxembourg are not more luxurious, but they are not poor countries. They are doing well for themselves.

I want to point out three points that I have heard about paramilitary gangs. These issues are not to do with young people; they are underlying issues that we have heard about time and time again in this country. We need to get rid of these paramilitary gangs. When we get rid of these drug gangs, these paramilitary groups or whatever they call themselves, we can then have safer environments for our young people.

Robert Moore: I have to agree with Alannah that there really is not enough focus on the victims here. In a debate where it is about the offender, victims are being shrouded over. There is not enough consideration,

even in the current system, of the crime being committed. It is more just the age and background. It is not something that can be looked at from one angle; it has to be taken from multiple angles, including the nature of the crime, the circumstances around the crime, what happened at that particular moment and who was there. There has to be more rigorous assessment into what happened and more investigation because it will only make outcomes worse and put people in a repeating loop into the criminal justice system if they are going to be treated badly and put in the criminal justice system early if that could be avoided.

Alannah Freaney: I would just like to raise a point that quite a lot of other Members have raised, and that is that 14 is not a hard line. If you are under 14 or over 14 and you commit a crime, it will likely be dealt with by the school, out of the courts or by juvenile help centres. That is already happening even if you are over 14. I am 18 now and am in uni. I have moved to Belfast. I am by myself. I am in the big, bad adult world, and, if you beat up someone, you will get prosecuted. Yet, if you are 16 and are in secondary or grammar school and you beat up someone, at most, you will probably get a suspension. So we are already looking at people who are under 18 being dealt with out of court, which furthers my point that if you are convicted of a crime, it is probably quite serious. For example, if you draw on a wall in the house, you are put on the naughty step. If you draw on a wall in a park, nothing happens. Why is there no action? Thank you very much.

Mr Speaker: Thanks, Alannah.

Ollie Torney: I want to talk about the image that a lot of people are bringing up: the idea of a 10-year-old in the back of a police car. Realistically, that does not happen, even when it comes to how people are prosecuted. Naomi Long said that, usually, in most cases, people under the age of 14 will not go to prison — plain and simple. The punishment is usually something like community service or being put into custody. I feel like a lot of us need to get the image out of our head. When we say that people between the ages of 10 and 14 are being acted on by the law, we do not mean that they are being put into prison; they are just being held accountable for their acts.

Mr Speaker: Ollie, thank you.

Oliver Mercer: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I absolutely agree with the Member who spoke previously, and I firmly believe in all the points that he raised. I believe that the solutions should be put into law to protect young people and that those legal protections would be beneficial to young people. That would ensure that the system that you are describing is the same in every case and is equal across the country.

Some Members believe in a more punitive justice system. Overly punitive justice systems go beyond helping society. All they do is increase the number of victims of crime. Under the proposed legislation, people will still receive punishment, just not a criminal record that will plague them forever. Instead, they will get the help that they need. Many Members have said that it would be better if we intervene. No one is disputing that, but we are saying that, for those whom the system cannot help and for whom the system does not intervene beforehand, they should still be offered an opportunity to live their life to the fullest.

As for the image of a 10-year-old in a police car, I concur: it should never happen. It does not happen, and that is right, but 10-year-olds deserve legal protection to ensure that that does not happen. The 23 countries in Europe that have a minimum age of criminal responsibility of 14 have not fallen apart. This is not earth-shattering stuff; it is just about providing an extra layer of legal protection to those who need it. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Rebecca Moore: Although a few points have been made saying that crime is crime and that you should suffer the consequences of what you have done, we are failing to acknowledge and understand that children may have been groomed by adults to commit awful crimes such as drug smuggling and stuff like that. Also, we are not thinking about children from impoverished families who have very little food and very few necessities. For example, if a 10-year-old steals some food from a shop to go home and feed his family, is it really justifiable for him to be sanctioned for that? Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Kel McAreavey: I am a member of the Rights and Equality Committee. It is unfair that people under 16 should be held responsible for their crimes when they try to get into certain areas of employment. There should be punishment for those under 16 who commit crimes, but it is not right to take away job opportunities from those who committed crimes at an age when they may not have realised the effects of their actions on the rest of their lives.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. We have come to our final Member: Neamh.

Neamh McShane: In my opinion, children think and act differently from adults and older teens. They have an inability to express themselves, and they *[Inaudible]* as their brains are still developing. Children deserve to learn from their mistakes and to evolve. That is why the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be 14, not 10. In the majority of European countries, it is 14.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Neamh.

That concludes the list of people who wish to speak. Thank you very much for your contributions. Presiding over proceedings today, we could feel — I will not say, “the tension” — the passion in the arguments rising as the debate went on. Fair play to every one of you for making the contributions. You have clearly thought well about this and are still listening to the arguments. You have to listen and make your arguments if you want to convince others. That is what this is about. You are learning about a debating Chamber — how it works and all the rest of it. Good luck to you in the future with all of that. I certainly think that our legislature will be in good hands if people of your age and level of development will be the people making the laws in future.

It is time to vote on the motion that has been debated. As I said, this is a free vote. Normally, in an Assembly vote, there would be a Clerk in both Lobbies to record the vote, with an MLA supporting the “Aye” vote and one supporting “No” in both Lobbies to ensure that the vote is properly conducted. Today, the Youth Assembly team will act as both Clerks and Tellers. They will register your vote in the Lobby. That is because we trust them. They will then return the results to me at the Table. We will now proceed to the vote.

Question put.

Some YAMs: Aye.

Some YAMs: No.

The Youth Assembly divided: Ayes 15; Noes 20

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: OK, Members. Today's debate has been important. It has been an important part of your project of learning how to work effectively as a Youth Assembly. Obviously, ultimately, that means learning how to legislate or how to influence or change social policy. It was quite clear — the three of us commented on this earlier — that the temperature and passion around the arguments rose as the debate went on. That is a good thing, because it means that people were becoming more engaged with the issue. In the last few minutes, there were an additional six or seven contributors who wanted to say something.

Obviously, you will all reflect on the narrative of today's discussion; there are more grey areas in there than there are black and white. However, for the purposes of the discussion and today's exercise, I wanted a straight black and white, yea or nay, answer from you on the Question. Quite clearly, when you read the narrative from the contributions, there are a lot of grey areas. For example, in a normal parliamentary session, if that motion were in front of us today, Members would have an opportunity to amend it. You can see in the course of the conversation that there were Members who were saying that they were not quite sure about age 16, age 14, age 12 or whatever. I invite everyone to read the Hansard report because there are contributions in there that might tell you that you need to learn more about something, that you need to raise an issue further or that you need to get greater clarity. I think that it was Oliver who made the point that just because you are saying that somebody may not be criminally responsible, that does mean that they should walk away from some sort of punishment or sanction. It all has to be appropriate and all that. So, there is a lot more within that.

I thank each and every one of you for your articulacy in the debate. The Justice Minister and the Justice Department have to take on board what the undercurrent was here and what the broader view was because, obviously, Departments and Ministers will have to pursue policy based on evidence. I do not know the statistics about whether Belgium or Luxembourg have a good record or not, but, obviously, all those things are issues and matters that the Department and any Minister will have to take on board.

I thank you all for your contributions today and the passion with which you made your arguments. If you look at and reflect on the debate today, you will see that there is still a lot more that you need to tease out on these matters. I encourage Members to put their direct response into the Department's consultation. Obviously, the Minister invited you as a Youth Assembly. We are delighted with that, but, again, the Minister is also inviting you all to make your own contributions into the Department's consultation, given that you all had a free vote today.

On that note, we conclude today's session. I thank each and every one of you for your contributions and your patience, effort and energy throughout the day. I thank all those who have made the day possible, including members of your families. You are free to go, you will be pleased to hear, on this fine Saturday afternoon. I hope that the sun is still shining outside. Good luck with the rest of your studies and whatever work you are involved in between now and the Christmas and new year holidays.

Adjourned at 3.27 pm.