



Youth Assembly

For Northern Ireland

OFFICIAL REPORT

5th sitting of the Youth Assembly

At 2.15 pm on Friday 24 February 2023
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 (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)
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Youth Assembly

Friday 24 February 2023

The Youth Assembly met at 2.15 pm (Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Speaker's Welcome

Mr Speaker: Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the fifth plenary sitting of the Youth Assembly. Tá fáilte romhaibh uile go léir anseo inniu. As always, I thank all those who have made today possible, including the Youth Assembly team, the Assembly secretariat, the Assembly Commission and the advisory group.

At the outset, I welcome some special guests whom we have with us today and whom you have already met in the Long Gallery. They are joining us in the Public Gallery for at least the start of today's proceedings, as they have a flight to catch very soon. We have the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP; the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, the Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP; and the Llywydd of the Senedd, the Rt Hon Elin Jones MS. I appreciate our visitors' support today, and I thank them for taking part in a useful, important and constructive session earlier with Youth Assembly Members.

The main focus of today's plenary sitting is a take-note debate on the importance of children's rights. It will include a response from the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma. You will be aware that the commissioner will be leaving her post in the very near future. I do not want to say sorry about that, in the context of not wanting to lose you. Today's debate will provide Members with a useful opportunity to scrutinise the commissioner's work as well as to voice your own views. I intend to say a few words at the conclusion of today's sitting on the commissioner's time in office. Thank you, commissioner, for attending today's debate and for your response later to the comments that will be made by Members. As it is a take-note debate, there will be no vote at the end of it.

As I have said, today's proceedings offer Members the chance to explore issues and discussions around children's rights that are relevant to you and your peers. I am sure that the commissioner is keen to hear your thoughts and will address in her response the issues that Members raise. My role, as always, will be to chair the plenary sitting and keep order. Members must respect the right of others and listen to what is being said. It is customary that Members do not talk over one another.

Rights of Children and Young People

Mr Speaker: Let us proceed to today's business. We begin with the commissioner making an opening statement about her role and the work that she does on protecting the rights of children and young people. We will then move on to hearing from Members on the issue of rights for young people and reflecting on the work of the commissioner. Finally, the commissioner will respond to Members' comments.

Moved —

That this House strongly advocates for the rights of children and young people and calls on the Commissioner for Children and Young People to report on her work to ensure these rights are promoted and protected.

Mr Speaker: We will now hear an opening statement from the commissioner, which will be followed by statements from Members and then a response from the commissioner. Members will be asked to indicate whether they wish to make a statement following the commissioner's opening remarks.

Commissioner, you have approximately 10 minutes in which to make your opening statement. Please proceed.

Koulla Yiasouma (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have my tissue here because there will be tears. I cannot tell you how pleased I am to be here and how pleased I am that I have survived my term as Children's Commissioner. I finish on Wednesday of next week.

When we were talking about how I would finish my time in office, we talked about presenting my term and my analysis of where we have been to a group of VIPs, and we were coming up with a list of VIPs. It became clear who the VIPs we needed to talk to were: the Members of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. You have been established to hold the Northern Ireland Assembly to account, and it had also been my dearest hope that, annually, I would report to you on my work. Therefore, it is an absolute privilege for me to be here with you to report on my work.

I will not go into detail, but I will give you a quick overview, because I really want to listen to what you have to say and respond to that. The role of the Children's Commissioner and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) team — I am proud to say that that the team is here in the Public Gallery — is to make children's rights a reality. It is to take what, some people think, are intangible rights and make sure that children and young people live them and breathe them every day of their lives and that the authorities that are charged to make that happen do their jobs properly.

Before I talk about what we need to do, I will say that we are in a different place in 2023 from where we were in 2015 when I took up post. There is a recognition that decisions cannot be made about children without children and young people, regardless of age — the little ones as well as older ones like you — and the establishment of the Youth Assembly is one such example. We have a different attitude to children's mental health and well-being and a very different attitude to special educational needs and the transformation that needs to take place. However, the challenge remains turning those attitudes into real actions.

As you know, I became commissioner eight years ago. Think about what it was like and where you all were eight years ago. Some of you were eight years old. At that time, we were involved in reporting to the United

Nations on how the UK, specifically Northern Ireland, delivered against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This year, my successor will do the same. It is interesting to look at how we have progressed or not progressed.

I will give a few dates. I have been commissioner since 2 March 2015. The Executive collapsed in January 2017 and reformed almost exactly three years later in January 2020. COVID hit in March 2020, and then, of course, everything went pear-shaped again in March 2022. In the eight years that I have been commissioner, four of them have been with no Assembly and two of them have been with COVID. That is not about whether it means that I was or was not a success; it is about what that has meant for children and young people. I am delighted that colleagues are here from the other jurisdictions because often in Northern Ireland we have watched as other places have progressed. It has sometimes felt like children in Northern Ireland have been outside the sweetie shop while the other children were inside choosing their sweets, and that has not been fair. Nevertheless, this place has shone in the past eight years, and you have been its brightest stars.

The work that we have been doing in NICCY has sought to address educational inequalities. Children and young people have been telling us about exam pressure and have said that many schools feel like exam factories. Again, it was predominantly before the pandemic that we heard that. We have heard from families that school and education are not free and that there are enormous costs to sending children to school. Academic selection continues to divide the haves and the have-nots in our education system. Although the situation is improving, there remains insufficient mental health and well-being support in schools, and, again while it is improving, children and young people do not have the voice that they need in schools.

The list goes on. We know that children with a disability, children who are newcomer pupils, children who are looked after, children who are travellers and children who are young carers are not getting the education experience that they deserve. We know that we have work to do with relationships and sexuality education (RSE).

I am happy to take any questions, and I will be quick, Mr Speaker.

We have worked on mental health — of course, we have — and we published our ‘Still Waiting’ report in 2018. I am really pleased with how our Government have responded. Every year, we have monitored them on their action plan in delivering the recommendations of ‘Still Waiting’. I am so proud that we were able to say, “Yes, mental health is a big issue, but here are the solutions to take it forward”. We shone a light on the way forward to improve our children’s mental health.

We have also done work on general health waiting lists. There has been a lot of discussion in Northern Ireland about the fact that we have the longest waiting lists on these islands, but children were invisible on those waiting lists. I am really proud that we shone a light on that in 2021.

Child poverty is the most disgraceful issue in our society and across these islands. If we can be serious about addressing child poverty, we will eliminate some of the other vulnerabilities and discriminations that children experience. An anti-poverty action plan will do that.

We have worked on safeguarding in a way that expands the definition of safeguarding and looks at services for children who are sexually exploited but also at how we can support children who are criminally exploited by gangs who use the title of paramilitaries to get away with it. I do not need to re-emphasise that after what happened on Wednesday evening.

That brings us to the legacy of the conflict. We have done a lot of work on this, remembering that, although children have been invisible in so many of our peace agreements and getting-back-to-work agreements, you — this generation of children and young people — continue to be impacted by the conflict. We need you to be more visible and to have a better education system to talk about the conflict and how we will continue to move forward as a society. We are in a very different place from where we were in 1998, but we still have a journey to go on.

We have worked on youth justice. I will not say too much about that, but I am happy to answer questions on the minimum age of criminal responsibility. I know that it was a theme of your previous plenary.

We have also done significant work on participation and the voice of children and young people. That is one of the big things that we have improved on. NICCY has had a small role in that, but you have done it. You, as young people, have taken to social media and said, “If you don’t listen to us, we are going to tell you anyway. If you don’t ask us, we are going to tell you anyway”. Increasingly, people are being listened to. One of the highlights is the way in which the Youth Assembly was established. The fact that the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Commission own this structure is, by far, the best model. The Youth Assembly is part of the Northern Ireland Assembly; you are not outside it, you are not separate from it, you are not an NGO or this or that. That is so important. I am just sorry that the adults in that equation are not living up to their responsibilities in that regard.

We have begun work on climate justice. Yesterday, we published a significant report on homelessness. We continue to work on challenging discrimination, particularly where children and young people are discriminated against in the provision of goods, facilities and services because of their age. The biggest piece of work to be done on discrimination is on the fact that you can still be hit in your home: the physical punishment of smacking. That remains a source of deep concern and injustice when our nearest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland and Wales have done that work.

We have done work on families and unaccompanied children who are seeking asylum and are subject to immigration control, and on making sure that the rights of families who have no recourse to public funds are met. Just because the service and the policy come from the Home Office in the UK does not mean that the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly do not have responsibilities to protect the rights of those children and young people.

I literally have 10 seconds left. I have never come in on time; this is the first time ever. I hope that that demonstrates the respect that I have for the Youth Assembly. Thank you very much.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Thank you, commissioner, for your opening remarks. We will now move to hearing statements from Members regarding the motion under consideration. Members should keep their remarks as brief as possible to allow as many contributions as possible from other Members. Member should not talk over one another and should respect the views of colleagues. I remind those who wish to speak to rise in their place to attract the attention of the Clerks. I will call Members to speak as indicated by the Clerks. Contributors will have up to three minutes to speak. The Floor is yours, Members.

Oliver Mercer: In four days’ time, we will mark 20 years since the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 was passed into law. It has been this country’s pleasure to have

Koulla Yiasouma serve as commissioner for eight of those 20 years. Under article 7(5)(e) of the Order, the commissioner is charged with ensuring:

“the services of the Commissioner are, so far as practicable, made available to children and young persons in the locality in which they live.”

First, I would like to inquire as to your interpretation of the specific language of the article and what you define as “locality”. How have you and your office taken action to ensure that no geographical restriction affects the work of your office?

Mr Speaker: My thanks to Oliver Mercer.

When people rise to speak, I ask that they state their name for the record.

John Kane: Madam commissioner, eight years ago, you set out with a series of goals. Of those goals, which do you think you have successfully achieved and what have you found most difficulty in achieving?

Ronan Lynch: I will try to keep this brief. First, I congratulate Koulla for serving out her two terms in their entirety and for the undoubtedly positive impact she has had and will continue to have on Northern Ireland’s troubled process to attempt to properly address children’s rights and issues as a priority in both legislative and practical terms. NICCY’s work and impact is underappreciated by many. However, a large part of that issue ultimately boils down to the lack of awareness that I believe to be present when it comes to the promotion of not just NICCY and its work but children’s rights themselves.

Rights education and awareness amongst children and young people is far less than it needs to be, and, while I appreciate that NICCY’s third statement on children’s rights addresses the need for better awareness in education and in general, I have two questions: what were the highlights of NICCY’s attempts to promote awareness among children of their rights during your tenure, and what advice would you give to the commissioner who will follow you on how they can achieve success in that area and create a better and more informed Northern Ireland for children and young people everywhere?

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Ronan.

I will take one more contribution, and then I will change the rules a bit and invite the commissioner to answer some of the questions as we go along. That might make it a bit more interactive.

Alannah Freaney: I would like to highlight fuel poverty. There is no solid data on it, but it is estimated that around 70% of households are experiencing fuel poverty. I am sure that we are all feeling the sting, regardless of our situation. At night, when I am trying to write an essay, my hands are cramping up with the cold. I do not live in poverty, but I am feeling the chill like everyone else.

Fuel poverty affects absolutely everything. It permeates all the issues that were raised by the commissioner. It affects health, mental health, performance in school and sleep. I would like to further highlight its affect on a child’s pride. They may be a bit embarrassed. Is the £600 enough? Do you feel that the measures that have been put in place are enough?

Koulla Yiasouma: Oliver, you asked your question, and here is my copy of the legislation; it is very dog-eared. I know that one of the plans of the first commissioner, Nigel Williams, in response to that article was to have a youth presence in each locality, but that did not really seem to work. I am the commissioner, and

NICCY serves every child in every corner of Northern Ireland. I have never said no to any invitation, nor has the team — I have literally been everywhere — nor have I ever suggested a different time because I did not want to get up too early. I have absolutely done that, but we also reach out to every corner of Northern Ireland to make sure of it. The north-west has been particularly receptive to NICCY, but there have been pockets in Northern Ireland that have been a little bit less so, particularly south Down. We have gone everywhere, we reach everywhere, and we are mindful of being all-inclusive.

John, you are right: even at interview, I said that my priorities were mental health, educational inequalities and poverty. No, I am not happy with where we are. I am probably happier with mental health than I am with the other three. We are nowhere near where we need to be with educational inequalities, bearing in mind what I have said, and I will answer the poverty question when I address Alannah's question. As I said, I think we have progressed in that we are better at articulating and understanding the issue, but that does not mean that we have achieved the change that we need. We have not done that.

Ronan, I still do not think that I should answer your question, because you are a Spurs supporter, but I will, because you are a Member of the Youth Assembly. I am pretending that you do not support Spurs or that you will see the error of your ways sooner or later. You are absolutely right, and that has been one of the most difficult nuts for me to crack. The best defenders of children are children and young people themselves. We are all children's rights defenders, and I want every child to be a defender of their rights, but that can happen only if they know their rights. That has proved to be really difficult to achieve.

We have had some highlights. The team has worked really hard with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), and we have had resources put into the curriculum. I do not think that it has been promoted recently, but there is a children's rights hub on the CCEA website. I can see more schools and young people wanting to talk about it, but, until it is a mandatory part of the curriculum in school and in youth groups, we will not get to where we need to be. That is not just for children and young people but for parents. Sometimes, people think that children's rights are anti-family and anti-parents: that is not true. The biggest defenders of children's rights are their parents. They are the ones who ring our legal and investigations team every day of the week. They want to know about their children's rights as well.

Alannah, thank you for the question on fuel poverty. You talked about the figure of 70% of households in Northern Ireland being much higher than in any other jurisdiction. That comes about because we spend more than 10% of our income on fuel. My view — some of you will have heard me say this before — is that we need to stop compartmentalising poverty. We talk about period poverty, food poverty and fuel poverty; we talk about all sorts of poverty. The reason that people experience fuel poverty is that they do not have enough money to pay their bills, and that is poverty. The reason that they have to go to a food bank is that they do not have enough money to buy food, and that is poverty.

There is a draft anti-poverty strategy sitting there, waiting for an Executive to sign it off for consultation. We are talking about things like removing the two-child rule in benefits. We are talking about child payments: additional payments if you have got a child in the family. My colleague will kill me because I cannot remember the other two things. Free education, making education free. The £600 is nowhere near enough, and I would rather that I did not get the £600 and it went to families who needed it. It was nowhere near enough, but it helped.

We need a proper strategy, so that children who are poor and their families can be lifted above the line. We must stop making ourselves feel better by donating cans of food to food banks.

Mr Speaker: Again, I thank the commissioner.

I will take one Member at a time. Oliver, do you want to come back in?

Oliver Mercer: The commissioner has shown a great deal of commitment to her office and the young people whom she so diligently supports and a great understanding of the duties that she is mandated to perform, but, as we all know, the commissioner often goes above and beyond her legal obligations. A prominent example can be found in article 7(3) of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which charges the commissioner with keeping under review:

“the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for children and young persons by relevant authorities.”

The commissioner has shown a genuine passion for her work through her interpretation of the Youth Assembly and the voice of young people, in general, as a relevant authority. That also fits neatly under article 6(3)(b) of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, wherein the commissioner is required to have regard to:

“any relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

Article 12 of that convention stipulates that “the views of the child” ought to be “given due weight”. That is clearly a deeply held belief of the commissioner, as evidenced by her reliance on the NICCY youth panel for consultation throughout her tenure. I cannot help but commend that quality. The commissioner has shown clear evidence that she understands the intrinsic value of the youth voice. The commissioner makes no attempt to objectify or use the youth voice in a tokenistic way, as is such a common problem in the modern political scene; instead, the commissioner values us and values our voice.

The commissioner has two roles: to listen to us and to fight for us; both of which the commissioner has fulfilled above and beyond what any reasonable person might have asked for. For that I thank the commissioner for her attendance here today and for her service to the young people of this country. I have no doubt that that sentiment will be shared by my peers here today.

I conclude by asking the commissioner this question: what difference has she observed the youth voice making during her tenure?

Koulla Yiasouma: Thank you for those kind words, Oliver. I admit that I have been on a journey around the youth voice in my time as Children’s Commissioner. I do not know how you can do a job like this without understanding what it means for children and young people. I do not know what it is like. I was a child, but, clearly, when you look at me, you see that I was a child quite a few years ago — more than four decades ago, I was a child. I do not know what it is like to be a child living in Banbridge, Ballymena or Bangor. I do not know unless I ask children and young people and the team asks children and young people. It is only by knowing what it is like for you that we can know what changes need to be made.

Another point is that, just because you say, that does not mean that it will be. My best times have been in debates with young people when I have tried to show them the error of their ways and to let them know that I am right and they are wrong. I do not always win, but that is OK, because I respect your views, and we have a journey to go on together.

It is impossible to do this job without the voice of children, and that is not just the NICCY youth panel and the Youth Assembly but the voice of every child. Some people talk about hard-to-reach children; some people talk about voiceless children. They do not exist in Northern Ireland; there are only children whom people choose to ignore. That is why you need a Children's Commissioner's office: to make sure that no child is ignored, no matter who they are. Some of you will know that my background is with children who commit crime. Just because a child has done the worst thing that we can imagine a child doing, it does not mean that they do not have a voice, and it does not stop them being a child.

It is impossible to do this job without children and young people. I hope that my successor builds on the work that has begun, particularly — to go back to your previous question, Oliver — making sure that NICCY reaches every corner.

Mr Speaker: I have a number of Members who have indicated that they wish to speak. I will call you in order. Martha.

Martha Curran: Was the outcome of our last debate about raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 years old as you expected? How did NICCY respond to the outcome of that debate?

Koulla Yiasouma: Now, I was hoping that you would ask that question. I do not know whether those of you who were here remember, but I was in the Public Gallery.

I have never wanted to jump over railings so much. I was trying to catch Mr Speaker's eye to say, "Please let me speak, even though I am old". Since the debate, I have said that it was the best debate that I have ever heard on the minimum age of criminal responsibility. I have been campaigning for over 25 years to raise the age of criminal responsibility in Northern Ireland.

2.45 pm

Is Lauren here? Yes. Seriously, you and I need to have a conversation. You made me think, "My goodness". I found it helpful to harness my thinking about what we need to do to address some of the legitimate concerns that were raised. No, the debate was not what I expected it to be, nor was it what I had hoped it would be, but I am taking that to be because you wanted to raise the age to 16. I know that that is not actually the truth. The debate was so good that I ask that you think about debating the subject with some of the advocates of changing the minimum age, because we have a response.

I want to be clear: raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility — "MACR" to those of us who know it so well — is not letting children off. It is not saying to one child, "Your rights are more important than those of the person whom you hurt", particularly if that person was another child. It is not saying that. It is in no child's best interests to tell them that they are more important than somebody else. It is in their best interests to say, "You hurt somebody. You need to understand what that means for that person and do a little bit of work to make sure that you do not hurt anybody again." You do not necessarily need the criminal justice system in order to do that. That is the debate, and that victim voice, which is so annoyingly well articulated, needs to be heard, and we need to have that debate again.

No, the debate was not what I had expected, but that is because I know that you all wanted it to go to 16, which is the NICCY position.

Grace Mc Gouran: I would like to ask the commissioner whether anything has been done to adjust the religious and cultural divide that exists among children in Northern Ireland right from the early years of primary school through to secondary education. I know that the commissioner is a supporter of shared education, but are any further strategies planned to promote peace among future generations?

Koulla Yiasouma: I am a supporter of integrated education. I am a supporter of making sure that children live and learn together. We have fuffed about. The Bill that was passed in this place last year is the beginning of something, but the tone of the debate around how we promote integrated education really upset me. Do not get me wrong: I am not saying that the schools that most of you go to are not good schools. I am not saying that they are teaching you to be sectarian or hateful. Of course they are not, but a lot of you or some of you will not have a friend from the other religion until you go to university or leave school. That cannot be right. We cannot expect schools to fix that, however, because we live in divided communities. Nowhere near enough has been done to heal the religious rift.

We have gone backwards in the past few years, following Brexit, and I will go there. The debates on the protocol have not helped. We place too much responsibility on you, as young people, to heal that rift for us. We need to give you a chance to make things different and to live differently from how your parents and grandparents lived when they went to school.

I would like to see the local school be the best school, where you go to to learn with children of all religions. Let us not forget that green and orange or Catholic and Protestant is not what it is about any more in Northern Ireland. We are becoming a multicultural, multiracial community. That is fantastic, so we need to look at how we can have more inclusive schools.

I am not sure whether I answered your question, Grace, but we are nowhere near where we need to be. I would like to see more schools come together.

Andrew Martin: I thank the Children's Commissioner for her work over the past number of years. She knows some of the questions that are coming up, as I spoke to her in the Long Gallery.

I am one of the oldest members of the Youth Assembly: I am in second year at Queen's University. Members across the House have talked about fuel poverty. I live with students, and we have friends who live in freezing conditions in houses in Belfast. You are the commissioner for young people as well as for children. I still count myself as a young person. This is a serious problem. Those poor living conditions can cause difficulties in mental health, and, if there is damp etc, that is not a good environment for people to live in, study and achieve their full potential. I do not think that it is fair that, when they step beyond the age of 18, the system basically lets them go.

Koulla Yiasouma: Thanks for that, Andrew. Article 3 of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 defines what a child is, for the purposes of the Children's Commissioner. As you say, Andrew, it is everyone under the age of 18, or under the age of 21 if "he" — those were the days — has a disability or has been looked after in the care of the state. It is not an area that I am allowed by law to address, but I understand, and I think that universities and colleges need to step up and support their students, because you cannot learn if you are cold; you just cannot do it. There has been talk about Children's Commissioners extending the age range, often to 25, and I know that some of my colleagues have slightly different definitions. Our problem is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and where that goes. NICCY would need to be doubled in size to be able to address all those issues.

Through the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission, universities and further and higher education institutions need to make sure that they support their students properly.

Ollie Torney: I would like to talk about something along the lines of the work that you did in reducing waiting times for such services as CAMHS, especially for those with disabilities and those who face other barriers in getting that care. Do you believe that there are other areas within the children's mental health services of Northern Ireland that might require reforms to improve the experience of young people when using those services?

Koulla Yiasouma: Thank you very much. You are right in saying that we are waiting too long. As I said, our 2018 report was called 'Still Waiting' because young people were waiting too long for CAMHS. We know that, if there were more early intervention and prevention services for children and young people, they would not need child and adolescent mental health services run by the health system. We need reform in those areas, from start to finish, and we need to see proper partnership and funding of the voluntary and community sector to do that early intervention work. We need to see the proper funding of services that are being run in schools, whether that is independent counselling in primary and post-primary schools or some of the well-being stuff that has been going on, and the services need to be quality assured so that we can ensure that that happens. We also need to be sure that children who need hospital services get them here in Northern Ireland, and get them as soon as they need them. That is a significant issue here, particularly for children and young people who have a learning disability and a mental health issue, and for children and young people who have a drug and alcohol issue because of their mental health or an adverse childhood trauma. Therefore, there is a lot of work to be done. We have a plan: I mentioned 'Still Waiting', but there is also the mental health strategy and the action plan. I think that we have a plan. The problem is making it happen in a sustainable way and investing properly in our children's mental health so that they never have to get sick, because we are catching any problems early.

Robert Moore: I thank the commissioner for her attendance today. I fully agree with her comments on child poverty. Child poverty in Northern Ireland is a disgrace. It is the issue about which I care most. The situation with child poverty should have got better over the commission's eight-year tenure, but it has not; indeed, in the last number of years since COVID, it has got worse. As a percentage, it has got worse, and, as a number, it has got even worse again. Given the rates of poverty in the areas most affected by the conflict, does the commissioner agree that addressing the conflict is linked to addressing poverty and child poverty?

Koulla Yiasouma: Thank you for that, Robert. Yes, I agree with you 100%. If you map — it is not a perfect map, but it is quite good — the areas affected most by the conflict and that still see the ramifications of the conflict and the areas with the highest levels of poverty, you find that there is a very strong overlap between the two.

The situation with child poverty has not got better in the past eight years. That is one of my deepest regrets and sadnesses, because it runs through everything that we do. Children with a disability are more likely to be poor than those who do not have one. Children on free school meals are less likely to go to a grammar school. Children with mental health issues are more likely to be poor. Children who are poorer have more physical health issues. The list goes on and on.

I agree that, if we address child poverty and the conflict — whichever one we do — we will end up sorting out child poverty and family poverty. Children are poor because their families are poor, so we need to lift families

out of poverty, which is why the anti-poverty action plan is so important. However, we need an Assembly to do that, and we need to go further than they have done across the water.

Lauren Bond: First, I thank the commissioner for the work that she has done over the years. As a young person, I really appreciate it.

Although school uniforms were originally designed to unite young people, the soaring prices of school uniforms and the increasingly difficult economic situation mean that young people are being left behind. Year after year, we see grants being offered and discussion of a cap on school uniform prices. However, do you not feel that we should stop the problem at its root by introducing more affordable uniform alternatives? Should a brand label on a jumper be a barrier to a young person receiving a proper, fair education? Should a logo on a plain white shirt prevent a young person from achieving their first win with their sports team?

What does the commissioner feel is an effective way forward on the issue? How we do turn the conversations into action? Every child has a right to an education, to learn, to create, to share and to be fearlessly themselves, and that cannot be tied back by a price tag on a school uniform. I really appreciate the work that the commissioner has done on this issue and on child poverty, which she mentioned. However, how can we effectively make a meaningful change in this area?

Koulla Yiasouma: Thanks for that, Lauren. You are 100% right. In 2017, we published a piece of work on the cost of education that showed the huge disconnect between the uniform grant for children on free school meals and the real cost of uniforms and the difference in the cost of school uniforms between non-selective schools and selective schools. Some of that is to do with the need for branded items, particularly PE kits, and some of it is to do with the need for a woollen blazer or a particular type of skirt.

My position is very clear: we need gender-neutral uniforms — not one for boys and one for girls. We need one set of uniform items from which you pick whatever. We need to bridge the gap between the uniform grant and the actual cost of the uniform. If we start raising the uniform grant to meet the cost — £500 or £600; I heard that it costs £800 to kit a child out to go to a particular school — that is a nonsense. There is no need for that. If the uniform grant was a couple of hundred quid, schools should be compelled by law to ensure that their uniform offer — what they put on their list — meets that requirement and that bill and that the uniform is generic. I believe 100% that that should be the case and that it is possible.

I think that the Minister would have done something. It might not have been as radical as what I suggest — I do not think that it is radical — but we would have got closer. It absolutely needs regulation. That is the only way that you will get school boards of governors to behave themselves.

3.00 pm

John Marcus: What are some of the long-term and short-term policies in your report that you hope to enforce in order to help in the battle against homelessness?

Koulla Yiasouma: We launched our homelessness report only yesterday, and all the recommendations have gone right out of my head — no, they have not.

Some of the recommendations in our report are based on the fact that the Queen's University team spoke to families and young people themselves. Temporary accommodation is temporary. Families are finding themselves in temporary accommodation for far too long, so I would like to see short-term accommodation,

including for families seeking asylum. We have heard a lot of talk about hotels. Just to be clear, those families are in rooms in hotel buildings; they are not receiving a hotel service. That is OK for a couple of weeks, but it is not OK in the long term. I would like to see that temporary accommodation is actually temporary.

We would also like to see the points system and the decision-making system altered a little to take into account children with additional needs, particularly those with neurodisabilities. Living in cramped conditions does not work for a child who may be on the spectrum because of the space that they need or for children who are doing homework and things like that.

We want our communities to be safe, so that we are not putting young people in their own flats in really unsafe areas, where they do not feel safe.

We made 15 recommendations. We want children to be more visible in policies on homelessness. We want no child under the age of 18 ever to have to be in a bed and breakfast. We want them to be seen as a child, that 16- and 17-year-olds are not treated as homeless or intentionally homeless and that children's and young people's services kick in for them.

We need to protect the rights of children in families seeking asylum. They have a right to a home so that they can learn and be well and healthy.

Please read the report and all 15 recommendations. Like I said, they have completely gone out of my head.

Hannah Abraham: Thank you, commissioner, for taking the time to be with us today. I would like to address the problem of child marriages. In 2021, 39 girls and 15 boys were married in Northern Ireland — Northern Ireland. That is simply preposterous. I am a 19-year-old, and I am thinking of children aged 16 and 17, just a couple of years younger than me, being married.

I come from India, which recently increased its age of marriage to 21. For the age in Northern Ireland still to be 16 or 17 is simply preposterous. What actions have you taken, to whom have you been talking and what actions will we see in future in order to address the situation?

Koulla Yiasouma: I know that that is another area that the Youth Assembly has worked on. You will be aware that the Department of Finance did a consultation on marriage and threw in a question on the age of marriage. In 2016, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that, across the four jurisdictions, we should raise the age of marriage to at least 18. We have been consistently asking government for that to happen, but remember that I said that we have hardly had a Government since 2016. That is the only way that we will raise the age of marriage, but I think that it will happen.

You all took part in the consultation, and we issued advice on it as well. We said that the age of marriage should be raised to at least 18. I am not averse to it being 21, to be fair, but it should be raised to at least 18. From talking to the Department of Finance and the Minister at the time, Conor Murphy, I think that it would have happened by now if we had had an Assembly. It can happen only if we have an Assembly in Northern Ireland; it is one of those things. I would be fairly optimistic that, once the Assembly is back, we will find it on the statute book in the next session, whenever that may be.

Charlotte McGucken: Commissioner, are you able to elaborate on the action that you have taken to address the bullying and inequalities that young people face in schools, and is there anything else you would like to have done differently?

Koulla Yiasouma: That is the question I was dreading, Charlotte. Thank you for that.

You will see in the Public Gallery, I think, the whole of our legal investigations team. They support individual families and individual children and young people with cases, and a lot of their cases involve bullying. The families feel that the schools have not responded properly to bullying. Also, we have worked hard with the Department of Education and the Education Authority on the proper implementation of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. It is good legislation, but it has been piecemeal and has been caught up in action short of strike, so we need to see that properly implemented.

We have moved forward with bullying. I do not think we are where we were. When we talk about trans and our newcomer communities, we hear a lot that there is racist bullying and homophobic and transphobic bullying, which is wholly inappropriate, so we have work to do. Some of this ties in to our relationships and sexuality education; they go hand in hand. Some of those issues need to be properly addressed, and we need to get into the mandatory area. We need to properly implement the 2016 Act; we need to have mandatory relationships and sexuality education; and we need to be more supportive of our children so that they can understand difference and choice, including religious differences.

What would I like to have done differently? That is a difficult question, because I think that I have done my best. What I have learned, though, in the job is that sometimes your best is not good enough. I have said that a lot to public authorities: "Your best does not cut it". When I think about me – not the team, because they have definitely been amazing – I think sometimes that I jump in too quickly. I need to take time. I would like us to have done a bit more around human rights education for children and young people and raising awareness. It is one of my sadnesses that children and young people across Northern Ireland do not know about their rights as well as they should, and I would like to have done that differently and stuck to it. I would like to have done more on childcare, trans issues and young carers, but I could not do it because I kept bursting into tears. There are so many areas where we would like to have done more, but there is only so much money and so many people. I hope, though, that what we have done we have done well.

Jenna McLaughlin: Why does it have to be such a struggle for children with autism to gain a place in a learning support centre (LSC) unit? The rate of children diagnosed with autism has jumped from 1 in 150 in 2000 to 1 in 54 in 2019. I am aware that LSC units can be over-applied, but giving the child a one-on-one assistant and expecting them to cope in a mainstream environment is upsetting. I have two autistic brothers, and I know that they need an environment to calm themselves and keep themselves calm when overwhelmed and a place to go when they are overstimulated — almost like a safe space.

The curriculum will be tailored to an autistic child in an LSC unit. If it is in a mainstream class, the work is given and explained and they are essentially told to deal with it. I know, as I have an inside view on how difficult and challenging it is. They are 100% entitled to an education and for it to be given in the way that they need. Why is it such a struggle?

Koulla Yiasouma: I was in a special school on Wednesday. I went into a classroom, and there was this girl, and she asked, "What's your name?". I told her, and she told me her name. She said, "I have autism. It's a disease." The school was definitely not telling her that autism was a disease, but she had obviously picked up the way we see children and young people with autism, maybe not as a disease but as a problem, as a

problem that we need to fix, a problem that is draining our resources or a problem that we cannot find a solution for. That girl had internalised that she had a disease. I said to her, “It is you. It is like having brown eyes. That is what autism is: it just makes you you”. We have a long way to go. It should not be this difficult.

Some of you will have heard me say this before, but I do not mind saying it again. The name of the United Nations convention is the Convention on the Rights of the Child; it is not the convention on the rights of “children”. It recognises that each child is a unique individual, and, whether it is education, healthcare or whatever, we tailor our service around the child. Education should be set up like that. The problem is that our special educational needs system in schools, particularly in mainstream schools — one of the reasons for the learning support units was to support children in mainstream schools — is broken and on its knees. To fix it, we need to keep giving it the money that it is getting, and then we need to give it a whole heap more money to reform and transform, with children and young people hearing the experiences of your brothers and their colleagues.

We should not have to wait for a diagnosis of autism, because each autistic child is different. If I had autism, just because I have autism, I would not be the same as someone else with autism. We are different, so we need our own assessments. Special educational needs is the area that worries me the most as I leave this role, and that is because of the budget. Some of these grey hairs are because we spent the beginning part of my role as commissioner — the team was more exhausted than me — getting the Education Authority to recognise that its special educational needs system was broken. It has done that now. In 2020, the Education Authority got there. There were a number of reports, including our report called ‘Too Little, Too Late’, so the Education Authority started a programme. It was incredibly slow — COVID got in the way — to implement it, but it now has a programme. It needs money, and there is now a budget imposed by Westminster that tells the authority that it has to save millions and millions of pounds.

It does not have to be this hard, and it should not be this hard. There are children who are not getting their right to education, and that is the biggest area for our legal investigations team. I worry that it will get a lot harder. Just when you thought that it could not get worse, if the budget does not change, it will get worse. I will not pretend, Jenna, that it will get any better, and this is the area that, as I leave, worries me the most. If we had a Northern Ireland Assembly, we could maybe have found a solution. The Assembly will not magic money out of thin air, but it will make decisions that meet the needs of children much better than the decisions made by people who do not have time to understand us, because we are a very special place here in Northern Ireland, and we have very, very different levels of SEN from those across the water.

Oliver Pearce: It is very clear that access to adequate education is of the utmost importance to the Human Rights Commission. With regard to human rights, how does NICCY and, for that matter, the commissioner perceive academic selection?

Koulla Yiasouma: They are all laughing up there because I would have found a way to put academic selection in here. Academic selection is supposed to be the great leveller. It is supposed to give children the opportunity to go to a school that fulfils their academic needs and abilities. What it actually does is that it privileges and gives advantages to middle-class children and children whose families are not poor. My children come from a family that is not poor, and they went to a grammar school. Yes, I know, shocking. Stephen Nolan already exposed me in 2015, so it is not news.

The issue with academic selection is that, if every single child is to meet their potential, they need to do that in the nearest school. We spend far too much money in Northern Ireland investing in different systems that

simply meet the needs of vested interests. I know that many of you go to grammar schools, and I make no comment about your right or your education, but I think that you would get an equally good education if you were in your local school with other children who maybe could not have passed a test at the age of 11 but could have aged 13. There is really strong evidence that shows that poorer children, when they go to school, are two years behind other children. They do not have a mission of catching up when they are 11.

Add to that, Lauren's point about how expensive uniforms are. Pupils also have to go on school trips and have their music lessons. I spent £500 if not £1,000 a year for my two girls to have music lessons. Families who live in poorer communities cannot do that.

3.15 pm

Academic selection is one of the biggest travesties of our education system — SEN is the other one — and it needs to be resolved, because only some children receive an effective education. I refuse to believe that children living on the Shankill Road cannot pass the 11-plus. They have just not had the opportunity to do so. They have the lowest level of representation at grammar school. Academic selection is a way of keeping our children segregated into the haves and the have-nots. The evidence is clear: twice as many children on free school meals go to non-selective schools as go to grammar schools. We cannot fix that unless we get rid of academic selection.

That was a really random way of saying, "Yes, get rid of it".

Luke Massey: Commissioner, based on the report that you worked on, are there any plans to improve the education experience for children with mental disabilities?

Koulla Yiasouma: You are talking about learning disabilities. That is part of the programme for transforming our special educational needs system. It is really interesting that we do not measure the academic achievement and attainment of children with disabilities, and certainly not that of children with learning disabilities. If we do not treasure the education that we give them, that raises the question of why we send them to school. It also suggests that we do not think that they can learn or achieve, when we know, 100%, that they can. Of course they can. They were at the Oscars. A young man with Down's syndrome was at the Oscars — sorry, the BAFTAs — for goodness' sake, so of course they can achieve.

This is really in response to Jenna's question. There is a programme for transforming. Part of it has to be about valuing the education that children with learning and intellectual disabilities receive. I want to see achievement, attainment and educational experience being made clearer in that transformation programme. Again, however, my optimism about our getting that done is not very high.

Mr Speaker: A number of Members want to speak. Does any Member who has not yet made a contribution want to speak? Yourself in the blue top. Dominic?

Dominic Bateson: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Commissioner, is every child's view in the North, or Northern Ireland, fully represented, or should more people be given the right to vote by lowering the voting age to 16?

Koulla Yiasouma: No, every child's view is not fully represented. We need to do more to make sure that we hear the voices of children who want their voice to be heard. We need to have better school participation

processes, such as school councils or whatever. The way in which we advised the Assembly Commission to select Members of the Youth Assembly was a big step forward, because it was about making the Youth Assembly more representative. Public authorities need to be better at hearing your voice.

Do I think that the voting age should be lowered to 16? Was that the question? The answer is yes, I do. The evidence is clear, and we have seen it in what has happened with voting in Scotland. We know that 18- to 30-year-olds vote the least, but there is strong evidence that, if people start voting at 16, those good habits will continue into their 20s when they have far more interesting things to do.

I absolutely think that 16-year-olds are more than ready to vote. Lowering the voting age needs to go hand in hand with getting a good political education on how you dissect information, but when I go to vote, nobody checks with me that I have read and understood all the manifestos. Somebody once gave me the argument about hormones, which was that young people have hormones and cannot make decisions. We all have hormones. I am a menopausal woman. No one has more erratic hormones than I do, but nobody stops me voting. I think 100% that the voting age should be lowered to 16. That, however, is in the gift of the UK Government for all Northern Ireland elections, and that is a shame.

Kaitlin Caldwell: Commissioner, as you have talked about unisex school uniforms, what are your views on the fact that some schools check how long a pupil's skirt is before that pupil is allowed to enter the building?

Koulla Yiasouma: That is a really good question. Do you know what? I have two daughters and, oh, the fights we have. As a parent, I say, "What is the need for this? Do you have a thick waistband because you have rolled it up?". You are right that uniforms need to be uniforms that you are comfortable with, whatever the gender that you are comfortable with. I need to get over myself, because I go, "Aargh!" when I see short skirts and then have that argument with my daughters: "I would quite like you to wear thick tights in the winter, because you are cold". I see blue legs more than anything else. I am going into mummy and prospective granny mode here.

Uniforms should be developed in partnership with young people and their parents. Children should not be excluded, isolated or suspended because of a uniform infringement. We need a common-sense approach to school uniforms. How far above the knee a skirt needs to be is up for discussion, and I am happy for that discussion to happen on a school-by-school basis.

Robert Moore: Does the commissioner agree that the current way that exams are conducted and the timing with which they are conducted is unsatisfactory? Yesterday, I did a GCSE chemistry unit. After the exam, I went to talk to my teacher to tell her how it went, and she said, "Now you have to focus on your biology exam". That puts pressure on students and young people. Instead of enjoying the fact that you got out of that exam and focusing on education and learning, you are reading material — not even understanding it — just so you can do your next exam.

Koulla Yiasouma: One of the big issues has been the purpose of exams. Is the purpose of an exam just to check that you have learned the things that you are supposed to have learned, or is it to make the school look good? It is probably a bit of both. The NICCY youth panel was with CCEA a couple of days ago talking about exams and the learning experience.

I agree that exams are stressful. During the pandemic, we learned that we will struggle to find alternatives, but we also learned that there may be different ways of assessing children's learning. We need to explore those. We need to move away from the idea of schools being exam factories. You are right that you want to

decompress from one exam before preparing for the next one. Some schools manage that better than others. There needs to be a conversation in your school, maybe through the school council, about how that is done.

Jessica-Elise McArdle: A child's right is the most important thing. Children and young people with a disability face discrimination and much more in the workplace and in school. That needs to be dealt with. There are numerous disabilities, such as autism, learning difficulties, partial sight, mental illness and much more. No child or young person should miss out on certain sports, activities and teaching. It is crucial that every child and young person is treated equally.

I repeat the term "children and young people" over and over again because we are the future. We need education that gives us knowledge about disabilities. If you suffer from a disability, you are no less human than anyone else, so why do we, as young people, not have enough education about disabilities? If we get taught about religion in school, why can we not get taught about disabilities?

I ask you, Children's Commissioner, how far you have come towards solving that problem, and I thank you so much for being the advocate for children and young people.

Koulla Yiasouma: Thank you. The answer is not far at all. You know that. I could have said something else, but you would have known that it was not true. People keep talking about the crowded curriculum. Learning about disability is hard. We need to make sure that our children learn about difference. Which disabilities would you teach people about? Which ones would you miss? The list is long, because we are all different.

It is about how we teach about difference and celebrating difference, not just tolerating it. I completely agree with you. Learning for life and work (LLW) needs to be teased out a bit more. It should stop being an exam subject. Some schools consider it to be an easy GCSE. If you remove the exam possibility of LLW — I am making up policy, but it will be our policy for only three days, so it is fine — you may have more creative conversations and discussions in the classroom. We have not got to where we need to be. It is similar for RSE. LLW has such huge potential that it has yet to meet.

Alannah Freaney: This is less of a question and more of a request: will you elaborate on the work that is being done or is intended to be done on spit-and-bite guards?

Koulla Yiasouma: Do you all know what spit-and-bite guards are? Did the Human Rights Commission talk about them? Do you know what a spit-and-bite guard is? Strap in; sit comfortably. I will be quick, Mr Speaker; do not panic. When police go to arrest somebody or when someone is in a custody suite and they look as though they are about to spit or there is a concern that they are going to spit or bite, the police officer will put a mesh hood over that person. They are used by virtually every police force on these islands, including in the South. They were introduced as an emergency measure in Northern Ireland at the beginning of COVID.

We have done a lot of work on spit-and-bite guards and a lot of challenging of the police. We have got them to a position where they have agreed that spit-and-bite guards will be used on children and young people — anyone under the age of 18 — only in exceptional circumstances. You have all talked about children with neuro disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health issues and trauma. They are often over-represented in the criminal justice system. Can you imagine how traumatising having a hood such as that — it is a mesh, so you can see through it — put over you might be? As a result of the work that has been done, the police will use them only as a last resort. They have agreed that, for every incident in which a spit-and-bite guard is

used, their body-worn videos will be switched on, and every incident will be sent to the Police Ombudsman so that her team can check that things were done properly. When she checked such incidents during COVID, she found that some of those involving children and young people included inappropriate policing activity. I think that it is likely that the police will reduce the numbers of incidents in which the guards are used against children. They will be used as a last resort, and all cases will be examined by the ombudsman. That is the best that we got. It was not what we wanted, which was that they would never be used for young people, but is better than what other places have.

Aaron Murphy: This question is an extension of the discussion on educational selection, but I would like to go to the root: the 11-plus. Would you consider getting rid of it and coming up with a more suitable way for people to move from primary education to secondary education? Is there a better way to make that happen?

Koulla Yiasouma: I am sorry if I did not make it clear, but I would 100% get rid of it tomorrow. We should remove the grammar schools and ensure that every school is a good school. We could achieve that in Northern Ireland: every school could be a good school, including your local school.

3.30 pm

We bus pupils millions of miles a year around this place to go to grammar schools, single-sex schools, controlled schools and maintained schools. If every school were a good school, that would be the way. I am not looking to replace the test with some other form of academic selection. That is not what we are talking about here. We are talking about removing this two-tiered system of education that we have in Northern Ireland and making sure that we transform our education system so that the local school is the best school for all the children in that community.

John Kane: Commissioner, in your eight years, why has NICCY not taken any action on collective worship? I am sure that many of my fellow Members will agree that that has been a prevalent issue in Northern Ireland during your tenure, especially when it comes to opting out of it, with more and more people in Northern Ireland identifying as non-Christian. What advice would you give your potential successor on that issue?

Koulla Yiasouma: There you go, John. You have found the one area that I have done very little on, although people have suggested this issue. It has been because of time. Also, however, it has not been raised with us. I do think that there is merit in taking religion out of schools. Having said that, I think that people get a lot of sustenance from religious belief and a spiritual side, whether that is through the traditional religions of Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism or whatever that may be, and that is a wonderful thing to have. However, so is having no religion and finding your sense of values and spirituality somewhere else. I often say that rights are my religion, and I was brought up within a faith.

It is not a piece of work that we have done. You are the first young person who has raised it with me. Maybe that is because I have run away from them when they have begun to open their mouth. John, you are on the NICCY youth panel, so you will raise it with the new commissioner. The team and I will definitely have a think about whether NICCY wants to get into that space. We just have not done it, and I think that it is something that is worth exploring.

Mr Speaker: I have four more Members on the speaking list, and I propose to close the list at that. Is that fair enough? You may not know whether you are on the list until I call the next four Members to speak.

Oliver Mercer: I would like to put two short questions — relatively short — to the commissioner. Under article 7(1)(a) of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, the commissioner is charged with promoting:

“an understanding of the rights of children and young persons”.

Prior to your tenure, research published suggested that 58% of people claimed to know either not very much or nothing at all about human rights. That is from the Human Rights Inquiry report of June 2009. That is enough of a majority to control this country’s government. Any reasonable person can see that this is a huge problem. Therefore, what has the commissioner done to resolve the issue, and what improvements has she seen over her tenure?

Exactly one year and two days ago, the commissioner’s office published a report entitled ‘Putting the Child at the Centre’. In the foreword, the commissioner stated that the Barnahus model, the subject of the report, was the way forward. You described there being an appetite for change and stated:

“significant developments ... are already in place in Northern Ireland”.

How has that implementation progressed in the past year and what impact has the commissioner seen as a result of the resources put into the publication and production of the report?

Koulla Yiasouma: Oh Oliver, you really want to end it well, don’t you, mate?

Mr Speaker: I think that you two could go and have a good yarn.

[Laughter.]

Koulla Yiasouma: Your first question was on human rights and our attitude towards human rights. For a long time, human rights and children’s rights were dirty words, and they were also politicised in Northern Ireland. It felt as though one side used it to bash the other side, so the other side ran away from using the term “rights”. I think that we have moved away from that now, and I think that we are embracing the term “rights” and what “rights” might mean across the political spectrum. I think that that is good. I am hoping that our work has contributed to that and that, in particular, as I said earlier, children’s rights are nothing to be frightened of and that families embrace them.

Thank you for reading our reports, Oliver. I am really pleased that, when you referred to ‘Putting the Child at the Centre’, I knew exactly what report you were talking about. I am very proud of myself for that.

I will be very surprised if the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child does not talk about Barnahus with the UK Government in May, because the founder of Barnahus is on the committee. We had a fabulous round table just after the publication of that report with Judge Gillen, who did the sexual offences review, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Education and the founder of Barnahus, Bragi Guðbrandsson. It was very clear that people were up for a Barnahus, and that is where my optimism comes from. They said that the question that needed to be answered was where the money was to come from, but they were hopeful that, by December, they would have a plan in place. We all know what happened by December; we had no Government. I believe that civil servants are working on a Barnahus but, without two Ministers to agree to invest the money in a pilot — I do not think that we need a pilot; we just need to get on with it — and with the processes that need ministerial agreement, we are not going to move forward with a Barnahus. I genuinely

think that a children's house, which is what Barnahus means in Icelandic, is the best way to support children to recover when they have been sexually assaulted or suffered any other form of child abuse.

Ronan Lynch: I want to build on points raised by Charlotte around bullying and bullying fuelled by bigotry, such as racism, homophobia or transphobia. You talked earlier about education and said that children are not taught sectarianism, and you are absolutely right. In schools, children are always taught tolerance, but that does not mean that, when intolerance finds itself in a school environment, there is enough done to counteract it. I can see, through my lived experience in the schoolyard and on social media, that for young people today, even if it is not gained from school but gained from their home, family or outside factors, it is still not very difficult to find examples of casual racism, homophobia and the likes. During your tenure, what has been done to try to promote tolerance and inclusion and to directly combat discriminatory behaviour, even in a casual manner, by young people in Northern Ireland? Thank you.

Koulla Yiasouma: You are absolutely right. We need to make sure that our teachers and other school staff are confident and trained to be able to challenge whenever they hear discriminatory language or see somebody being abused or on the verge of abuse. We have a way to go, but we are getting better. I can see that things are improving.

Also — I know that you do not mean it this way — “tolerance” is a great word, but it means “putting up with”. I do not want to be put up with. Well, I will put up with you because you are a Spurs supporter. You should feel celebrated, seen, listened to and cherished. We should celebrate difference and learn to be more inclusive, and I am seeing that. I go into schools and see maps of the world and where all the children are from, but we are definitely not seeing enough of it, particularly with LGBTQ+ children and young people and sectarianism. School staff are not confident enough because we do not teach our teachers to talk about those issues, so they are not confident to challenge that behaviour. I have seen some progress in the past eight years, but we still have a way to go.

Andrew Martin: First, when we had discussions with the Human Rights Commission, it said that, under the Northern Ireland Act, an anti-poverty strategy was meant to be initiated, and that still has not come to fruition. Secondly, with regard to exams and the transfer from school to university, the big thing now is that university work is a lot more assignment based. When I was at school, CCEA was taking assignments away and moving more towards exams. What are your thoughts on that?

I grew up through the Dickson plan, which is the system in Portadown and Craigavon. For those who are not sure what that is, there is no academic selection at P7; rather, it is at the end of third year, and you then either go to grammar school or high school. What are your thoughts on that? Could it be used more widely across Northern Ireland?

Koulla Yiasouma: You are right that the anti-poverty strategy was in the Northern Ireland Act. Our Executive did not progress it, and it took a judicial review by the Committee on the Administration of Justice and, probably, Amnesty — I think that I am right in saying that; it is normally there or thereabouts — before our Government were compelled to come up with an anti-poverty strategy. It was also in the New Decade, New Approach agreement that brought them back in January 2020. A draft is sitting there: if it has in it what we think that it has in it around children and families, it is OK. It needs an Executive to sign it off for public consultation. It has been sitting there for a year. I will say no more.

Schools need to better prepare children for what happens after school, whether that is work, apprenticeships, higher education or further education. If there is a disconnect, that needs to be fed in, and we can maybe have that conversation with CCEA as that work continues.

The Dickson plan is an interesting idea, but it is half-cocked — I am not sure that that is a Hansard word. It has not been implemented properly — I say that to help the colleagues in Hansard. Children go through the non-academic selection route and go through different post-primary schools. They do junior high, senior high and two years of sixth form somewhere else. Academic selection at 14 is not regulated. Each school has its own test. I do not know how much they coordinate and collaborate. I think that the Dickson plan was a good idea, but it feels to me that it has been poorly executed and is yet another example in Northern Ireland of our higgledy-piggledy education system that is not based on evidence. We can learn from the Dickson plan and maybe think about rolling it out in the transformation of our education system, but we are nowhere near that yet.

Mr Speaker: Our final Member to speak this afternoon is Grace Mc Gouran.

Grace Mc Gouran: There has been much discussion in England about raising university fees in the near future. Do you see that potentially happening in Northern Ireland? Furthermore, as an upper-sixth student, I have been looking at uni accommodation in Belfast, and the cost of having a place to live while I study is simply extortionate. What do you think needs to be done to ensure that a university education is accessible to all and that the price of that education stays as low as possible?

Koulla Yiasouma: Remember that I said that I am not legally paid to care about over-18s. I went to university. I did not pay a penny, and my parents did not pay a penny for tuition. I got a grant, which covered my halls and my accommodation. I benefitted from that. I do not understand what we are doing now with fees. I do not think that fees should rise. I welcome what the Northern Ireland Government and the Department for the Economy have done around fees for young people staying in Northern Ireland to study, but there is clear evidence that it is disadvantaging poorer children. We talk about levelling up education, and what we do then means that higher education is inaccessible.

Both my girls went to university. They got a loan, so they have come out with huge debt. That was their decision. We could have afforded it, but they did not want us to pay for it. If we had not paid for their accommodation, they would never have made ends meet. I know very few students who do not have to work while studying, and then you lose the joy of university.

3.45 pm

I did not have to do any of that. I had the best time ever. I do not even want to talk about what I did, but it meant that, when I left university, I was ready for work. I had had my fun, had done what I needed to do and had had that hedonistic lifestyle. I got a job in the August after graduating in the July, and I have not stopped working since. The grant paid for itself again and again in the taxes that I have been paying since the age of 23.

The official line, however, is that the Children's Commissioner can make no comment about those matters.

Mr Speaker: We have concluded the debate, and I thank everybody for their important contributions. It is 3.45 pm, so I will be very generous and invite the commissioner to give us no more than two minutes of concluding remarks.

Commissioner for Children and Young People: Concluding Remarks

Koulla Yiasouma: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I do not have many remarks to make, because Members have said everything. It has been an absolute joy and privilege to be your Children's Commissioner for most of your lives. I am, and, for the next eight years, will be, the only Commissioner ever to be appointed by the Executive. I was appointed by Peter Robinson and the late Martin McGuinness. I am really sad that, when we have our fourth commissioner in a few months, it will have been only me who was appointed by the Executive. In spite of the adults whose job it is to serve you, you will be fabulous. You are fabulous, and I know that you will show the new commissioner the same respect and partnership working that you have shown me and my office. Together, you will all do great things. You are the future, but you are also the present, and you deserve your rights in the here and now. Enjoy being a young person, because adulthood will come quickly enough.

Mr Speaker: On behalf of the Youth Assembly, I thank the commissioner for being here this afternoon and for her contribution to the debate. I am also conscious that the commissioner's term is coming to an end, and, on that note, I offer Koulla my personal thanks, not only for her role in the development and establishment of the Youth Assembly but for her wider role as Commissioner for Children and Young People. I have no doubt that your term, which began in 2015, has been challenging but ultimately very rewarding. You have been a key advocate for the sector throughout, not least when the COVID pandemic had such a profound impact on children and young people, and we thank you for that. I wish you every success in the future.

As we draw proceedings to a close this afternoon, I thank you all for coming today, and I offer my congratulations on all your contributions. I also thank those who have made today possible, not least those who supported Members to be here this afternoon. I remind you that a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings will be placed on the website. Following the sitting, I ask Members to remain in their seats, where they can respond to the feedback form that will be handed out shortly, and there is one other small item that we have to deal with.

Adjourned at 3.48 pm.