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## FOREWORDS

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### The Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly

A claim that has been made, too often, and too easily, is that young people are not interested in politics. The first two years of the Youth Assembly have proven how unfounded that statement is.

When the Assembly Commission announced the creation of the Youth Assembly and opened the recruitment process, 1200 young people applied for the 90 places. From the very start, I was impressed by their passion, enthusiasm and fresh thinking.

It has been a pleasure to chair the Youth Assembly's debates and to watch its Members build relationships and learn from each other as they honed their arguments and put across their different views with total respect for each other.

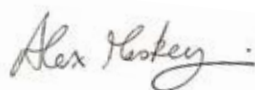
I want to thank all of the Assembly staff who worked so hard to bring the Youth Assembly into being and everyone who has given them support, including parents.

It is regrettable that the Assembly itself has not been fully functioning for much of this mandate of the Youth Assembly and that has inevitably had some impact on the nature of their activities, for example, engagement with Assembly committees has been limited.

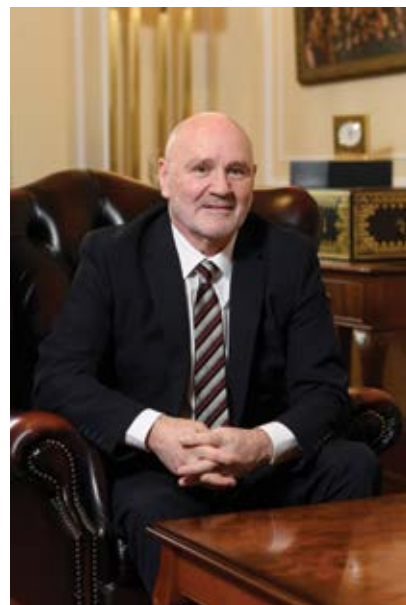
However, the Youth Assembly has been busy nonetheless. The number of government departments and other organisations who have actively sought to work with the Youth Assembly is a strong indicator to me of the growing reputation of the Youth Assembly.

I am extremely proud to have been associated with the Youth Assembly. Having the chance to get to know the Youth Assembly Members has been one of the highlights of my time as Speaker. As I have watched their debates, I have taken great heart in the talent that has been on display – there is clearly great potential for the future.

The Youth Assembly Members have played an important role in making the first two years of the Youth Assembly such a success and I hope they encourage a new group of Members to help the Youth Assembly develop further for the future.



The Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Alex Maskey



## Clerk to the Assembly/ Chief Executive

The creation of a Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland was a long time in the making but it was definitely worth the wait!

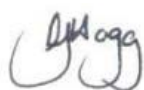
While there was much learning available from other places, the Assembly Commission wanted to create a Youth Assembly that had maximum impact and closely reflected the cross section of young people in Northern Ireland. One that could achieve meaningful outcomes for young people, and which was truly integrated with the work of the Assembly. A Youth Assembly that was co-designed by young people, for young people.

The Youth Assembly Members embraced this challenge and set about consulting other young people, determining how they would work, and agreeing their own priorities. The fact that they did much of this ground-breaking work during the pandemic, says much about their enthusiasm and commitment.

The Youth Assembly has not only created a space where the voice of young people can be heard, but it has also given the Members a platform to learn new skills and build their capacity. It has been amazing to see how the Youth Assembly Members have grown in confidence and how their negotiation, public speaking and collective decision-making skills have developed.

The success of the Youth Assembly is testament to the hard work of the Members, and the expertise and dedication of the Youth Assembly team and the staff throughout the Assembly who support them. This includes those working in Research, Committees, Information Systems, Human Resources, Official Report, Communications, Broadcasting, Banqueting and Usher Services. We have all enjoyed working with the Youth Assembly Members and are tremendously proud of their achievements.

It has been a privilege to have been part of this Pioneer Phase of the Youth Assembly and we will continue to support the Youth Assembly on its journey, as it grows from strength to strength. We wish all the Youth Assembly Members success in their future lives and careers and hope that they will be inspired to continue their participation in our democratic and legislative processes!



Clerk to the Assembly/ Chief Executive, Lesley Hogg



## Executive Summary:

### The story of the Youth Assembly

It has long been a goal of the Northern Ireland Assembly to have a platform for young people to come together to engage, debate, and decide on issues that matter to them and to wider society.

The Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland is the fulfilment of that goal.

The first cohort of 90 Youth Assembly Members was recruited in the summer of 2021.

### Recruitment and support

The 90 Members arrived in response to a robust advertising campaign across Northern Ireland, which called on those aged 13-17 years to apply. The recruitment phases, as with all elements of the subsequent mandate, were carefully designed and supported with input from experts on the best models to follow.

Almost 1,200 young people applied, and 54 were randomly chosen according to their home location — three from each of the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland.

A further 36 young people were randomly drawn from communities of interest — groups with additional or different experiences that reflected the wider make-up of Northern Ireland society.

With all Members in place, the training and support launched in earnest.

A key underpinning of the work was to ensure that safeguarding and support was woven into the fabric of the Youth Assembly. Topics such as mental health and children's rights were covered, as well as the purpose and powers of the Northern Ireland Assembly, how legislation is made and how voting works.

The two-year Pioneer Phase, so-called to reflect the new path that the young people were forging, was in progress and the Youth Assembly could be convened and could begin to make some decisions about its tenure.

### Committees

One of the first tasks for Youth Assembly Members was to discuss and decide a code of practice on how they would go forward. Then, they examined the issues that affected them and their peers, and took some time to agree the subject areas, underpinned by a large-scale survey of young people, that would form the basis of the Committees.

They identified the most prevalent issues and during their second plenary meeting, they considered their options and made informed decisions. The resulting four Committees — Environment, Education, Health and Rights and Equality — were approved and convened. These would form the backbone of the Youth Assembly throughout the two years as they examined

issues, took evidence, made recommendations and reported back to their peers.

### Plenary Meetings

Plenary meetings — topics for decision and debate by all Youth Assembly Members in the Assembly Chambers — were scheduled. Initially, there were to be four but, in actuality, there were six over the two-year span of the Pioneer Phase — all of which were chaired by the Speaker, Alex Maskey.

The plenary meetings are the fora for the Youth Assembly Members to come together as a whole group, take stock of progress and share learning. It is the space for planning messages, practising speeches and building confidence before taking towards your feet to speak to your peers. It is a moment to build to, and the young people talk of that pivotal moment in particular in their Youth Assembly experience.

The plenary meetings dealt with a range of issues. These included standing items, such as Youth Assembly Committee updates, as well as topical matters, such as consideration of the involvement of young people in the preparation of future Programmes for Government; a debate on the minimum age of criminal responsibility; and a session in which Members scrutinised the tenure of the outgoing Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY).

### Challenges and Opportunities

As with every plan, there are always a few unexpected challenges. The pandemic and restrictions on meeting at the inception of the Pioneer Phase meant that initial discussions and the first plenary session were online instead of in-person. That created a change in process but not in tempo as Youth Assembly Members took changes in their stride and simply varied their approach to deal with a different environment.

The Assembly not functioning normally has meant that interaction with the scrutiny Committees was not available and engaging with MLAs was a little more limited.

However, the Youth Assembly Members did participate in the Committee for Education's pandemic youth engagement, My Life and Learning in Lockdown.

Youth Assembly Members used the time afforded to them to participate in a number of departmental consultations, including the independent review of education; school uniform policy; the Irish language and Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture strategies; marriage laws; and minimum age of criminal responsibility. It is encouraging to know that the voice of young people will be reflected in departmental policy development relating to these issues.

In addition, Youth Assembly Members participated in a number of tasks with various statutory agencies. These included the period dignity project; the development of an education rights resource for the Children's Law Centre; and a Statement of Children's Rights in Northern Ireland with Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

A number of Members also sat on the selection panel for the new Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People; met with the Chief Constable of the PSNI; and attended an election count to observe proceedings.

The Youth Assembly finished out its two-year Pioneer Phase mandate with some Members taking to the stage for the Assembly's Good Friday/Belfast Agreement event in Parliament Buildings, others attended Hillsborough Castle as part of the same events, and a group of 10 Members was in the audience for the President of the United States of America's key address at Ulster University.

## The next steps

It is hoped that their time with the Youth Assembly has been instrumental in building the skills, confidence and understanding of democratic principles of every single one of the Youth Assembly Members.

With preparations for the second mandate in full swing, the Pioneer Phase Members have noted some recommendations for their successors to consider. Equally importantly, the Members have taken the time to note some words of advice for the cohort of young people who will take on this important role in the next mandate.

Recognising the vigorous support of the Members of the Pioneer Phase, an alumni group will be established that can be called upon to give peer-to-peer advice for the new intake.

## Three Main Roles

1. To engage with the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly, particularly its Statutory Committees, and have their voices heard on legislation and inquiries relevant to young people
2. To undertake project work generated by the members of each of the Youth Assembly Committees
3. To participate in youth voice projects and opportunities such as government consultations

## Key Figures

**2** YEAR  
TERM 

**1,196**   
APPLICATIONS

**AGES**  
**13-17** 

**90**   
SEATS

**18/18**   
CONSTITUENCIES  
REPRESENTED

**6**   
PLENARY  
MEETINGS

**5**   
COMMITTEES  
**5**   
CONSULTATIONS

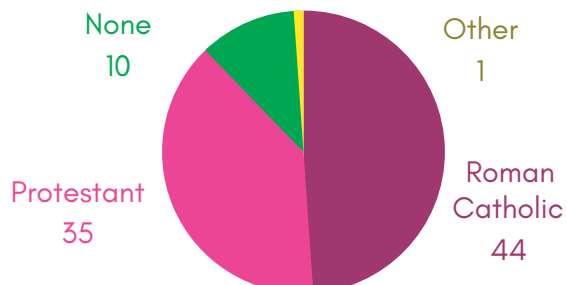
**36**   
COMMITTEE  
MEETINGS



## How representative is the Youth Assembly?



Male 46      GENDER      Female 44



RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Membership of the Youth Assembly is inclusive and representative of the Northern Ireland youth population.

### Planned

### Actual

<b>3</b>	Young people with lived experience of care	<b>4</b>	
<b>3</b>	Young people from an ethnic minority background	<b>6</b>	
<b>4</b>	LGBTQ+ young people	<b>12</b>	
<b>5</b>	Young people with a disability	<b>8</b>	
<b>7</b>	Young carers	<b>8</b>	
<b>24</b>	Young people who are eligible for free school meals	<b>26</b>	

### Development Opportunities

The Youth Assembly had representatives on each of these groups and projects:

- Appointment of Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
- Children's Law Centre - development of education rights resource
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment and Department of Education - period dignity project
- Police Service of Northern Ireland - policing engagement initiative



## Background

In July 2020, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission announced the establishment of a Youth Assembly in Northern Ireland.

Having considered this concept in detail, the Assembly Commission made a formal request in March 2018 for options to be considered and presented. This led to a period of extensive consultation and engagement, with both internal and external stakeholders, followed by development of detailed proposals. The result was formal endorsement of an Assembly Commission-supported Youth Assembly, with the independence for young people to determine the agenda.

The agreed proposals outlined that the Youth Assembly would comprise 90 Members: 54 drawn from the 18 constituencies — three per constituency — to ensure geographic spread; and 36 appointed to ensure equality and diversity. It was agreed that the core age range of Members of the Youth Assembly should be 13-17 years old. It was also decided that two plenary sittings of the Youth Assembly would take place annually. In addition, the Youth Assembly would have four Committees, the subjects of which would be decided by the Youth Assembly Members. The Committees would meet more regularly than the Youth Assembly in plenary format.

Great emphasis was placed on young people co-designing the processes and procedures of the Youth Assembly, including the process for recruiting its Members and shaping its future. The overriding principle behind the proposal — indeed central to the Assembly Commission's discussions — was that while the Youth Assembly would be supported by the Assembly Commission, it would be led by the young people themselves.

Following the announcement of the Assembly Commission's proposal, a team of Northern Ireland Assembly Commission staff — the Youth Assembly team — was set up to take forward the work needed to ensure that young people were able to co-design the practical structures and processes, including how Youth Assembly Members would be recruited.

Building on the consultation and engagement that had already taken place in the development of the proposals agreed by the Assembly Commission, the Youth Assembly team undertook further engagement with more than 130 external organisations and individuals. In addition, a web presence was established and a mailing list created so that anyone interested in the development of the Youth Assembly could sign up to receive updates.

An Advisory Group, chaired by the Speaker, was convened to support the establishment of the Youth Assembly. Comprising experts and young people in the field of promoting youth participation, it advised on the recruitment process, the programme of support and the co-design approach that shaped the Pioneer Phase.

The members of the Youth Assembly Advisory Group included:

- Koulla Yiasouma, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY);
- Professor Laura Lundy, Director of the Centre for Children's Rights, Queen's University Belfast;
- Sean McDonnell, Youth Worker, Youth Action;
- Caitlin Wickham, Youth Action;
- Chris Quinn, Director, Northern Ireland Youth Forum;
- Ciara Hesketh, Northern Ireland Youth Forum;
- Arlene Kee, Assistant Director, Education Authority Youth Service; and
- Aimee Woods, Lisburn and Castlereagh Youth Council and Education Authority

## Recruitment

A co-design panel of young people was set up to help design proposals for the process of recruiting Members of the Youth Assembly. The panel were supported by the Youth Assembly Advisory Group, whose expertise was invaluable. In addition, the Youth Assembly team commissioned the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission's Research and Information Service (RaISe) to summarise the demographic of the Northern Ireland youth population in the core age range of 13 to 17. This research was commissioned to ensure that the membership of the Youth Assembly would be fully inclusive and representative of the youth population.

The co-design panel held a series of meetings during December 2020 and January 2021 to discuss recruitment to the Youth Assembly, following which its findings were drawn together in a report. In summary, the co-design panel was in favour of a random selection approach to the recruitment of Members; an open, fair and transparent application process; and the removal of barriers to application for all young people.

Based on the co-design panel's findings, and allied to the information in the RaISe report, the Youth Assembly team developed a proposal for a detailed recruitment process known as "enhanced random selection". The anonymised process was objective, robust and fair and ensured that the Youth Assembly's membership is representative of the Northern Ireland youth demographic in the core age range.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland was consulted on the proposed recruitment process and was content with the proposals.

The recruitment process was presented to the Advisory Group, who welcomed the engagement with young people and the co-design panel's report, and unanimously endorsed the suggested process of enhanced random selection, which, in turn, was agreed by the Assembly Commission.



Recruitment went live on 26 April 2021 and closed on 21 May 2021, with almost 1,200 applications received. Enhanced random selection was used to appoint the 90 Youth Assembly Members. Unsuccessful applicants were given the option of having their names remain on a Youth Assembly consultation forum list.

The purpose of the consultation forum is twofold. First, the consultation forum can provide a consultation base of engaged young people from whom the Youth Assembly can seek views. Secondly, it acts as a pool from which vacancies can be filled should they occur.

The Youth Assembly Members are listed in Appendix One.

## Operation

The Youth Assembly was established to perform three functions:

- to engage with the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly, specifically legislation and inquiries relevant to young people;
- to undertake project work generated by the Youth Assembly Committees; and
- to enable consultation in partnership with government Departments.

As the Northern Ireland Assembly has not been functioning normally for a significant part of the Pioneer Phase, the Youth Assembly Members had to consider how to meaningfully perform these functions. The Members met that challenge and, instead of the interface with a sitting Assembly, they focused on the issues they wished to explore in Committees, and contributed to a wide range of government consultations.

With the resumption of full Assembly business, the Youth Assembly will reprioritise its work to engage directly with the business of the Northern Ireland Assembly. This will involve the opportunity to examine legislation and inquiries relevant to young people.

## COMMITTEES

In order to help the Youth Assembly Members to decide which topics to concentrate on, an online survey was developed and undertaken. A total of 951 responses were received from young people across Northern Ireland, after which further virtual meetings were held to discuss the findings.

During those meetings, Youth Assembly Members voted to select the 10 issues that were of most interest to them.

Those were:

- Education
- Rights/Equality
- Jobs
- Health
- Justice
- Youth Services
- Environment
- Language
- Transport
- Identity

A plenary meeting was convened at which Youth Assembly Members debated the merits of focusing on particular issues and voted to establish four Committees, which would concentrate on the following sub-themes:

- Environment Committee — climate change legislation and compliance.
- Education Committee — relationships and sexuality education (RSE) provision.
- Health Committee — mental health service provision.
- Rights and Equality Committee — enhancing the knowledge and awareness of this topic among young people and decision-makers.

The Committees set about researching their chosen themes, with a view to scrutinising senior leaders with responsibility in those areas, and making informed recommendations to them. To adequately prepare Youth Assembly Members for their scrutiny role, the Youth Assembly team arranged for the young people to hear from experts in the chosen themes. Over the course of several months, departmental officials, representatives from non-governmental organisations, and Assembly research officers gave evidence to the Committees.

This provided the Youth Assembly Members with reliable evidence-based information that they could use to develop scrutiny questions and on which they could base their recommendations.

## Environment Committee Summary

In preparation for a meeting with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Permanent Secretary, Katrina Godfrey, the Environment Committee heard from people with knowledge of and experience in the field of climate change.

For example, a Northern Ireland Assembly Bill clerk presented an overview of climate change legislation in Northern Ireland; the Director of DAERA's climate change and green growth policy division helped the young people to understand the challenges ahead; and Northern Ireland Assembly Research Officers assisted the young people in developing further considerations in relation to the implementation of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

## Committee Concerns:

- To achieve net zero, could CO2 have to go beyond zero to make up for other gases — for example, methane?
- Do we have the resources and the technological capability to meet the targets?
- Could net costs from 2022-2050 be greater than the estimate of £4 billion?
- Where will the money come from to meet these costs? What will be sacrificed from the block grant as a result?
- What level of benchmarking across sectors has been conducted in order to understand where reductions can be made?
- What cost analysis or impact assessment work has been conducted so far?
- Are there plans for a distinct land use sectoral plan?
- Who will be held accountable for achieving targets and how?
- What is the impact of climate change policy on farmers' rights? Has an equality impact assessment been carried out?
- What exactly is a "just transition"?
- Is Northern Ireland's storage capacity sufficient?

## Committee Recommendations:

- Initiatives to tackle food and textile waste;
- Effective management of Northern Ireland's peatlands as potential carbon sinks;
- Development of coherent sectoral plans for reaching climate change targets; and
- A just transition towards net zero.

## Health Committee Summary

In preparation for a meeting with the Department of Health Permanent Secretary, Peter May, the Committee met a number of key stakeholders in its chosen area of mental health. These included a briefing from Jay Buntin and Matthew Taylor from Pure Mental NI, a youth-led mental health charity; and a meeting with Gavin Quinn, Leanne Thompson and Paul Millar from the mental health directorate in the Department of Health. Members also had a briefing and question and answer session with the Assembly Research Officer for health.

In addition, all Youth Assembly Members were offered training by the youth-led mental health charity Pure Mental NI at one of their online drop-in sessions. Members were also given the opportunity to meet the Assembly's Education Committee to contribute to the My Life and Learning in Lockdown inquiry. This enabled them to share their lived experience of being school-aged children throughout the pandemic. Members also contributed to a consultation session for the Independent Review of Education.

## Committee Concerns:

- Rates of mental illness and mental health difficulties among children and young people have been increasing steadily, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A UNICEF research project (The State of the World's Children 2021 - Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health) across low-income, middle-income and developed countries looked at mental health and rates of mental illness among children and young people. The report estimates that more than 13 per cent of adolescents aged 10–19 years, live with a diagnosed mental disorder as defined by the World Health Organisation.
- The Committee was concerned about the results of 'The Mental Health of Children and Parents in Northern Ireland' survey 2019, conducted pre-pandemic, which reports the following: one in eight children has anxiety or depression; almost one in eight reported thinking about attempting suicide; one in six engaged in a pattern of disordered eating; one in 20 has a form of post-traumatic stress disorder; and one in five experienced six or more psychotic-like symptoms.

In Northern Ireland in particular, the rates of mental illness among adults and children are 25% higher than they are in the rest of the UK.

- As a result of the Troubles, intergenerational trauma still contributes to mental health issues in Northern Ireland.
- Mental health is dependent on a variety of factors, which include socio-economic status, physical health, education, disability, childhood experiences and parents' mental health. Therefore, it is not solely the responsibility of the Department of Health to tackle the issue and a cross departmental approach is required.
- In Northern Ireland, research into mental health, particularly that of children and young people, has been poor.
- Mental health is not being effectively dealt with in all schools. Support is patchy, and in some rural primary schools, there are no counselling services at all.
- Pupils have to miss classes to see a counsellor and there are long waiting lists.
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) waiting lists are very long and our mental health services are underdeveloped.
- A 2018 study of mental health in Northern Ireland called 'Elephant in the Room: Exploring young people's awareness of mental health in Northern Ireland' found that that stigma still exists around mental health.
- The effect of social media on young people's mental health is a concern. Little is known of the long-term impact of social media on children and young people.
- The effect of wide-scale budget cuts and the impact on mental health services are a concern to the Committee.

## Committee Recommendations:

- Funding should be secured to conduct a follow-up survey on 'The Mental Health of Children and Parents in Northern Ireland' to see how the statistics have changed since 2019.
- Mental health services for children and young people must be co-designed with them.
- Young people should be involved in the upcoming review of the Department of Health's 'Still Waiting' action plan.
- Primary-school counselling should be continued beyond the current pilot.
- The Department of Education should develop a programme of mental health first aid training for all school staff and trainee teachers and ensure that the programme is co-designed with young people.

- All schools should consider appointing a “mental health first aider”.
- Mental health education should be mandatory on the curriculum.
- Amid budget cuts, funding for CAMHS should be ring-fenced.
- The Department of Health should develop proposals around the transition from CAMHS to adult mental health services and this should be done in consultation with young people.
- Awareness raising among young people of the “Text-a-Nurse” service, which provides free confidential advice.
- Training for teachers in how to recognise mental health difficulties, and support and signposting must be rolled out.
- Specialist mental health services need to be adequately funded. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2023 recommends the development of:

“adequately funded mental health services that are tailored to the specific needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children, migrant children, children with disabilities and ‘young carers’, including through sufficient investments in specialist services.”

To this list the Committee wishes to highlight the specific mental health needs of children with special educational needs.

## Education Committee Summary

In preparation for its meeting with Linsey Farrell, Deputy Secretary for Education Policy and Children’s Services, the Education Committee met a range of key stakeholders with knowledge and experience in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). Meetings were held with the Clerk to the Northern Ireland Assembly’s Education Committee and the Assembly’s Research Officer for Education. Members also participated in question and answer sessions with Ray Caldwell, Director of Curriculum and Assessment at the Department of Education and with Programme Manager, Roisin Radcliffe, and Education Manager, Deidre Coffey,

from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), both of whom work in the area of RSE and have responsibility for the CCEA RSE hub.

Members of the Education Committee met the panel for the Independent Review of Education; in order to give evidence and share their lived experience as young people presently in the education system.

## Committee Concerns:

A recent Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) report, ‘The Preventative Curriculum in Schools and Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) Centres’, April 2023, echoes the lived experience of the Youth Assembly Education Committee:

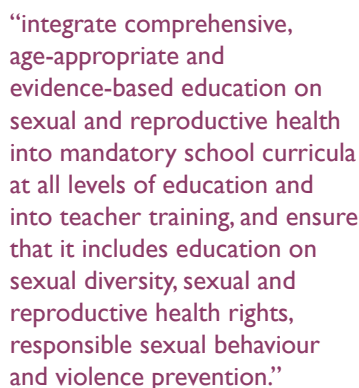
- For RSE provision, schools vary in what is taught and how, and in some cases, it is perceived that even the minimum content is not being consistently delivered.
- The more sensitive aspects of the RSE curriculum are sometimes avoided or not covered in sufficient depth — for example, gender and sexual identity; LGBTQ+; sexual abuse; child sexual exploitation; domestic abuse/ violence; and menstrual well-being.
- Knowledge and use of available RSE resources - for example, the Department of Education’s resource on emotional health and well-being and the CCEA resource hub – is not consistent across schools and teaching staff.
- Mental health is a huge concern in schools and there are delays in accessing support.

## In addition, the Education Committee is concerned about:

- The fact that issues around the RSE curriculum have been debated for a long time and have been the subject of many studies and reviews.
- The views of young people are not always considered during the development of RSE curriculums, policies or teaching practices.
- Parents and governors may not be fully briefed about how RSE is delivered in their school.
- RSE resources and content are not always up to date and this impacts on the ability of teachers to provide up-to-date knowledge, especially of the more sensitive topics.
- Different types of schools (e.g. faith schools) may approach RSE education differently. The Education Committee calls for standardisation of the RSE curriculum.

## Committee Recommendations:

- The Committee supports the recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its 'Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' (2023), which asks the Government to:



“integrate comprehensive, age-appropriate and evidence-based education on sexual and reproductive health into mandatory school curricula at all levels of education and into teacher training, and ensure that it includes education on sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible sexual behaviour and violence prevention.”

- The minimum content for RSE should be revised and extended at the earliest opportunity in partnership with all stakeholders, including children and young people. Subsequently, the content should be updated as frequently as possible to ensure that it remains agile and current.
- Schools should consider the views of pupils and parents when developing RSE policy. The policy should be available to all and regularly updated to ensure that it meets the needs of the young people.
- Schools should hold annual curriculum meetings with parents and students to explain the RSE curriculum.
- Regular inspection of RSE provision should be carried out in schools to ensure that the minimum content is taught consistently.
- Where RSE is not taught as a discrete subject, schools must make it clear to pupils and parents how and where the minimum content is being delivered.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on RSE training for teachers – including during initial teacher training and throughout teachers professional learning. This will help to ensure that teachers have the necessary skills, training and resources to deliver RSE. Training for school governors should also be included.
- Facilitation of CCEA to allow for continued creation of up-to-date resources for the RSE hub. These resources should be co-designed with young people.
- Awareness should be increased among teachers about the CCEA resource hub.
- Learning for life and work/RSE teachers should be connected via a network in order to share best practice.

## Rights and Equality Committee Summary

During the Pioneer Phase, the Rights and Equality Committee addressed raising awareness of the rights of the child among young people, particularly in schools. The Members met the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) to discuss the topic and voice their concerns.

In preparation for the meeting, the Committee conducted a series of meetings with key stakeholders, including an Assembly research officer and the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee Clerk who was responsible for administering the Ad Hoc Committee that scrutinised the Northern Ireland Bill of Rights. The young people also met officials from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's (NICCY) office.

On a separate issue, the Committee met officials from the Department of Finance to investigate a proposed change to marriage laws. As a result, the Youth Assembly was mentioned in a ministerial statement in relation to that issue. Members of the Rights and Equality Committee also participated in the selection process for the new Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

## Committee Concerns:

- The Committee echoes the concerns noted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in its 'Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2023'.
- There is still a relatively low level of knowledge of the UNCRC among children and adults.
- The Committee is concerned about the cost-of-living crisis and the impact on child poverty.
- Members are concerned that children's views are still not systematically heard in policymaking on issues that affect them.
- The majority of Committee Members believe that the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) is too low.
- The Committee is concerned about mental health services waiting times.
- The Committee is concerned about inequalities in educational attainment in Northern Ireland.

## Committee Recommendations:

- The Department of Education implements an initiative to raise the awareness of children's rights among school-aged children.

- Systematic training on children's rights be made available to all professionals working for and with children as per the UNCRC report.
- Measures to address fuel poverty this coming winter are put in place immediately.
- All policies and legislation in all Departments pertaining to the lives of children and young people should be subject to a Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA). This would be evidence-based, include input from children and all results would be published.
- Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) should also be actioned in all matters relating to budget and economic decision-making processes and outcomes, including austerity measures, in areas that are directly or indirectly related to children's rights (as per the UNCRC report).



## PLENARY MEETINGS

Youth Assembly Members met in plenary session on six occasions during the two-year mandate. Each plenary meeting was chaired by the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Alex Maskey.

From the first plenary meeting, which was held online due to restrictions arising from the Covid pandemic, to the final plenary meeting in the Assembly Chamber, these sessions have been important milestones along the journey of the first Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. The plenary meetings were a chance to make new connections, build relationships, discuss priorities, progress Committee business, debate issues and make plans.

### Plenary 1 Online - 2 July 2021

The inaugural sitting of the Youth Assembly took place online shortly after the Youth Assembly Members were appointed. The Speaker formally opened the plenary meeting, which included video contributions from Members and speeches from both the Speaker and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma. Youth Assembly Members pledged their commitment to the Youth Assembly:

"I confirm that I will commit to the work of the Youth Assembly, that I will show respect and tolerance for the views of all its Members, that I will act and behave in line with any and all of the Youth Assembly's policies, and that I will do nothing that harms the name and reputation of the Youth Assembly."

### Plenary 2 Great Hall - 6 November 2021

The first face-to-face plenary session took place amid tight Covid restrictions and was therefore held in the Great Hall in Parliament Buildings.

Members agreed and voted for their code of conduct, which had been discussed in online meetings prior to the plenary session.

Following a large-scale youth survey, a wide range of issues affecting young people were identified. The main priority at this plenary meeting was to discuss and debate the issues raised by the survey and agree the four issues that would form the basis for the establishment of the Youth Assembly's Committees.



*Youth Assembly Members gather in the Assembly Chamber to vote for the issues they will focus on during their mandate, November 2021.*

Junior Ministers Gary Middleton MLA and Declan Kearney MLA addressed the Youth Assembly and spoke of their delight that the Youth Assembly was up and running. They commented on the wide diversity of the group and praised Members for their plenary contributions on the range of issues highlighted in the youth survey. They encouraged them to make best use of their Youth Assembly mandate to challenge decision makers on all the issues they feel strongly about.

After the Junior Ministers' address, the result of the vote was announced. The four issues chosen by Members were: education; health; environment; and rights and equality.



*Junior Ministers Gary Middleton MLA (top) and Declan Kearney MLA (bottom) address the Youth Assembly, November 2021.*



## Plenary 3 Assembly Chamber - 5 March 2022

The third plenary session began with reports from the four Committee rapporteurs on their chosen areas of focus and their work to date. An open floor discussion followed in order to inform forward work programmes.



*The third Youth Assembly plenary debate gets under way in the Assembly Chamber, March 2022.*

Prior to this plenary session, Members received an online training session on the Programme for Government from Executive Office officials. Members debated the following motion:

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

The motion was carried.

## Plenary 4 Assembly Chamber - 5 November 2022



*Youth Assembly Members gather in the Great Hall, Parliament Buildings, November 2022.*

The minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) was debated during this session. In preparation for the plenary session and an associated online consultation, Youth Assembly Members met the then Justice Minister, Naomi Long MLA.

The Youth Assembly team provided detailed research to Youth Assembly Members, enabling them to fully understand the issues that were to be discussed and debated.

After a balanced debate in the Assembly Chamber, Youth Assembly Members voted against the motion to raise the MACR from 10 to 14 years old.

This was because the majority of Members decided that an age greater than 14 years old would be more appropriate. In addition to the MACR debate, Members presented Committee updates and shared the details of other ongoing consultations.



*(L-R) Minister of Justice, Naomi Long MLA, Diane Forsythe MLA and Minister for Health, Robin Swann MLA watch the Youth Assembly debate from the public gallery.*

## Plenary 5 Assembly Chamber - 24 February 2023



*Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma, addresses the Youth Assembly in the Assembly Chamber, February 2023.*

- Education Committee - Linsey Farrell, Deputy Secretary for Education Policy and Children's Services, Department of Education
- Health Committee - Peter May, Permanent Secretary, Department of Health
- Rights and Equality Committee - Alyson Kirkpatrick, Chief Commissioner, Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

On conclusion of the Committee sessions, the Youth Assembly Members moved to the Assembly Chamber where they attended their final plenary meeting.

This was an opportunity to reflect on their work, personal development and the overall experience of being a Youth Assembly member. In addition, Youth Assembly Members shared their hopes and aspirations for the future and highlighted issues that they hope the next Youth Assembly might consider.

The outgoing Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People attended the fifth plenary session, with Youth Assembly Members tasked with the responsibility of scrutinising her tenure in office.

In order to prepare the young people for this plenary session, the Youth Assembly team conducted online evening meetings that were attended by representatives of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's office and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

The Youth Assembly team provided the young people with written support material, with assistance from RalSe. By way of final preparation, Youth Assembly Members received further briefings from Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission staff and RalSe research officers on the morning of the plenary meeting.

The Speakers and Presiding Officers from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland addressed the young people prior to the sitting. The round-table session that followed was an opportunity for Youth Assembly Members to ask questions to senior figures in the political sphere.

## Plenary 6 Assembly Chamber - 30 June 2023

The final plenary session was preceded by the concluding meetings of the four Youth Assembly Committees, which met on the morning of Friday 30 June in the Senate Chamber of Parliament Buildings. During the Committee meetings, the young people shared recommendations in their chosen areas of research and took part in question and answer sessions with senior public officials, bringing the Committee work of the Pioneer Phase to a close.

**The following witnesses attended the Committee meetings:**

- Environment Committee - Katrina Godfrey, Permanent secretary, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

## CONSULTATIONS

During the Pioneer Phase, Youth Assembly Members have participated in a number of consultations, projects and stakeholder events. They worked with the Northern Ireland Assembly's Education Committee, seven Executive Departments and a range of public bodies.

### Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee

The Committee for Education began its pandemic youth engagement, *My Life and Learning in Lockdown*, in March 2021. This programme of work sought to allow the Committee to hear from young people in order to accurately represent their concerns in the scrutiny of departmental policies and school practices during the pandemic. In particular, the Committee focused on emotional and mental health and well-being.

The Committee undertook several strands of engagement throughout 2021 with pupils of all ages and sectors via Zoom, focus groups and a tailored art project.

Youth Assembly Members engaged in a final Zoom meeting with other young people on 24 February 2022 to help to give the Committee an update as restrictions eased.

The Committee stated:

“the contribution of the Youth Assembly was invaluable in informing the Committee's understanding and scrutiny.”

In March 2022, the Committee was able to raise the issues highlighted by young people in questions to CCEA at a Committee evidence session. In the longer term, the Committee recommended that a successor Committee might continue to engage with young people, promote their mental health and well-being, and take forward a plan of work informed by research analysis as to any impacts affecting the educational journey of the pandemic cohort.

### Departmental Consultations

#### Department of Education — Independent Review of Education

As part of 'New Decade, New Approach' (2020), it was agreed:

“The Executive will establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system.”

Following its appointment, the independent review panel started work at the beginning of October 2021. Since then, it has been focused on understanding the strategic context, gathering evidence and establishing the priority areas for the inquiry. The panel met a wide range of stakeholders, including the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, and received a significant volume of written submissions.

The Youth Assembly team facilitated a stakeholder workshop for the independent panel in April 2022.

During the meeting, Youth Assembly Members discussed what they thought was good in education in Northern Ireland; what they thought could be improved; their vision for education in the future; and how they thought that that could be achieved. There were feedback sessions at which young people summarised key points and communicated those directly to the panel.

The panel found the sessions very useful, and indeed the feedback provided was considered in the formulation of conclusions and recommendations during the preparation of its interim report.

The panel published its interim report in October 2022 and aims to publish the final report in September 2023.



*Youth Assembly Members meet with the panel Members from the Independent Review of Education, Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings, April 2022.*



## Department of Education — Pre-consultation, School Uniform Policy

The Department of Education conducted a pre-consultation report on school uniform policy in order to provide an incoming Minister with informed choices on potential change in this policy area. As part of this process, officials conducted focused pre-consultation meetings with key stakeholders.

In March 2023, officials met via Zoom with Youth Assembly Members. In the Department's words:

"This was invaluable as it allowed officials to consider pupil's views on their own school uniform. Officials have met pupils in school, but, in these cases, their principal or a teacher was also present. The Youth Assembly has been very useful in providing an independent pupil's view to the pre-consultation process."

It is intended that the pre-consultation report will be completed by June 2023. The views of the Members of the Youth Assembly will be represented in the report. The report will inform an options paper on potential changes to school uniform policy for an incoming Minister. This will almost certainly lead to a full public consultation.

## Department for Communities — Irish Language and Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategies

In March 2022, the Department for Communities published two recommendation reports by expert advisory panels for an Irish language strategy and an Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture strategy. The panels were made up of representatives from across academia and the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and Irish language sectors. Each panel was asked to bring forward recommendations to help to inform the strategies.

The publication of the reports was a first step in a co-design process to develop the strategies. Views on the reports were gathered by various community, voluntary and language organisations.

As part of the process, the Department for Communities engaged with the Youth Assembly in a focus group session in April 2022. The session allowed young people to give their views on the Ulster-Scots and Irish language recommendation reports.

The consultation on the expert advisory panels' reports has finished. The Department is working with a cross-departmental working group to develop the action plans for both strategies.

The Department's aim is to develop both draft strategies to present to a future Executive and to seek agreement to a public consultation.



*Officials from the Department for Communities consult with Youth Assembly Members on language, heritage and culture, Parliament Buildings, April 2022.*

## Department of Finance — Consultation on Marriage Laws

In 2021-22, the Department of Finance carried out a public consultation on two aspects of the law on marriage and civil partnership — belief marriage and the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership. In March 2022, as part of the consultation process, a Department of Finance official attended an online session of the Rights and Equality Committee to discuss the proposed changes and to note how Committee Members felt about them.

The Committee was primarily interested in the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership. At present, the law allows people aged 16 and 17 years old to marry or enter into a civil partnership provided their parents or guardians agree. The United Nations and many non-governmental organisations believe that this is too low a minimum age and have proposed that it be increased to 18 years old.

In discussing the proposed increase, Committee Members noted the following concerns relating to under-18s and the present minimum age: they could be forced into marriage/civil partnership; they could be coerced during the marriage or partnership; and they could miss out on opportunities and life chances on account of the marriage or partnership. The Committee thought it irrelevant that other important decisions such as taking up employment were open to 16 and 17-year olds or that the voting age has been lowered to 16 in some jurisdictions. Members suggested that different types of decision require different levels of maturity and have different long-term implications. It is easier, for example, to leave a job than it is to leave a marriage. The Committee's views were reflected in the final consultation report, which noted almost unanimous support for increasing the minimum age to 18.

On 1 July 2022, the then Minister of Finance, Conor Murphy MLA, made a written statement to the Assembly announcing his intention to legislate at the earliest possible opportunity to increase the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18. However, legislation to amend marriage law cannot proceed until the Assembly and Executive are functioning.

## Department of Justice — Consultation on Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility

In March 2022, the Department of Justice published its first strategic framework for youth justice (SFYJ) and an accompanying five-year action plan. Its vision is for a progressive youth justice system that delivers better outcomes for children and communities. The SFYJ highlighted a range of current issues in the youth justice system, along with proposals to address them.

One such issue was the relatively low minimum age of criminal responsibility in Northern Ireland, which currently sits at 10 years of age. Previous attempts to increase the MACR here have been prevented due to a lack of political support. The SFYJ included a commitment, supported by the most-recent Justice Minister, Naomi Long, to carry out a public consultation to formally record views on increasing the MACR to 14 years old.

The consultation was launched in October 2022 and ran for 12 weeks. In addition to the main consultation document, a “youth-friendly” version was developed to encourage responses from children and young people.

Youth Assembly Members met Minister Long and officials from the Department of Justice in October 2022 to discuss the consultation and provide their views on the issue.

Following that meeting, the MACR was tabled at a Youth Assembly plenary debate in November 2022, with the motion asking whether Members agreed that the MACR should be raised from 10 years to 14 years, in line with the consultation question. Of the 35 votes recorded, 15 supported the motion and 20 opposed it, not necessarily because they disagreed with an increase in the MACR, but because their opinions differed on what age it should be. Further analysis carried out among 29 of those who voted revealed that although the majority supported increasing the MACR above 10 years, the new suggested age varied between 12 and 16 years.

A total of 455 responses to the consultation were received by the Department of Justice. It has conducted a full analysis of all the responses and will publish a summary report over the coming months. The Department will consider the issues raised through the consultation exercise and use the views expressed to inform its recommendations for the development of policy and legislative proposals in respect of the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Northern Ireland.

Those recommendations will be subject to ministerial consideration and approval. Any proposed changes to the current legislation will be subject to Executive and Assembly approval.



*Youth Assembly Members meet online with Minister of Justice, Naomi Long MLA, to discuss the departmental consultation on the minimum age of criminal responsibility, October 2022.*

## PROJECTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

### Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People: Appointment

The Executive Office recently undertook a vital, high-profile public appointment competition for a new Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

The job of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People is to safeguard and to promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. A key aspect of the process was the involvement of young people — defined as those aged 12-18 years, or under 21 if they have a disability or have been in care.

Applications for the youth selection panel were invited from young people via their nominating organisation. These were assessed against predetermined criteria, and seven representatives from the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly were awarded places. Officials from the Executive office said:

“The Youth Assembly representatives showed great commitment and engagement through attending and being fully active participants in the workshops and assessment stages.”

Workshops, led by a youth facilitator and assisted by an independent assessor, were aimed at developing youth selection panel members’ understanding of the public appointment process and assigning roles for the assessment stage. These took place between October 2022 and February 2023. The assessments for the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People took place over two days in February 2023. Youth selection panel members contributed effectively to all aspects of the competition, from inputting to the competition documentation to taking an active role in the assessment stage.

Of the seven representatives from the Youth Assembly, two were assigned to sit on the adult selection panel for the assessment of the candidates’ presentations and the remainder were on the youth selection panel, taking on the roles of observer, chair or carrying out the role play.

The importance of the youth selection panel can be highlighted by the fact that candidates for the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People post had to pass both selection panel stages — youth and adult. Officials stated:

“Highly professional, confident and articulate throughout the process, the Youth Assembly representatives displayed excellent knowledge about the sector and the Commissioner’s role. Their important role and contribution in the overall process was invaluable.”

The Secretary of State, The Rt Hon Chris Heaton-Harris MP, has just announced the appointment of Mr Chris Quinn as the new Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. Chris will take up the appointment on 18 September 2023.

### Children’s Law Centre — Development of Education Rights Resource

The Children’s Law Centre (CLC) has developed an online chat bot called “REE rights responder”, which helps young people under 18 to gain access to free and confidential legal advice on a range of issues such as employment, homelessness, welfare and benefits, mental health and stop and search. It was designed by young people, for young people, to deliver legal services when and where young people need them. It is accessible on smart phones and available 24/7.

The CLC identified a gap in the resource around education rights and it secured funding to develop an education strand, with questions and answers co-designed by children and young people.

Youth Assembly Members assisted in the co-design process by attending workshops with other young people from ‘Youth@CLC’ and the Secondary Students’ Union of Northern Ireland to discuss content for the strand, ensuring that it was relevant and presented in accessible language. They also discussed ideas for marketing a future launch of the strand and how to reach as many young people as possible.

The project is still in development. Work is ongoing on phase two, working alongside a pro-bono volunteer partner, and a series of workshops is being organised to engage with students with special educational needs or disabilities. The launch is expected shortly after September 2023.

### Department of Education/Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment — Period Dignity Project

The Executive agreed in December 2020 to fund a pilot scheme to provide free period products to all schools in Northern Ireland with effect from September 2021.

The period dignity pilot scheme aims to ensure that period products are available to learners where and when they need them, as well as to provide educational support within the school setting. This important work is overseen by a steering group of key stakeholders, including the Department of Education, the Education Authority, the Education and Training Inspectorate, CCEA, teacher representatives and a youth representative.

The steering group also oversees the evaluation of the pilot that must take place towards the end of each academic year and makes recommendations on the continuation of the scheme, or otherwise, the following year, along with recommendations on changes to the scheme and required funding.

In October 2022, a Youth Assembly member was invited to join the period dignity steering group to be the voice of the young person. The steering group meets online bi-monthly. CCEA officials stated:

“The Youth Assembly Member has contributed well to the work of the Steering Group, asking relevant questions, and putting forward some great ideas from her own experience, and those of her peers on this very important issue for young people.”

Funding has been confirmed for the 2023-24 financial year, and the steering group will continue to meet on a bi-monthly basis.

The current schools' period dignity pilot scheme is a vital source of information to help design and implement the long-term future provision of period products through the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

## Police Service of Northern Ireland — Chief Constable

On 15 March 2022, two Youth Assembly Members were invited to join young people from other youth organisations to meet the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Chief Constable, Simon Byrne. The Chief Constable and his team gave an overview of issues that the Police Service is working on that affect children and young people. This was followed by a question and answer session.

Subsequently, Youth Assembly Members invited the Chief Constable to meet them. In advance of the meeting in April 2022, the Youth Assembly asked Members of the Youth Assembly consultation forum to tell them the key issues that they would like the Youth Assembly to raise. Among the issues discussed were PSNI recruitment, youth engagement, mental health, LGBTQ+ issues, substance abuse, hate crimes and victim support. The Chief Constable made a commitment to progress youth voice initiatives within the PSNI.

## Police Service of Northern Ireland — Policing Engagement Initiative

The PSNI policing engagement initiative was established in autumn 2022. The aim of the initiative is to provide a platform for young people to explore key policing issues and how they affect them; for young people to speak directly to key decision-makers from policing and justice; for decision-makers to hear and listen to the voice of young people; and for young people to influence the direction and practice of policing in Northern Ireland.

Young people from the Youth Assembly, along with other young people from the Voice of Young People in Care, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and NI Alternatives volunteered to join the group to help to steer the direction of the initiative.

After a period of capacity building, looking at the issues young people are facing and engaging with the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) and the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI), the group will shortly begin event planning and designing a young person-led conference on policing to be held later in 2023. This event will feed into an ongoing and regular engagement process between the PSNI, NIPB, PONI and young people.



*Youth Assembly Members pictured at the launch of the PSNI children and young people strategy, June 2023.*

## Electoral Office Northern Ireland

In advance of the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, the Chief Electoral Officer attended a drop-in session with Youth Assembly Members at which she gave the young people an overview of how the election system operates and explained how the count is undertaken. Youth Assembly Members were invited to the count at the Titanic Visitor Centre to observe proceedings. The Chief Electoral Officer met the young people, gave them a tour of the centre and explained the process involved. It was a great opportunity for those who attended to experience the atmosphere, meet candidates and gain first-hand experience of an election count.

## Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) – Statement of Children’s Rights in Northern Ireland

In November 2022, Youth Assembly Members received an invitation from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People to attend the report launch of the statement on children's rights in Northern Ireland. This is the third statement on children's rights in Northern Ireland produced by NICCY. It looks at some of the key issues facing children and young people today such as health, education and having a say. It also looks at areas where the rights of small numbers of children and young people are not being upheld.



The event was held in the Europa Hotel, Belfast and consisted of an address by the NICCY Chief Executive, Mairead McCafferty, followed by a summary of key report findings presented by NICCY youth panel members and closing remarks from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma.

The Statement on Children's Rights in Northern Ireland is informed by the UN Committee's concluding observations following its 5th periodic examination of the UK State Party and NICCY's work with stakeholders on key priorities. Each themed area of the statement is prefaced with the relevant UNCRC articles, the UN Committee's concluding observations, followed by the current context in respect of children's rights and NICCY's calls to Government.



*Youth Assembly Members pictured with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma, at the launch of the Statement of Children's Rights in Northern Ireland, November 2022.*

## Pure Mental Northern Ireland — Mental Health Sessions

Youth Assembly Members met representatives of the youth-led mental health charity Pure Mental NI on two occasions. In the first instance, officials from the charity attended an online drop-in session that was open to all Youth Assembly Members. The young people were given advice to help them cope with the pressures of the exam season. Representatives of the charity also attended the stakeholder event that took place in September 2022. This was an opportunity for the Health Committee to explore mental health provision in Northern Ireland in greater detail.

## Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC)

The outgoing Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People attended the November 2022 plenary, at which Youth Assembly Members were tasked, at a future plenary meeting, with scrutinising her performance during her time in office. A plenary meeting was arranged for February 2023. Representatives from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission attended a drop-in session to help prepare Youth Assembly Members for that meeting.

In addition, the young people met representatives of the NIHRC on the morning of the plenary session, when they

provided information about children's rights and helped the young people to prepare for their scrutiny of the Commissioner.

## United States Consul General

The United States Consul General, Paul Narain, attended the fourth Youth Assembly plenary session, which was held in November 2022. He addressed Youth Assembly Members, speaking about the unique opportunities afforded to them and highlighting the significance of their roles.



*Youth Assembly Members pictured with United States Consul General in Belfast, Paul Narain, in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings, November 2022.*

## Presidential Address

The President of the United States of America visited Belfast in April 2023. The United States Consulate invited Members of the Youth Assembly to attend his key address at Ulster University.



*Youth Assembly Members attend the address by the President of the United States, Joe Biden, at Ulster University in April 2023.*

## Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

In April 2023, Youth Assembly Members attended events marking 25 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

They were invited to a gala dinner at Hillsborough Castle and an event Parliament Buildings hosted by the Speaker. They had opportunities at both events to meet with senior political leaders from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States, and to discuss with them the work of the Youth Assembly.



*Youth Assembly Members pictured at a reception in Hillsborough Castle with former US President, Bill Clinton, April 2023.*



*Youth Assembly Members pictured at a reception in Hillsborough Castle with UK Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, April 2023.*



*Following a ceremony to mark the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, Youth Assembly Members gathered on the steps in the Great Hall, Parliament Buildings, April 2023.*

# YOUTH ASSEMBLY MEMBER REFLECTIONS

## Jamie Brown

Being part of the Youth Assembly has expanded my experiences. I have developed a better understanding of our government system and the problems in our environment. It has helped me with my confidence, speech writing and allowed me to work with others, all of which I thoroughly enjoyed.

## Alannah Freaney

The Youth Assembly has given us the space and platform to advocate positive change for all young people in Northern Ireland. We had our voices heard by decision makers. Being involved in the Youth Assembly has been a blast!

## Hannah Abraham

We had many meetings both as a Committee and as a whole plenary to discuss our research. Each person was given opportunities to speak and debate. Everyone was immensely respectful of the many backgrounds and beliefs we all held. Everyone was treated with equality with no prejudice of age or background.

I have made close friends that will be with me for many years to come and the experience has forged skills like teamwork, communication and even brought out an extroverted nature that I did not even know I had.

In decades to come I will remember this experience. I will cherish the friendships and look back on the memories.

I hope to see the policies that I helped to work on come in to existence.

## Ollie Torney

My time at the Youth Assembly has influenced the way I am today. Two years ago, I was shy, ignorant to what was happening around me, and very afraid speaking in front of a crowd. But on that first plenary I made the decision to speak up, and ever since I've tried my hardest to throw myself into every challenge that comes my way.

It's because of the Youth Assembly that I have so much hope for the future of this country.

I am surrounded by so many promising young minds each with their own ideas and experiences. By looking beyond our difference we've been able to learn so much about the issues that face the Northern Ireland youth.

The fact that such a diverse bunch of individuals full of ideas and opinions are able to work together so harmoniously is what makes me believe that we have a bright and peaceful future ahead of us.

## Rebecca Moore

My Youth Assembly experience has been invaluable – I have grown in confidence, met interesting people from different backgrounds to my own and had the opportunity to work in partnership with others to persuade decision makers to make a change for the better. This shared experience has been really rewarding.

## Robert Moore

The Youth Assembly has taken the ethos of the Good Friday Agreement into its fundamental principles; to respect all opinions and bridge the divide. Its membership is fully representative of Northern Ireland's population.

The Youth Assembly has provided me with a platform to voice my concerns and aspirations. The Youth Assembly has given me the ability to shape our future because we are architects of our future.

APPENDICES

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## Appendix One List of Youth Assembly Members

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



### OFFICIAL REPORT

#### 2nd sitting of the Youth Assembly

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At 11:00 am on Saturday 6 November 2021  
Great Hall, Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast  
(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

#### Speaker's Welcome

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Confirmation of the Code of Conduct

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

Moved —

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

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

**All Members:** Aye.

Resolved —

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

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

## Debate on the Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly

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

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

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

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

These issues were education; rights and equality; jobs; healthcare; justice; and youth services.

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

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



Another issue that we looked at was jobs. We felt that employers are in many cases unsympathetic to the fact that many of their young employees are still in full-time education and can therefore not achieve the same flexibility as many adults.

Nevertheless, it is more important than ever for young people to gain work experience in order to be competitive in the job market once they leave school, creating a situation where many feel that they have no choice other than to sacrifice grades so that they can attain sufficient work experience to be employable. I am sure that you can all agree, as we did, that this is an unacceptable situation that we should be attempting to solve.

Finally, we wanted to recognise the important role that schools play in providing youth services in communities where they would otherwise not be available. However, since this is again a postcode lottery, we would like to rectify it.

It is our belief that the duty to provide youth services and facilities should not fall solely on schools. There should be wider access to youth services for those who do not live in cities or major towns.

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

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

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

I have the honour of reporting the results of the group 2 discussion, which was held on 12 October at 7:30 pm.

The six issues discussed were education; health; rights and equality; environment; language; and jobs.

It was clear that rights and equality were very important issues that concerned everyone, since they ran through so many of the other issues, such as jobs, and, more specifically, the minimum wage for our age group.

It is unfair that younger people are not paid the same as older colleagues for doing exactly the same thing. All of us who have a job but are not paid the same wage will agree that that is very annoying. If that were changed, it would be greatly appreciated - I would certainly appreciate it.

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

*[Interruption caused by technical difficulties.]*

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

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

As a lot of us know, COVID also impacted on exams and led to much confusion for students and teachers alike. Coronavirus has been here for nearly two years, so it is time to make a clear plan for exams. The plan should involve students and be made known to them, since we are the ones who have to go through the stress and anxiety of the unknown. That stress has led to a dramatic increase in the number of mental health problems, which is why it is vital that people get the correct help. That help is not always easily accessible in school, and that must be fixed as soon as possible.

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

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

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

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

**11:15 am**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whilst we relish the great opportunity to voice our views today, we all should have proper representation in our schools. School councils have no real voice and are simply for appearance.

Engaging young people in our society is crucial, as their voices must be heard throughout our academic journey. Suicide prevention, education on alcohol and drugs, and dealing with poverty, racism, disability and personal expression should be as important as academic learning.

A focus on that will develop resilience, lift some academic pressure and work towards creating more healthy and well-rounded citizens. We all should be valued, not just for academic performance and sporting prowess. Allowing young people's voices to be heard in schools in relation to education and the curriculum, educating our teachers and investing in mental health and personal expression is, in our view, vital to the future of Northern Ireland.

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

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

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

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

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

Our third priority was health, and that linked in a lot with education. As I previously mentioned, we discussed how education around mental health is inadequate and how teenagers have little support.

There is no outlet that allows teenagers to relieve stress and to talk about how they are doing. Not every teenager needs therapy, but we all need someone to talk to on those difficult days. We all know of the connection between mental and physical health, yet schools offer only a small variety of sports that do not suit all abilities, and not every sport is accessible for each gender.

There is no equal opportunity. We also discussed the possibility of healthier food options in schools.

Our fourth point was the environment. It is our future that is at stake. We talked about more environmentally friendly vehicles, cutting out unnecessary plastic in supermarkets and cutting down on plastic in schools, whilst ensuring that there are accessible recycling bins.

We discussed how using public transport is too expensive, especially for teenagers, and how we can more sustainably produce electric car batteries.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let me give you the practical example of the number of hours that I would need to work to come here. The bus from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast costs £19.50, and I can times that by two, because I brought my mum. I had a bite to eat before coming here, so let us dedicate about a fiver to that — although it actually came to £12. It is likely that lots of people had to buy presentable clothes to wear, and let us say that it cost a tenner for that whole thing.

That is £54, overall, meaning that I would have to work 11.68 hours just to be here today. That does not include the bus from the city centre or meals at and transport to my place of work.

That having been said, the main issue is not the figure or the fact that we cannot buy a Big Mac.

The main issue is the value that it places on young people. I have worked in many places, but my first job was in a bar. I talked to some kitchen staff and told them my age, and they laughed in my face and said, “You will be sacked when you are 18”. That is when it clicked: I was cheap labour whom they could work to the bone, and, when I quit, another fresh-faced young person would take my place.

It is about worth. Why is a Big Mac worth more than me? We are not asking to be paid six-figure sums; we are just asking to be paid a respectful amount. Work, especially in hospitality, leaves an impact on a person. We invest time in our work, and it can exhaust us and sometimes scar us. This is not about us begging for more money; it is about us begging for the end of our exploitation. That is just a single aspect of the topic of jobs that we are focusing on. That is why I encourage all of you to vote to make it one of our priorities. We always focus on education — rightly so — but what about the people who choose not to pursue education? Why neglect them? After all, there are 28,000 of us as of December 2020.

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

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

**Abbie McAtee:** Hi, I am Abbie. One of the issues that is really important to me is health. I know someone who is almost 14 and suffers from scoliosis. His back started curving when he was only a few days old. He is 13, coming 14 in March, and every day is really difficult. He has waited for surgery for such a long time. Waiting lists are a huge issue.

His back curves 70 degrees one way and 80 degrees the other, yet he has been waiting for years. I want to know what more we can do to reduce waiting times.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 11:30 am

**Órla Lafferty:** Hi. I am Órla. It is very important to mention that we, as young people, have been kept in the dark about our education during this COVID time.

We do not know what is going to determine our grades. I am going to university next year. I do not know what test is going to make up the grade that I need to get into that university. Last year, we were taking tests from Christmas and we were told that they would not count towards our A levels, but they determined part of my AS grade. It is unfair that we were not told at the start of the year how our grades are going to be determined. Thank you very much.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**David Anderson:** I will raise an issue that I do not think has been spoken about yet; the closest that we could relate it to is transport and infrastructure. It is to do with housing. We are still young — we have not considered moving out yet — but how often do we hear about young people leaving home, finishing school, going to university and buying a house? We do not really think about that.

We might not have considered it, but most people whom I know who have finished university and education and have moved out to be independent end up renting. They cannot buy a house because it is not possible.

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

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

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

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

I do not know whether many people know this, but we are permitted a lot less money for our student loans than our counterparts in England and Wales. We are given about £3,000 less to survive at university.

That is going to affect a lot of us next year — I am in my final year at the moment. Since a lot of us go abroad for university, we should talk about possibly increasing student loans and the rules under which they are given out, because the situation at the moment is not sustainable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Tiana O'Brian:** I would like to talk about rights and equality, primarily the age of criminal responsibility.

The age of consent in Northern Ireland is 16 and the voting age is 18, but the age of criminal responsibility is only 10, which is two years younger than the age recommended by the UN. That is a really bad indiscretion, and it should be addressed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**11:45 am**

**Alannah Freaney:** I will expand on the previous point on languages. It should be compulsory for schools to teach sign language to pupils from a young age, even from first year. It is unfair that we cannot speak to those who cannot hear properly.

There should be the option to learn either British sign language or Irish sign language, depending on the school, and, obviously, they would make that choice. Thank you.

**Robert Moore:** I will add to the point that Alannah made about transport. It is not just Derry that is left behind but many other towns and cities in Northern Ireland, such as Armagh, Omagh, Enniskillen, Newry, Banbridge and Downpatrick.



Those were all major players in the transport network of Northern Ireland, and now they are left behind with a small intercity connection with a bus. A bus can hold only 56 people; a train can hold 100 plus. There is massive demand between those areas. Why are we not meeting it?

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

**David Anderson:** I want to make a point on infrastructure. I have been listening to what everyone has said, and I certainly agree that everyone knows that it is a serious issue. From listening to the debate, I feel that it is not so much that we are not doing enough but that the resources that we have are being terribly allocated. For example, I live in Ahoghill, a small village outside Ballymena.

Not a lot of people live there, yet, when I go to school in the morning, three buses pass by within 20 minutes, whereas we have heard about people who have to get the bus to school, and there is maybe one bus every two hours. Surely it is a terrible way to run the system, if, for some people, there are buses sitting empty or with hardly anyone on them, and, for others, they are late for school if they miss the bus by one minute.

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

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

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

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

**Hannah Abraham:** Hello. My name is Hannah. I want to expand on something that was mentioned by someone at table 8 and Alannah: train times.

A lot of us are working — for example, yesterday I worked until 10.00 pm — and, for me, there are no buses or trains after 7.00 pm.

Many of us who come back from work are susceptible to a lot of dangers, especially when it is that late at night. I sometimes come home at 11.00 pm and, although it gets busier around the weekends, if you live far away from work, it takes a long time to get home. Having no transport that late at night discourages people from working and makes things a lot more difficult for local businesses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



**Tyler Large:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is Tyler again. I second Ronan's point on special educational needs in school. When I was younger, I was diagnosed with dyspraxia, which means that hand-eye coordination is affected by whatever links your brain and can get worse through time. When I was younger, all my teachers in primary school kept telling me how bad my handwriting was, and it was really taking an effect on me because I was behind. I only found out I had dyspraxia because my P4 teacher was given SENCO training, which meant that she could pick up on the signs of special educational needs. That is the only reason why I was diagnosed with dyspraxia.

I knew that it was not just my handwriting; there are a lot more issues, such as problems with balance, that have affected my life.

It would be good if more teachers were given special educational needs training so that they are able to pick up on problems that would otherwise go undiagnosed until later.

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

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

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

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

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

## Vote on the Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly

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

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

*Youth Assembly Members voted.*

## Junior Ministers' Address

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

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

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

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

I assure you that Declan and I will pass on the content of the debates and conversations here today to the rest of the Executive Ministers.

Each and every issue that you raised is equally important, and I look forward to seeing the result of the vote. Whatever the result, I encourage you to keep raising the issues directly with your local representatives, including your MLAs.

## 12:15 pm

I sat at table 8, but I know that there is a diverse range of people at each and every table. I am encouraged to see people from every demographic and every geographic place right across

Northern Ireland, particularly, of course, from the Foyle constituency.

I am honoured to have been elected to represent the Foyle constituency as one of five MLAs. I hope and pray that there are people in the Great Hall today who will go on to represent their constituencies in the Assembly, whether they are Assembly Members or Ministers. Even if you do not do that, we have some very talented people here who will, no doubt, go on to do great things no matter what field they are in. That is fantastic, and I really wanted to say that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When I came into the Great Hall this morning, I reflected. Generally, like Gary, I just pass through this place on the way to Committees or to the Chamber, which is over here to the left, for debates and questions and so on, but there is an iconic moment that will always stay with me, and I go back to 2007-08.

That was the moment when Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley — rest in peace both of them — came down the stairs here at the top of the Great Hall. You will probably have heard about that moment, read about it or seen it on television, but it was a really important moment as a turning point in our society, because all the commentators will tell us that they could never have imagined Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley coming together to share office as joint First Ministers in our power-sharing Government. It happened: what was perceived to be the unimaginable became the possible and the deliverable.

We are in a much better space today, but there is an awful lot more to do. You have touched on a number of the issues. We still have divisions in our society. We have to deal with sectarianism. We have to deal with racism. We have to deal with the fact that young people from different sexual orientations are not treated equally in our society. We need to make the North of Ireland a warm place for everybody, regardless of where you are from, whatever place you live in or where you came from.

You might be from a family that has come from other places as migrants or refugees fleeing war, famine and pestilence. You may have lived here all your years. If you live here, you have entitlements, a right to be here and a right to be treated well. This initiative today goes a long way to underlining the importance of that.

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

Change is happening all around us. We live in a very dynamic world and a very dynamic society. There are big discussions taking place about constitutional change on our island.

There are important discussions taking place about health; mental health and well-being; public health; issues around rights; issues relating to women's reproductive health rights; issues pertaining to ensuring that every young person has access to education; infrastructure; transport; and the importance of rurality and rural life and ensuring that people who live in rural areas are included in society. All those issues have been touched on by you today, and that is absolutely fantastic.

There is a lot happening regionally and nationally for us, but there are also big global challenges, and what inspires me about today's younger generation is your sense of appreciating that we live in a global village. We live on a vast planet, but, in reality, we have a real sensitivity and understanding of the key issues.

The big issues of the moment are climate, hunger and tax justice across the world, and there are real challenges in places like Afghanistan, Yemen and Gaza in Palestine, where young people like you face massive challenges. That is all part of our world.

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

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

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

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

President Barack Obama had a turn of phrase:

“We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

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

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

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

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

The votes cast were as follows:

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

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

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

## Concluding Remarks

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

We, in the Assembly, will continue to work with you. The setting of the Youth Assembly's agenda, as has been demonstrated today, is entirely in your hands. Do your work in the Youth Assembly;

be proud to have been appointed to it; and do your best, working with your colleagues here and on behalf of the young people in the broader community.

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

*Adjourned at 12:30pm.*

## OFFICIAL REPORT

### 3rd sitting of the Youth Assembly

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At 11:30 am on Saturday 5 March 2022  
Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast  
(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

#### Speaker's Welcome

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

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

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

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

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

*Members observed a period of silence.*

#### Reports from Committee Rapporteurs

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

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

#### Environment Committee

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

The Committee discussed the issues that members most wanted to consider in relation to the wider environment portfolio.

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

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

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

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

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

## Rights and Equality Committee

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

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

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

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

## Education

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

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

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



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

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

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

## Health

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

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

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

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

**11:45am**

## Business Committee

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The consultation has demonstrated consensus on the need for a common curriculum to age 14".

— *[Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 18, p386, col 2]*.

That did not last. Years of debate led to the test being reinstated, only this time it was far worse. Unduly influenced by elite schools and other vested interests, the resulting system was to see children as young as 10 faced with sitting five exams in schools to which they had never been, with teachers they had never met and with none of their friends around them.

That created a suboptimal environment that heavily disadvantaged those who are economically disadvantaged and children with additional needs, present or underlying. I put it to you that parents and children should have had a greater say in the development and outcomes of that system, like elite schools and their boards had.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 12:00 noon

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

**Olivia Smith:** I am a member of the Environment Committee. I want to stress the central and crucial importance of the opportunity for cooperation between Youth Assembly Environment Committee members and our Assembly counterparts.

We must recognise that significant provisions must be made to protect the long-term future of young people under the climate legislation that is progressing in the Assembly. As Lauren mentioned earlier, young people contribute 100% to our future and we must work now to ensure that the well-being and prosperity of young people can be protected in a constantly changing world.

**Caolán Gregory:** I want to reiterate Kelly's point about long COVID. I have suffered from long COVID over the past two years and every waking moment is hell. I had to force myself every day to go to school to finish my GCSEs and I have received absolutely zero help from the Government and the NHS.

At every visit to the hospital or to the doctor, I was told that I was just depressed and that it would disappear. Even then, I was given no help by mental health services. Just this morning, I was so tired and in so much pain that I reconsidered coming here today, but I thought that I should come anyway and discuss the matter. I have been on a waiting list for three months and I am still waiting to see more doctors. Every doctor I have seen has absolutely no idea what is wrong with me, and it has affected my life so badly that I cannot even finish my A levels.

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

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

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

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

**Robert Moore:** I will touch on education this time. In the middle of February, I picked my GCSEs. I was off school at mid-term, so I could not go to my careers teacher for advice on which subjects to pick. We had to pick them by intuition. We were not even given advice on what career links the subjects could have. There was no preparation. I did not even know what was going to be in the options booklet. I did not have a clue. It is not fair on anybody to be left without a clue. We were told to do our own research, but careers teachers are trained for that. They are trained to help you make that decision. Pupils should not have to do everything by themselves when picking their subjects. In a way, they should, but not totally 100% by themselves. That is all I have to say about that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 12:15pm

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

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

**Robert Moore:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. You will be sick of me up here. [Laughter.] Two climate change Bills are going through the Assembly at the moment — the Executive Bill and the private Member's Bill — and that is slowing down the process, even that involving more important legislation in different areas. When two pieces of legislation are going through, that will obviously slow down the process because you will have to take double the time to look at two Bills. If you were able to merge the Bills, take provisions out of one, merge them with the other and create a sort of super Bill, that would maybe make both sides happy and achieve a better outcome. You could even give that Bill accelerated passage, because it is a massively important issue that concerns the future and stability of Northern Ireland. Frankly, it should be given accelerated passage.

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



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

They have to take all that on board very seriously, including worries about agriculture, other forms of emission and so on.

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

Thank you for your comments on that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 12:30pm

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

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

*The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.*

2:00pm

On resuming —

## Programme for Government

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

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

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

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

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

If that is clear, we will move on.

Moved —

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

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

## Education

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

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

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

In life, you have to make mistakes, yet schools punish you for that. That criminal system paralyses our spirit.

We cannot share, create or learn from our mistakes. Instead, you have hundreds of kids chasing the one right answer, and there is never one right answer to a problem, although maybe there was 100 years ago.

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

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

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

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

**Jenna McLaughlin:** I will cover the subject of having to learn unnecessary topics in school, like point, evidence and explanation (PEA) paragraphs in English or learning Pythagoras' theorem in maths. Unless I need those things to become a teacher, I do not think that it is necessary to learn them. Obviously, it is important, but I do not think that it is that important, if I am not considering going down that career path. In addition, we should have the option to sign up for certain subjects that we can do instead of subjects such as double-award science rather than being nominated to go into them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Aaron Murphy:** There are not nearly enough practical implications for the subjects that we learn in school. Sure, in English, I could study Shakespeare all I want, but, unless I want to be a writer or a poet, I will never really use that.

It is the same for maths. If I do not want to be an engineer, when will I ever need to use Pythagoras' theorem? We are not doing enough things to incorporate real-life scenarios into our education system.

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

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

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

## 2:15pm

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

I appreciate the pressures that schools face in teaching the whole content of an exam course. I know that my teachers work very hard to do that. However, if schools' mission is to prepare children for modern education and life, the law oversees life. How can we expect to be good citizens, and model citizens, without knowledge of the law? My ignorance of what a Programme for Government is demonstrates that. When law is mentioned in schools, it is shoehorned into perhaps unfashionable citizenship classes. Therefore, I ask schools to teach law, not the intricate details of estoppel or fiduciary duties, but what the legislative, Executive and judiciary do, and how they impact us. The old idiom is that ignorance of the law is no excuse. However, if modern education continues to teach children in that way, it may well be.

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

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

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

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

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

## Health

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2:30pm

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

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

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

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

**Hannah O'Connor:** Following on from Kelly's point about social care, I think that our services that deal with social care issues do not listen nearly enough to the people whom they are dealing with. I feel that that should definitely be looked into because, with lockdown and stuff, a lot more kids have been at risk because they have been stuck at home and have not been able to go to school and have that free space. I think that it should definitely be looked at that. The people whom it is affecting should be listened to. I have heard from other cases that that does not happen, which is absolutely unacceptable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Environment

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

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

**Robert Moore:** Debate about fracking is seeing a resurgence in Northern Ireland, with some major political parties adopting it as a policy. Can we not see how bad fracking is? Fracking has been allowed in America. Look at the ecosystems in America where that has happened; just look at them. It does as much harm to us as it does to the wildlife in an ecosystem, because we are part of the ecosystem. If we let fracking happen in Northern Ireland and introduce those licences, it will harm us as much as it will harm the wildlife. We have to think about that and take action now.

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

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

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

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

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

## 2:45pm

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

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

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

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

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

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

On electricity, a reason why we are seeing massive price increases may be that we are in the middle of the transition between fossil fuels and renewable electricity. We are where we are because we have not put in place proper price controls and actual control of renewable energy, and because private companies are trying to make a profit on that renewable energy. We should take action now, take renewable energy fully under state control and plan it like that, because it is an essential service. People need electricity to cook food. You need electricity for oil to heat your home. You need electricity for everything. Why should it be less important than anything else?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Rights and Equality

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

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

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

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

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

### 3:00pm

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

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

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

**Lauren Bond:** I am a member of the Education Committee. The last two years have been unimaginably hard for everyone. Some have felt worried, distressed or even angry. Unfortunately, a vast majority of those people have taken those feelings out on our pharmacists, shopworkers and local community workers: the very people who have kept us going. I was horrified and disgusted to see mobs of people on a local community group posting hate about the very people who were feeding us, keeping us going and making sure that we were healthy. Had it not been for a local MLA, they would possibly still be posting that hate. How can we even think about talking about rights and equality when we cannot even treat the people who let our lives continue as normal with basic human decency and respect?

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

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

**Sofia Wilkin:** Yes.

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

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

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

**Ollie Mercer:** When we had a Committee meeting about the Programme for Government a few weeks ago, we were asked whether we knew what that actually was. In my group at least, not a single person said yes. We, the young people, cannot do anything to change our country if we are not even aware of how the Government plan and prep for the future.

The youth are rarely consulted on Programmes for Government, and, when they are, it is through a single, small and non-diverse panel.

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

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

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

**Robert Moore:** I did not know whether to contribute again. However, lowering the voting age to at least 16 would enable many more young people to have their voice heard. Also, it is only two years away from 18 when they are able to vote. It would enable thousands more people to vote, have their voice heard and have a proper debate by including all sections and ages in society.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Robert Moore:** It is totally right that we welcome Ukrainian refugees with open arms, but doing that are the same people, in the Assembly and in wider political conversation in Northern Ireland, who have been critical of refugees of other nationalities. That is not fair. It is a war. There are no preconditions for war. It is always about guns and violence.

It is not a case of saying, "If you are white, you can come to this country". Everybody should be welcome in Northern Ireland and should feel safe here. If people are coming from a war, we should help them. If they want to go back, they can go back. If they come here for refuge, we should give that to anybody who needs it.

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

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

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

**Ruadhan McCarney-Savage:** Further to what another Member said about the minimum wage, with inflation approaching 7%, a wage of about £4.50 per hour is losing spending power every day. I ask that employers not take young workers for granted. Every year in Northern Ireland, the multi-billion-pound service and retail industries are built on the backs of young people such as those in the Chamber. It is time for young people to be adequately compensated for their labour.

## General Contributions

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

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

## 3:15pm

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

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

**Mr Speaker:** Jenna is next.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you, Patrick, for that.

**Robert Moore:** I want to go back to Patrick's point. You will be missed, even in the Assembly. It is your work and that of everybody else that has made this happen. You should go down in the history books for putting up with me. [Laughter.] That is all I have to say. Thank you for everything that you have done. We will be sad to see you go.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

*Resolved:*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Adjourned at 3.28 pm.*



## OFFICIAL REPORT

### 4th sitting of the Youth Assembly

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At 1:30 pm on Saturday 5 November 2022  
Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast  
(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

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### 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.

### 1:45pm

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 CO<sub>2</sub> 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 CO<sub>2</sub> 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 CO<sub>2</sub> 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.



2:00pm

**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

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### 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.

## 2:15pm

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 2.21 pm.*

**2:30pm**

*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.

2:45pm

**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 Marcus:** 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.

**3:00pm**

**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.*



# OFFICIAL REPORT

## 5th sitting of the Youth Assembly

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At 2:15pm on Friday 24 February 2023  
Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast  
(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.

**2:30pm**

**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.



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 fussed 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.

**3:00pm**

**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.

### 3:15pm

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.

### 3:30pm

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.

**3:45pm**

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.*



### 3.1. Business Committee Minutes

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#### YOUTH ASSEMBLY For Northern Ireland

#### Business Committee Minutes of Proceedings 8 February 2022

Meeting Location: Online

**Present:** Members of the Business Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

### AGENDA

An overview of the role was explained to Business Committee Members.

I. Requests were discussed. Committee Members expressed interest in finding out more about the following:

- Department of Education - Independent Review of Education
- Children's Law Centre – Chatbot Review
- Department of Education - Participation in Decision Making Project
- QUB – Transport Study
- Young Person's Correspondence - Long Covid
- NICCY - Protecting NI Children from Physical Punishment campaign
- Trinity College Dublin- Interview with young people GFA generation
- Committee for the Economy – Employment Bill (Zero Hours)

*Committee Members declined the following requests:*

- Linking Generations Northern Ireland
- Commission for Victims and Survivors
- Department of Infrastructure - Inconsiderate Pavement Parking
- Department for Infrastructure - Equality Impact Assessment for the Draft Budget
- Department of Finance - Changes to marriage laws
- NIA Engagement - Disability Parliament

Members were presented with a draft document, which outlines the process external bodies should follow when consulting the Youth Assembly.

**2. The meeting was adjourned.**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Business Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
22 March 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Business Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## **MINUTES**

Requests were discussed.

1. Committee Members expressed interest in addressing the following:

- DfC – Language strategy
- South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust: Urgent and Emergency Care services at Lagan Valley Hospital (Lagan Valley YAMs)
- University Montana research (Education Committee)
- Chief Constable - policing discussion

*Committee Members declined the following requests:*

- BBC Young Reporter
- The Enlightenment Festival

2. The meeting was adjourned.

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Business Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
20 May 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Business Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## **MINUTES**

1. *Committee Members discussed the following:*  
Planning for one-year anniversary event  
Debrief - Consultations with Department for Communities and Independent Review of Education  
Children's Law Centre resource development project
2. **The meeting was adjourned.**

## 3.2. Education Committee

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### YOUTH ASSEMBLY For Northern Ireland

#### Education Committee Minutes of Proceedings 6th December 2021

Meeting Location: Online

**Present:** Members of the Education Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## AGENDA

### 1. 'ICE-BREAKER' SESSION

### 2. BACKGROUND TO THE ROLE OF THE CLERK

*Noted by Members*

### 3. GENERAL INFORMATION SESSION

Members noted information regarding the upcoming YA website and MS Teams platform, as well as training sessions and the holding of YA Committee meetings.

### 4. MARCH PLENARY

There was discussion regarding Members' preference for the next plenary session of the YA to be held on a Friday or a Saturday. Any decision will be subject to Members' agreement.

### 5. EDUCATION ISSUES DISCUSSION

The Committee proceeded to a discussion of the issues that Members would most want to consider relating to the wider education portfolio. Topics included: the Covid pandemic and the wider impact that this has had on education, educational experience, career prospects, and specific issues such as 'Long Covid'; issues around Transfer Tests; and careers advice and options other than university after school, including professional and technical options.

### 6. DISCUSSION ON THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

Members discussed their hopes and fears regarding the Youth Assembly, as well as the objectives they wish the Committee to achieve. Additionally, Members were given information on the resources available to them on the work of the Assembly's Education Committee, and the wider Assembly, as well as records of debates, transcripts of meetings, research papers, and other useful sources of information to support Members' consideration of Education issues going forward.

### 7. SCHEDULING OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS



There was some consideration of when the Committee would meet again.

**8. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Education Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
18 January 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Education Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## **AGENDA**

**1. 'ICE-BREAKER' SESSION**

**2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

Agreed by Members.

**3. DISCUSSION ON RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Committee members proposed various issues including the Integrated Education bill; the Period Products bill; the CPR/AED bill; the quality of Relationships and Sexuality Education; relevance of the current curriculum; problems with the current Transfer arrangements; careers advice, grades and examinations; exam stress; learning how to revise for exams; digital poverty and the lack of Irish medium schools.

**4. VOTE ON PRIORITY ISSUE**

Committee members voted on curriculum review as their area of focus to include (but not be limited to) examinations, Relationships and Sexuality Education and Careers advice.

**5. NEXT STEPS**

The next Plenary will take place on Saturday 5 March 2022 in Parliament Buildings (Public Health guidelines permitting). The Official report from the November Plenary is available on the Youth Assembly website.

The next Committee meetings will take place on either 22 or 23 February 2022.

A "drop-in session" will be held online on the evening of 8 February.

Business Committee - Two YA members from each of the four committees will form a Business Committee. The Business Committee will work with officials to make decisions about which consultations and external requests the YA will take forward. More details will follow.

**6. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Education Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
3 February 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Education Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## **AGENDA**

**1. MARCH PLENARY INFORMATION**

YAMs asked to return forms in advance of plenary meeting  
Proceedings planned for 5 March shared with Committee

**2. CONSULTATION OPPORTUNITIES**

Department of Education – Independent Review of Education  
Education Committee – My Life and Learning in Lockdown

**3. RAPORTEUR UPDATE**

Contents of speech shared and feedback given

**4. PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT (PfG) TRAINING**

Motion for debate explained to YAMs  
Training video shared online  
YAMs discussed PfG motion in relation to education

**5. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Education Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
06 April 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Education Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Ken Smyth (NICCY)  
Arlene Robertson (NICCY)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. CONSULTATION OPPORTUNITIES**

Chief Constable PSNI meeting  
Independent Review of Education  
Language Strategy

### **2. NICCY Talk**

Notes recorded in associated PowerPoint presentation file  
Human Rights Overview – Key principles  
UNCRC minimum standards and promises explained  
The concept of participation explained  
Overview of NICCY work on Education and Children's Rights

### **3. Questions**

### **4. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Education Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
30 September 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Parliament Buildings

**Present:** Members of the Education Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)

Aoibhinn Treanor (Committee Clerk)

Niamh Devlin (Research Officer)

Ray Caldwell (Department of Education)

Deidre Coffey (CCEA)

Roisin Radcliffe (CCEA)

## **AGENDA**

**1. Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee Perspective**

The Committee Clerk gave an overview of the work that the Committee is has undertaken on the topic of RSE.

**2. Understanding the Issues**

Youth Assembly Members found out about research that has been completed and issues that have arisen. They also heard about comparative RSE studies and the characteristics of successful RSE.

**3. Departmental Perspective**

The young people discussed RSE and the school curriculum.

**4. RSE Resource Hub**

Youth Assembly Members learned about the CCEA RSE Resource Hub and discussed its operation.

**5. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**



**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Education Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
19 October 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Education Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)

## **AGENDA**

1. 30 September Committee day – recap, next steps discussed.
2. 5 Nov Plenary - explained the programme.

Need rapporteurs for the period since the last Plenary in March 2022

- Education
- Health
- Environment
- Rights

Plus: -

- Marriage Law consultation
- Irish and Ulster Scots consultation
- Independent review of education consultation
- Voting training and visit to count
- CLC cat bot project
- Meeting PSNI Chief Constable
- Team building day – Belfast Activity centre
- NICCY - interview panel

3.      **MACR debate - DOJ consultation will form the basis of a debate in Plenary on 5 November.**
4.      **Close**
5.      **Questions**
6.      **THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Education Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
21st March 2023**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Education Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. UPDATES**

19th April GFA

Gala Dinner

7th April GFA Event

Lyric Theatre Event

Travel Claims

### **2. REVIEW OF COMMITTEE WORK SO FAR**

Preparation for 30th June.

Members content to work on questions, no further witnesses required.

### **3. UNIFORM CONSULTATION**

Facilitated by Peter Burns, Head of the Uniform Policy Unit, Department of Education

### **4. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

### 3.3. Environment Committee Minutes

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**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Environment Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
7th December 2021**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Environment Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## AGENDA

**1. 'ICE-BREAKER' SESSION**

**2. BACKGROUND TO THE ROLE OF THE CLERK**

Noted by Members

**3. GENERAL INFORMATION SESSION**

Members noted information regarding the upcoming YA website and MS Teams platform, as well as training sessions and the holding of YA Committee meetings.

**4. MARCH PLENARY**

There was discussion regarding Members' preference for the next plenary session of the YA to be held on a Friday or a Saturday. Any decision will be subject to Members' agreement.

**5. ENVIRONMENT ISSUES DISCUSSION**

The Committee proceeded to a discussion of the issues that Members would most want to consider relating to the wider environment portfolio.

Topics included: a range of issues regarding transport, including how better infrastructure is required, greater access for rural dwellers and young people, electrification of public transport, cheaper travel for young people; the use of renewable energy, including greater use of solar energy; greenhouse gases; climate change; rising sea levels and cleaning the oceans; bio-diversity; and plastic usage, waste and littering, including issues around single-use plastics.

## **6. DISCUSSION ON THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE**

Members discussed their hopes and fears regarding the Youth Assembly, as well as the objectives they wish the Committee to achieve. Additionally, Members were given information on the resources available to them on the work of the Assembly's Environment Committee, and the wider Assembly, as well as records of debates, transcripts of meetings, research papers, and other useful sources of information to support Members' consideration of Environment issues going forward.

## **7. SCHEDULING OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

There was some consideration of when the Committee would meet again.

## **8. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

## **YOUTH ASSEMBLY**

**For Northern Ireland**

**Environment Committee**

**Minutes of Proceedings**

**19 January 2022**

**Meeting Location: Online**

**Present:** Members of the Environment Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)

James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)

Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)

Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. 'ICE-BREAKER' SESSION**

### **2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

Agreed by Members.

### **3. DISCUSSION ON RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Committee members proposed various issues including: climate change; sea level rises and pollution of the oceans; rural transport and infrastructure issues; the impact of reaching 'net zero' on disadvantaged communities; incentivising action on climate change; plastic use and disposal; 're-wilding', including appropriate tree planting and increasing bio-diversity; energy saving and efficiency and providing grants to support disadvantaged communities to do this; taking cars off the road and improving access to charging points for electric cars; awareness-raising and culture change with respect to climate change; the impact that young people can have with regard to the climate crisis; a more strategic approach across the Executive to give strategies such as the Energy Strategy a greater chance of being effective; and greater investment in a wider range of renewable energies, including tidal, solar and on and off-shore wide.



#### 4. VOTE ON PRIORITY ISSUE

Committee members voted on three issues to reach decision on the issue that they wish to prioritise. The issues voted on were:

- **Ways of incentivising individuals and communities to tackle climate change.**
- **Considering how young people can tackle climate change in their everyday lives and encourage and support their peers to do the same.**
- **How lifestyle changes might help to tackle climate change.**

The Committee voted by a majority for: **Ways of incentivising individuals and communities to tackle climate change.** Members agreed that while this would be the main focus of their work, they would also respond to current and live issues, including policy and legislative developments happening in the Assembly.

#### 5. NEXT STEPS

The next Plenary will take place on Saturday 5 March 2022 in Parliament Buildings (Public Health guidelines permitting). The Official report from the November Plenary is available on the Youth Assembly website.

The next Committee meetings will take place on either 22 or 23 February 2022.

A “drop-in session” will be held online on the evening of 8 February.

Business Committee - Two YA members from each of the four committees will form a Business Committee. The Business Committee will work with officials to make decisions about which consultations and external requests the YA will take forward. More details will follow.

#### 6. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Environment Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
23 February 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Environment Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)

Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)

James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)

Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## **AGENDA**

**1. MARCH PLENARY INFORMATION**

YAMs asked to return forms in advance of plenary meeting

Proceedings planned for 5 March shared with Committee

**2. CONSULTATION OPPORTUNITIES**

Education Committee – My Life and Learning in Lockdown

**3. RAPORTEUR UPDATE**

Contents of speech shared and feedback given

**4. PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT (PfG) TRAINING**

Motion for debate explained to YAMs

Training video shared online

YAMs discussed PfG motion in relation to the environment

**5. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Environment Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
05 April 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

<b>Present:</b>	Members of the Environment Committee of the Youth Assembly
<b>In attendance:</b>	Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)
	Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)
	James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)
	Alex Tennant (NICCY)
	Laura McFall (NICCY)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. CONSULTATION OPPORTUNITIES**

Chief Constable PSNI meeting

Independent Review of Education

Language Strategy

Summer team building

### **2. NICCY Talk**

Notes recorded in associated PowerPoint presentation file

NICCY overview

Rights explained

NICCY Key Priorities – Environment retrospectively added

Mentimeter – question session

Links between climate change and rights examined

NICCY's work on environmental issues

### **3. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Environment Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
30 September 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Parliament Buildings

**Present:** Members of the Environment Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)

Barbara Love (Bill Clerk)

Colin Breen (DAERA)

Suzie Cave (Research Officer)

Mark Allen (Research Officer)

## **AGENDA**

**1. Understanding Climate Change Legislation**

Northern Ireland Assembly Bill clerk presented an overview of climate change legislation in Northern Ireland.

**2. Identifying Challenges**

The director of DAERA's climate change and green growth policy division helped the young people to understand the challenges ahead.

**3. Developing Points for Scrutiny**

Northern Ireland Assembly research officers assisted the young people in developing further considerations in relation to the implementation of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

**4. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Environment Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
18 October 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Environment Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## **AGENDA**

**1. REVIEW OF COMMITTEE STAKEHOLDER EVENT**

Summary of evidence given by Barbara Love, Colin Breen, Suzie Cave and Mark Allen.

**2. NOVEMBER PLENARY INFORMATION**

YAMs briefed on format of event.

YAMS made aware of resources.

**3. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE BRIEFING**

YAMS made aware of the online meeting with Justice Minister in advance of plenary.

**4. RAPORTEURS IDENTIFIED**

YAMS identified to report on Committee proceedings and events during 5 November plenary.

**5. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY**  
**For Northern Ireland**

**Environment Committee**  
**Minutes of Proceedings**  
**20 March 2023**

**Environment Committee**  
**Meeting Location: Online**

**Present:** Members of the Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. UPDATES**

19th April GFA

Gala Dinner

Travel Claims

### **2. REVIEW OF COMMITTEE WORK SO FAR**

Preparation for 30th June.

Members content to work on questions, no further witnesses required.

### **3. NEXT STEPS**

Youth Assembly team to investigate streaming for 30th June.

### **4. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**



### 3.4. Health Committee Minutes

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**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Health Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
6th December 2021**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Health Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

#### AGENDA

**1. 'ICE-BREAKER' SESSION**

**2. BACKGROUND TO THE ROLE OF THE CLERK**

Noted by Members

**3. GENERAL INFORMATION SESSION**

Members noted information regarding the upcoming YA website and MSTeams platform, as well as training sessions and the holding of YA Committee meetings.

**4. MARCH PLENARY**

There was discussion regarding Members' preference for the next plenary session of the YA to be held on a Friday or a Saturday. Any decision will be subject to Members' agreement.

## **5. HEALTH ISSUES DISCUSSION**

The Committee proceeded to a discussion of the issues that Members would most want to consider relating to the wider health portfolio. Topics included: access to medical schools; waiting times and lists for appointments and treatments; a range of issues relating to Covid, including Long Covid and the impact of the pandemic on mental health; safe spaces to talk about health issues, including mental health; wider issues around the treatment of mental health and 'toolkits' for this; health issues relating to having a disability; invisible health conditions; treatment of, and wider issues concerning, allergies; organ donation; social care; wider health awareness; autism; and protection of the unborn.

## **6. DISCUSSION ON THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE**

Members discussed their hopes and fears regarding the Youth Assembly, as well as the objectives they wish the Committee to achieve. Additionally, Members were given information on the resources available to them on the work of the Assembly's Health Committee, and the wider Assembly, as well as records of debates, transcripts of meetings, research papers, and other useful sources of information to support Members' consideration of Health issues going forward.

## **7. SCHEDULING OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

There was some consideration of when the Committee would meet again.

## **8. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Health Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
18 January 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Health Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## **AGENDA**

**1. 'ICE-BREAKER' SESSION**

**2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

Agreed by Members.

**3. DISCUSSION ON RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Committee members proposed various issues including mental health; Covid vaccination; access to school counsellors; waiting lists; awareness of mental health services; cancelled appointments; isolation due to Covid and accessing mental health services.

**4. VOTE ON PRIORITY ISSUE**

Committee members voted on mental health as their area of focus to include (but not be limited to) reviewing Mental Health services and developing a 'toolkit' for young people by young people.

**5. NEXT STEPS**

The next Plenary will take place on Saturday 5 March 2022 in Parliament Buildings (Public Health guidelines permitting). The Official report from the November Plenary is available on the Youth Assembly website.

The next Committee meetings will take place on either 22 or 23 February 2022.

A “drop-in session” will be held online on the evening of 8 February.

Business Committee - Two YA members from each of the four committees will form a Business Committee. The Business Committee will work with officials to make decisions about which consultations and external requests the YA will take forward. More details will follow.

**6. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Health Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
22 February 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Health Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)

Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)

James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)

Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. MARCH PLENARY INFORMATION**

YAMs asked to return forms in advance of plenary meeting

Proceedings planned for 5 March shared with Committee

### **2. CONSULTATION OPPORTUNITIES**

Education Committee – My Life and Learning in Lockdown

### **3. RAPORTEUR UPDATE**

Contents of speech shared and feedback given

### **4. PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT (PfG) TRAINING**

Motion for debate explained to YAMs

Training video shared online

YAMs discussed PfG motion in relation to health

### **5. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Health Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
06 April 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Health Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)

James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)

Christine Irvine (NICCY)

John McCullough (NICCY)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. CONSULTATION OPPORTUNITIES**

Chief Constable PSNI meeting

Independent Review of Education

Language Strategy

### **2. NICCY Talk**

Notes recorded in associated PowerPoint presentation file

Human Rights Overview – Key principles

Introduction to the work of NICCY

NICCY key priorities outlined

Implementing Children's Rights – NICCY health project overviews:

- 'Still Waiting'
- 'More than a number'

### **3. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**



**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Health Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
30 September 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Parliament Buildings

**Present:** Members of the Health Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

Jay Buntin, Matthew Taylor (Pure Mental NI)

Gavin Quinn, Leanne Thompson, Paul Millar (Department of Health)

Sinead McMurray (Research Officer)

## **AGENDA**

**1. NGO Perspective**

Youth Assembly Members discussed mental health provision with officials from Pure Mental.

**2. Departmental Briefing**

Officials from the Department of Health gave an overview of mental health services on offer.

**3. Research Briefing**

The Youth Assembly members learned about research that is being undertaken in this field.

**4. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Health Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
18 October 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Health Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Peter Hall (Youth Assembly Team)  
Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)

## **AGENDA**

1. 30 September Committee day – recap, next steps discussed.

2. 5 Nov Plenary - explained the programme.

Need rapporteurs for the period since the last Plenary in March 2022

- Education:
- Health:
- Environment:
- Rights:

**Plus: -**

- Marriage Law consultation
- Irish and Ulster Scots consultation
- Independent review of education consultation
- Voting training and visit to count
- CLC cat bot project
- Meeting PSNI Chief Constable
- Team building day – Belfast Activity centre
- NICCY - interview panel

3.      **MACR debate - DOJ consultation will form the basis of a debate in Plenary on 5 November.**
4.      **Close**
5.      **Questions**
6.      **THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Health Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
20th March 2023**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Health Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. UPDATES**

19th April GFA

Gala Dinner

Travel Claims

### **2. REVIEW OF COMMITTEE WORK SO FAR**

Preparation for 30th June.

Members content to work on questions, no further witnesses required.

### **3. NEXT STEPS**

Youth Assembly team to investigate streaming for 30th June.

### **4. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

### 3.5. Rights and Equality Committee Minutes

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**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Rights & Equality Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
7th December 2021**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Rights & Equality Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

#### AGENDA

**1. 'ICE-BREAKER' SESSION**

**2. BACKGROUND TO THE ROLE OF THE CLERK**

Noted by Members

**3. GENERAL INFORMATION SESSION**

Members noted information regarding the upcoming YA website and MS Teams platform, as well as training sessions and the holding of YA Committee meetings.

**4. MARCH PLENARY**

There was discussion regarding Members' preference for the next plenary session of the YA to be held on a Friday or a Saturday. Any decision will be subject to Members' agreement.

**5. RIGHTS AND EQUALITY ISSUES DISCUSSION**

The Committee proceeded to a discussion of the issues that Members would most want to consider relating to the wider rights and equality portfolio.

Topics included: rights of the Traveller Community; inclusive education; LGBTQIA rights and equality; women's rights; rights and equality for people with disabilities; rights and equality for People of Colour and different races; internet access; abortion and abortion education; gender conformity; cultural representation; wider minority rights; right to autonomy; religious rights; rights of the child and young people; and the impact of Covid on the exercise of rights.

## **6. DISCUSSION ON THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE**

Members discussed their hopes and fears regarding the Youth Assembly, as well as the objectives they wish the Committee to achieve. Additionally, Members were given information on the resources available to them on the work of the Assembly's Committees, and the wider Assembly, as well as records of debates, transcripts of meetings, research papers, and other useful sources of information to support Members' consideration of Rights and Equality issues going forward.

## **7. SCHEDULING OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

There was some consideration of when the Committee would meet again.

## **8. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

## YOUTH ASSEMBLY

For Northern Ireland

Rights and Equality Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

19 January 2022

Meeting Location: Online

**Present:** Members of the Rights and Equality Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Peter Hall (Clerk to the Youth Assembly)

## AGENDA

### 1. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Agreed by Members.

### 2. DISCUSSION ON RESEARCH FINDINGS

Committee members proposed various issues including: Children and Young People's Strategy goals around children rights; children's rights awareness in school; children's rights advocate ensuring children be heard; sexism and misogyny; disability action plan (lack of consultation with children); interest in Human Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims Bill; right to healthcare – lack of counselling opportunities in schools; trans awareness in schools; uniform checks and the right to self-expression and worker's rights – zero hours' contracts.

### 3. VOTE ON PRIORITY ISSUE

Committee members voted to focus on enhancing knowledge and understanding of children's rights and ensuring that they are applied.

### 4. NEXT STEPS

The next Plenary will take place on Saturday 5 March 2022 in Parliament Buildings (Public Health guidelines permitting). The Official report from the November Plenary is available on the Youth Assembly website.



The next Committee meetings will take place on either 22 or 23 February 2022.

A “drop-in session” will be held online on the evening of 8 February.

Business Committee - Two YA members from each of the four committees will form a Business Committee. The Business Committee will work with officials to make decisions about which consultations and external requests the YA will take forward. More details will follow.

**5. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Rights and Equality Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
23 February 2022**

**Meeting Location: Online  
21st March 2023**

**Present:** Members of the Rights & Equality Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)

## **AGENDA**

**1. UPDATES**

19th April GFA  
Gala Dinner  
7th April GFA Event  
Lyric Theatre Event  
Travel Claims

**2. REVIEW OF COMMITTEE WORK SO FAR**

Preparation for 30th June.  
Members content to work on questions, no further witnesses required.

**3. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Rights & Equality Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
05 April 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Rights & Equality Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Ken Smyth (NICCY)  
Alex Tennant (NICCY)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. CONSULTATION OPPORTUNITIES**

Chief Constable PSNI meeting  
Independent Review of Education  
Language Strategy

### **2. NICCY Talk**

Notes recorded in associated PowerPoint presentation file  
Human Rights Overview – Key principles  
UNCRC minimum standards and promises explained  
Quiz: fact or myth  
The concept of participation explained  
Lundy model description  
Implementing children's rights across UK and Ireland overview

### **3. Questions**

### **4. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Rights and Equality Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
30 September 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Parliament Buildings

**Present:** Members of the Rights and Equality Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Stephen Orme (Research Officer)  
Caroline Perry (Committee Clerk)  
Alex Tennant (NICCY)

## **AGENDA**

**1. Research**

The Youth Assembly Members received a detailed overview of Children's rights

**2. Ad Hoc Committee -**

A Committee Clerk summarised the scrutiny of the Northern Ireland Bill of Rights

**3. NICCY**

The young people discussed the school curriculum, rights awareness, the UNCRC and the importance of young people knowing their rights.

**4. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Rights & Equality Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings  
19 October 2022**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of the Rights & Equality Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)  
Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)

## **AGENDA**

### **1. REVIEW OF COMMITTEE STAKEHOLDER EVENT**

Summary of evidence given by Stephen Orme, Caroline Perry, Alex Tennant  
Suggestions:

*Sofia: Be part of the Children's Day 2022 17 November*

*Ollie: Do some more work with NICCY, views on implementation of rights and equality*

*Charlotte: Can we meet with school principals about what they think?*

*Ollie: Talk to the Education Authority and setting a curriculum – CCEA and Department of Education.*

### **2. NOVEMBER PLENARY INFORMATION**

YAMs briefed on format of event

YAMS made aware of resources

### **3. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE BRIEFING**

YAMS made aware of the online meeting with Justice Minister in advance of plenary

### **4. RAPORTEURS IDENTIFIED**

Election Count event

YAMS identified to report on Committee proceedings and events during 5 November plenary

*Charlotte McGucken: Elections*

*Sofia: Committee Rapporteur*

*Ollie Torney: Marriage Law Consultation*

### **5. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**Rights and Equality Committee  
Minutes of Proceedings**

**24 March 2023**

**Meeting Location: Online**

**Present:** Members of the Rights & Equality Committee of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)

## **AGENDA**

**1. UPDATES**

19th April GFA  
Gala Dinner  
7th April GFA Event  
Lyric Theatre Event  
Travel Claims

**2. REVIEW OF COMMITTEE WORK SO FAR**

Preparation for 30th June.  
Members content to work on questions, no further witnesses required.

**3. THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**

### 3.6. All Committee Meeting Minutes

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**YOUTH ASSEMBLY  
For Northern Ireland**

**All Committee Meeting  
Minutes of Proceedings  
14 June 20223**

**Meeting Location:** Online

**Present:** Members of all Committees of the Youth Assembly

**In attendance:** Lucy McClelland (Youth Assembly Team)  
James Stewart (Youth Assembly Team)  
Laura Whinnery (Youth Assembly Team)

#### **MINUTES**

1. Youth Assembly Team shared the plan for the 30 June - Committee meetings and final plenary.
2. Committee rapporteurs appointed for the committee meetings with Permanent Secretaries.
3. **THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED**