



Youth Assembly

For Northern Ireland

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Environment Committee

Peter Hall (Northern Ireland Assembly): I welcome members to this meeting of the Environment Committee. We also have meetings of the Education, Health, and Rights and Equality Committees that will proceed later. Remember that everything will be recorded and transcribed by Hansard. You need to say your name before you ask your question so that we have it on the record. If you want to ask a question, raise your hand and catch my eye: we will make a list, and you will be called in the order in which you indicate that.

I welcome to the Environment Committee of the Youth Assembly, from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Katrina Godfrey, permanent secretary; Jane Corderoy, director of climate change and green growth; and Anthony Courtney, assistant director of climate change and green growth.

John Kane, the Committee's rapporteur, will make a statement, and then we will come to Katrina.

John Kane (Environment Committee Rapporteur): Over the past few years, we have focused on climate change. I will give a short summary of our concerns and recommendations, based on research and on meetings with key stakeholders. We spoke with people to help us further understand the issues involved. They included a Northern Ireland Assembly Clerk of Bills, who presented an overview of climate change legislation in Northern Ireland; the director of climate change and green growth policy at DAERA, with whom we spoke about the challenges ahead; and Northern Ireland Assembly research officers, who discussed issues around the implementation of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

We have a number of primary concerns, some of which are connected to the current economic situation, including the practicalities of reaching net zero, and Northern Ireland's technological capability to meet the climate targets that have been set. We are also concerned about the accuracy of the estimated costs attributed to reaching net zero. The Committee is interested in the cost benchmarking that has been conducted across sectors and in where and from which Department the money will come. We would like to know who will be accountable for achieving targets and to find out what impact assessment work has been conducted.

The Committee's recommendations to the permanent secretary are to develop initiatives to tackle food and textile waste; to encourage the effective management of Northern Ireland's peatland as potential carbon sinks; to develop coherent sectoral plans for reaching climate change targets; and to target a just transition towards net zero.

To conclude, it is imperative that we, as young people, continue to engage on climate change issues and to challenge our leaders and those in industry to treat our concerns with the respect, gravity and urgency that they demand. I thank my colleagues on the Committee, and, on behalf of the Committee, I thank those who have engaged with us.

Katrina Godfrey (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, John, for that summary and for the indication of the questions that you want to ask. I will not say very much, because it is much more important that we answer your questions than you hear what, I think, I want to say.

First, I want to say thank you. This is my first Committee appearance since I joined the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The Senate Chamber is familiar to me, but, since I moved last

year to my new Department, I have not had the opportunity to be questioned in it. I am delighted that you are the first Committee that I get to face. As you have heard, I have with me Jane Corderoy and Anthony Courtney, and we will do our best to answer your questions.

I will say three key things at the start. The first of those is that the Youth Assembly could not be a better audience for us, because how we handle the implementation of the Climate Change Act will impact so much more on you than it will on me. If we get it right, you will benefit. If we do not get it right, you will, rightly, look to us and hold us to account. You are such an important audience, and it is really important that we have the recommendations that John Kane talked about to represent the work that you have been doing.

The climate emergency is real. It has been declared by the Northern Ireland Assembly, and we have the Climate Change Act, so we cannot do nothing, and we need to galvanise ourselves. That is the point that, I think, you made, John, in some of your comments. The scale of the challenge in achieving net zero by 2050 is huge. That risks us all being so daunted that we do nothing: the response between “fight or flight” that it is so easy to have. We will just have to be really courageous and determined, chunk down all the things that we can do and get on with doing them. We will need a lot of help and support for that from across government and from individual citizens. You talked about things like waste management, the business community, the voluntary sector and local communities more generally.

We are up for this, and we need to be. We have to make a huge difference, but you have highlighted some things that will not make it easy for us. I am really keen, as are Jane and Anthony, to hear what you want to put to us and what answers you feel that you need from us. You talked about accountability. Ultimately, when we have them, Ministers are accountable to the Assembly, but I too am accountable for whether the Department delivers the statutory obligations that are placed on it, so it is really important for me, as well.

Peter Hall: Thank you, permanent secretary. The first question is from Jamie Brown.

Jamie Brown: If we want to hit net zero by 2050, a 46% methane reduction will be necessary. How are you helping to tackle that problem for farmers across the country?

Katrina Godfrey: That is a good question. We have number of things in train, some of which were announced just last Monday, I think. Is that right, Jane?

Jane Corderoy (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Yes.

Katrina Godfrey: Those announcements were about moving our future agricultural policy towards having a much stronger focus on reducing emissions and enhancing and improving our natural environment. We are looking at a range of measures to reduce emissions and at how we use science, technology and innovation. We will not be able to solve these problems without science and innovation. One programme that we are working on, for example, looks at genetics and whether there are ways in which farmers can breed livestock that would help to reduce carbon emissions.

We are looking at productivity, the difference between productivity and production and being more efficient. We are also looking at whether we can have new scientific and innovative interventions: for example, whether there are animal feed compounds that could help to reduce emissions. There are lots of individual

pieces of work. Each one of those might be quite small, but I think that, together, they will form the right way to find out where we get the biggest impact. I do not know whether you want to add anything to that, Jane.

Jane Corderoy: I only joined the Department in February, and I have been quite impressed. There is quite a lot of innovative work going on within farming policy and with individual farmers to try to find a way to reduce emissions more effectively.

Grace McGouran: Could the net costs from 2022-2050 be greater than the estimate of £4 billion? Have there been plans to address where that money will come from in the block grant? Who or what will potentially lose out?

Katrina Godfrey: That is a good question, at a time when financial resources are so constrained. The first thing that we have to do is make sure that we use our existing money as smartly as possible. Is the way in which we spend money contributing to the drive to net zero? Or, is it actually creating more emissions, which would obviously be very difficult for all of us to deal with? We will have to make sure that we work in collaboration with the private sector and, as Jamie mentioned, the agriculture sector. Many of the solutions will not be for government, and government will not be best placed to find them. We have already seen, for example, the power of the supermarkets in driving many of the sectors in agriculture, including the dairy sector, towards net zero. In many ways, in the short term, they have an even bigger influence than we do, because the legislation is so new.

Anthony, you might have another perspective on that.

Anthony Courtney (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I was going to add something in relation to the overall process. One of the key elements is producing climate action plans to set out how we will achieve carbon budgets on the longer-term targets. As part of that process, we will produce impact assessments to try to determine what the cost will be. It is inherently difficult to work out the cost, because you are trying to predict actions over decades. It is also sometimes difficult to estimate the benefits, because they will be substantial and could ultimately be greater than the costs. That is part of the reason that we need to do what we need to do. It is difficult to get a robust estimate of the costs, but we are focusing on that as part of our climate action plan development process.

Robert Moore: This will seem like a very simple question, but there is a legal grey area: what is a just transition? There is plenty of mention in the Act of a just transition and a just transition fund, but there is no real definition of a just transition. Who will fund it, where will the money come from for it, and who will be accountable for decisions being taken in its name?

Katrina Godfrey: You are right that the just transition is set out in legislation. The principles in the Act give us a really helpful pointer to what we mean by just transition. They are in section 30(3). They give you the sense of fairness, social justice, support for people to change the way in which they act or do business and the concept of the high-value jobs that are central to our wider work on green growth. We start to build up a picture from the principles that are set out in the Act. You are right that there is not a neat definition, but the principles give us a clear sense of what the Assembly, when it passed the Act, considered should be included in a good set of just transition principles.

How will we pay for it? One thing that we will have to do, increasingly, is make sure that government policy supports a just transition so that we do not have to pay for it out of two different pots of money. For example, how do we use the support that we give to businesses and agriculture so that it drives a just transition and supports people to change behaviours and practices and delivers the sorts of benefits that the Act requires us to deliver?

Hopefully, that makes a bit of sense.

Robert Moore: Thank you.

Jane Corderoy: I will add that I am the person who is tasked with setting up the just transition commission. We looked at what happened in Scotland, because Scotland has a just transition commission. We met our Scottish counterparts and people who are on the commission to take lessons from them. Other countries have done quite a lot of things that we are struggling to tackle, so we can look at best practice elsewhere.

It is worth mentioning that the primary legislation is quite prescriptive. We have to have certain sectors on the just transition commission, such as agriculture, fisheries, academia, trade unions, youth groups — importantly — and civic society, so there will be representation on the just transition commission when it is established.

John Kane: You mentioned innovation: in order to meet net zero targets, what technology must be developed to keep in line with current projections? Without the technology, which has not been developed, how long will it take to reach net zero?

Katrina Godfrey: You may have seen the Climate Change Committee (CCC) referring to that point when it described the gap between the 83% target that it had originally recommended for Northern Ireland and the net zero target that the law now requires. The CCC said that we will be reliant on technologies, some of which do not exist yet, to drive that target. No matter how difficult the financial context is, and it is exceptionally difficult, we need to make sure that we keep a level of investment in science and technology, because, if we do not let it happen, we will not find the new ideas and new ways of doing things. That has been a really important focus for us. The Department has a science transformation programme that is trying to put science at the heart of the advice that we prepare for Ministers and to make sure that it informs the decisions that need to be taken.

Anthony might say something on the small business research initiative.

Anthony Courtney: I am not an expert on it, but I know that the Department is taking forward work to try to develop innovative solutions around slurry so that we can utilise for energy some of the waste that comes from our agricultural practices. There is big potential for what we can do with biomethane. An exercise/competition is open at the moment to try to develop prototypes and innovative solutions with that. It is due to move to its next stage later in the year, and it could have quite significant and positive impacts for what we can do in that regard.

Katrina Godfrey: Some of that goes back to what I said earlier, when I made the point about having small-scale trials of things to see whether they might yield something that can then be adopted on a much larger scale.

Dominic Bateson: Is enough environmental and social governance being undertaken to encourage businesses to turn carbon-neutral? If so, is it enough to prevent a climate emergency?

Katrina Godfrey: Earlier, I mentioned the power of the like of supermarkets and how they can shift behaviour through the way in which they buy. That is really important. All of us need, however, to make sure that the support and incentives that we have are driving the right sort of carbon behaviour. Do our grant

assistance programmes, for example, ensure that they drive the right behaviour, or is there a risk that they could reward the wrong behaviour? That is something that we would want to avoid.

One of the things that we are doing throughout the implementation of the Climate Change Act is to work closely with other Departments, particularly the Department for the Economy. We will not solve the problems that need to be solved to arrest the warming of the planet without making sure that every government policy is joined up, so that takes us to working with the Department for the Economy. If you look at Northern Ireland's two biggest sources of greenhouse-gas emissions, you will see that they are agriculture and transport. That means that we also need to look closely at our transport infrastructure and how people move around. That involves looking not only at the role of electric vehicles and public transport — although they are hugely important — but at whether we can reduce the number of journeys that people need to make; at, when they make them, whether they can be made in the most sustainable way; and at, if they are short journeys, how we can encourage more people to walk and cycle, because those are the most carbon-friendly means of travel. None of that is going to be solved unless there is a significant effort made to work collaboratively across all Departments.

Peter Hall: Olivia or Eoin, do you want to ask a question? No. John has another question.

John Kane: The current estimated cost of reaching net zero by 2050 is over £4 billion. Is that an accurate assessment? Do you believe that that figure will change? From where will that money come, if it is to be done on budget?

Katrina Godfrey: As Anthony said, it is an estimate. I am therefore absolutely certain that it will change.

Anthony Courtney: Yes, that has proven to be the case across the UK. In years gone by, the CCC has estimated costs for the UK to reach net zero, and those costs have changed as technology has developed and as policies have moved in certain directions. It is an estimate that is based on high-level assumptions, but the detail will change. I think therefore that the costs will change in the long term. As I said earlier, we have to recognise that the benefits will also be substantial, and potentially more than the costs. From an NI perspective, we will be trying to bottom them out and to be as robust as we can about what we think the costs will be, as part of the impact assessment process that we will undertake for producing the climate action plans. There is always a degree of estimation in that process, however, because one is looking so far ahead and things can change. Actions that are taken can hopefully drive down the costs of certain pathways.

Katrina Godfrey: John, you asked this very obvious question: who pays? In some cases, it will be government. In some cases, it will be businesses. In some cases, we will have to ask ourselves as individuals to change some of our habits and the way in which we live our life.

You mentioned waste, and that is such a good example. I have talked about transport and the role of walking and cycling. A contribution will be needed from everyone, including from government. Anthony's point is important, because imagine what would happen if we did not spend the money to take that preventative action. We would end up spending more in response to not tackling the climate emergency, and that is likely to be an even bigger strain on the taxpayer and public funds.

Peter Hall: Are there any other questions before we move on?

Grace McGouran: What is the impact of the climate change policy on farmers' rights? Has an equality assessment been carried out? Yes, reducing emissions is so important, but so are the rights of people who depend on agriculture for their livelihood.

Katrina Godfrey: In many ways, farmers are the custodians of our countryside. Those of you who live in the countryside will know that well. The future agricultural policy that our former Minister announced just over a year ago has been screened for equality impacts and rural needs impacts. We have a responsibility in law to test all policies for their impact on rural communities, so that has been done. At every stage, as we work through new policy proposals, we will have to do the same again and test whether they will have impacts, whether those impacts are adverse and whether we can do anything to mitigate those that are.

The work that we announced last Monday on future agricultural policy took very much a co-design approach. It therefore involved representatives of farmers, some food companies and, importantly, some environmental non-government organisations, which meant that we had a balance of farming, the food sector and those who advocate most passionately for our environment. That work was mapped out in a very collaborative way. Those people were around the table, rather than just a bunch of civil servants determining what to do. That is really important, because, if we do not listen to the concerns about impacts and to the ideas and suggestions of farmers, we will not make the progress that we need.

Peter Hall: Thank you, and we go back to Robert.

Robert Moore: That was the question that I was going to ask, so you do not need to come to me.

Peter Hall: We go back to John.

John Kane: Are children's voices being [*Inaudible*] heard by the Department and [*Inaudible*] more young people put their voices into policy?

Katrina Godfrey: Yes, we have. Jane or Anthony might want to say a wee bit about the engagement that we have already had with young people. We do that in a number of ways. Right across the Department, we have a children's champion. He and I meet, for example, the Children's Commissioner to talk about how much better we could be at making sure that we engage with children and young people. We also have, of course, all our students in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, which deals with our rural environment: farming, rural enterprise and food. It has three campuses: one at Greenmount, outside Antrim; one at Loughry, near Cookstown; and one at Enniskillen, which specialises in the equine sector. That is a real source of engagement with young people: we teach young people, but they also teach the staff there. We have also had specific engagement on the Climate Change Act.

Anthony Courtney: Yes, and on the green growth strategy.

Katrina Godfrey: Yes.

Anthony Courtney: An overarching strategy that sits alongside the Climate Change Act will help to direct the policy pathway. As part of the process of producing that strategy, there was targeted engagement with young people. There is a consultation out at the moment, and a widespread engagement process will take place as part of that. There will be a specific session for young people. We have been engaging with the Education Authority and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) on that,

because we recognise the importance of engaging with young people, particularly on this matter, given that young people helped to drive some of the changes that have happened.

Katrina Godfrey: If there are recommendations from this Committee about how you think we could do better, it would be really good to have those, too. As I said, if we do not get this right, it will have a significant impact on all of you, so we really need to make sure that we are listening.

Peter Hall: Obviously, a key role of the Youth Assembly and its Committees will be to be at the forefront of youth participation in the design of legislation and policy. One of the key differences of this Youth Assembly compared with other youth representative bodies is that it is embedded in a legislature with access to amending legislation and all the policymaking levers. That suggests very exciting times ahead for us when we get the other Assembly up and running. Obviously, these young people are working hard throughout.

In an exciting innovation, I will now move to the outer Benches. I ask anyone who has a question to display their nameplate. Tom will instantly rush to you with a roving mic that he is about to switch on. I know that you have questions, so do not be shy. Do not keep them secret.

Ollie Torney: My question is along the lines of John Kane's question about the involvement of children, especially in the just transition that you mentioned. As part of the Rights and Equality Committee, we have been looking at creating children's rights impact assessments (CRIA). That is a good way of ensuring that children's voices are not just listened to but have an impact on what is being done. How can we make sure that something will be set up so that the children have an impact? After all, as you said, we have to deal with the consequences if things do not work out with the climate.

Katrina Godfrey: That is really important. We started with a point about accountability. You are right: I said that it is important that we listen to you, but you are even more right to say that it is important for us to act on what we hear. We need to be accountable for that. How do we engage meaningfully? We have to be guided by you. I could ask all the questions that occur to me, but they might not be the right ones. How do we have a conversation about what works? What makes young people feel engaged, as opposed to just being a ticked box? How would you have confidence that we had listened and acted on what you said? What would you look for from us to show that we had listened? I guess, Jane, those are the things that we will have to pick up in even more detail.

Jane Corderoy: Absolutely. With my colleague, Jonathon Fulton, I met the Children's Commissioner last month. He had met the Education Authority on the specific youth event that we want to have as part of the carbon budget. We also talked to them about the possibility of establishing a green growth youth forum as part of the wider green growth forum. That would be a formal mechanism for young people to feed into all our policy development around climate change. You mentioned the children's rights impact assessment. We are aware of that and will be including it in our financial, social and economic environmental impact assessments across the climate action plan and under the carbon budgets that I am taking forward.

As Katrina says, this is about future generations, and that includes you. We have to get this right. We absolutely want to hear your voice and will take on what you say. If you want to pick that up with me outside the Youth Assembly, I can take views from everybody here on how best to do that. We want it to be genuine and real.

Peter Hall: That is very helpful. As we like to say, you know who we are and where we are. We are always available for engagement. As I said before, the young people have been working on these issues for quite

some time, and those ideas will be put into the legacy report for the next Youth Assembly. It is anticipated that that Assembly will have a front and centre role in any further work on this, as befits a Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland.

I turn to the outer Benches, where Martha has a question for us. Tom will deliver the roving mike to her.

Martha Curran: My question is about textile waste. I am not sure whether that has been picked up on, but has the Department done anything to look at that issue? A lot of fast fashion, chain-store, cheap clothes come in from abroad. Will there be any legislation to try to reduce our wider carbon footprint on bought goods?

Katrina Godfrey: That is a really good question. Waste in general is one of the sectors that we have to focus on as part of the Climate Change Act. As you might have seen in our launch of the consultation on the carbon budget, we have very specific pathways for waste. The extent to which it applies to textile waste is interesting. A lot of the focus has been on packaging, which, as you all know, is a real challenge. Food waste is another focus. Ironically, one of the things we have seen in the cost-of-living crisis is that the food waste is reducing a bit, quite understandably. You are right to ask about textile waste. There is easy access to cheap, imported clothes. Do we treat clothes now almost as disposable items? What is the correct approach to that? That very much gives you the sense that the first thing that you ought to do is “reduce”. You should reduce your dependence on the number of things that we all think that we need. We are then very much into “reuse”, while “recycle” should be at the end of the circle, if you think about it. If we are having the conversation about waste, it probably means that we have failed on those three points. That therefore needs quite a bit of attention.

Jane Corderoy: It is really good that you raise that point. One of the things that we are looking at is behavioural change and how we can influence behaviours. It is not necessarily about nudging people but about changing the choice environment in order to try to get people to act. It is one of the areas in which the public and communities are almost ahead of us. You all know that there are quite a number of zero-waste movements. Especially across Northern Ireland, there are a lot of interesting and innovative community-led initiatives, such as repair cafes. I know that there is a tool library in Belfast. There are lots of things like that, and that is the public saying that they want to see more of that. It is about being aware of that and responding to it.

Peter Hall: It is appropriate that our final question is from our rapporteur, John.

John Kane: It is just a quick one. Would you agree, at least in principle, to some form of permanent oversight of your Department by the Youth Assembly and, more specifically, its Environment Committee?

Katrina Godfrey: I would be absolutely delighted to present ourselves to the Environment Committee for scrutiny, to be asked questions and to be held accountable. I am more than happy to do that, John. We owe it to you, and to the people who will come after you on the new Environment Committee, to make sure that you know what we are doing. We would benefit from having the sorts of questions and the sort of engagement that we have had today, so, from my perspective, absolutely.

Peter Hall: On that happy note, which is obviously on the record —.

Katrina Godfrey: There is no going back on that. *[Laughter.]*

Peter Hall: We will come back to that, no doubt. I will now adjourn the Committee session. Thank you very much for coming. It is much appreciated.

Health Committee

Peter Hall (Northern Ireland Assembly): I welcome to the meeting Peter May, permanent secretary at the Department of Health, who will introduce his colleagues.

Peter May (Department of Health): Yes, joining me today is Gavin Quinn, acting director of mental health, and Leanne Thompson, policy lead for child and adolescent mental health services, known as CAMHS. I suspect that you will hear quite a lot about CAMHS in the next half an hour.

Peter Hall: Kelly You, the Health Committee rapporteur, will say a few words to start us off.

Kelly You (Health Committee Rapporteur): Hello. I will speak on behalf of the Health Committee. Over the past two years, we have focused on the topic of mental health. I will give a short summary of our concerns and recommendations, which are based on research and meetings with key stakeholders.

We are very grateful to have been able to meet many brilliant people in the area of mental health, including departmental officials Gavin Quinn, Leanne Thompson and Paul Millar and members of the youth-led charity Pure Mental NI, whom we found to be especially brilliant. We continue to be encouraged by the work being put in to improve mental health, but the more research we did, the more we realised the true extent of the mental health crisis.

In a 2019 survey of the mental health of children and parents in Northern Ireland, it was discovered that one in eight children in Northern Ireland has anxiety or depression, nearly one in eight children has thought of committing suicide, and one in six children has an eating disorder. Globally, 15% of children have a mental health illness, yet the rates of mental illness among children in Northern Ireland are even higher. The rates are 25% higher here than in the rest of the UK. In a lot of schools, particularly in rural areas, there are no counselling services at all. In the schools where services exist, the waiting lists are endless, and pupils have to miss out on their education to see the counsellor.

Outside of school, CAMHS are desperately struggling with underdeveloped services and never-ending waiting lists. They even face upcoming budget cuts that we simply cannot wrap our heads around. This Committee recommends that cross-departmental approaches need to be taken to deal with the mental health crisis, as socio-economic circumstances and intergenerational trauma are evidently a massive part of the problem.

We also believe that all schools should make mental health education mandatory. Pure Mental's healthy happy minds survey found that schools that had mental health education saw a 92% positive increase. Amidst budget cuts, mental health services are essential and need to be ring-fenced. Furthermore, specialist mental health services need to be adequately funded. In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recommended 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.”

Finally, as all the Youth Assembly Committees will say today, article 12 of the UNCRC states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. For example, young people should be involved in the review of your Department's 'Still Waiting' action plan.

Peter Hall: Thank you, Kelly. I ask the permanent secretary to make a brief statement.

Peter May: Thank you for the opportunity to join you today. Thanks, Kelly, for your introduction. It is great to be here, and I thank in particular the Health Committee for taking an interest in this really important area. I also thank the other Youth Assembly Members (YAMs) who are with us today. It is great that we have such a group of young people who are interested in some of the issues that matter most to our society. I thank you for that interest.

I will say a bit about mental health as it affects children and adolescents in particular, which, I hope, will provide a frame for the questions that I know that you will want to ask me and my colleagues in a few minutes. First, it is important to talk about mental health. There is a risk of stigma around a subject like that, and it is really important, not least for some of the reasons that Kelly set out. I will say something about what we are doing on mental health for children and young people. A lot is going on to enhance the CAMHS service and to develop the mental health strategy, and I will say more about that in a moment.

Kelly, you mentioned that it is recognised that the prevalence of mental illness in Northern Ireland is higher than in the rest of the UK. Some studies say that it could be as high as 25%. We all accept that there are just too many people in our community who struggle with their mental health. In 2021, we published a 10-year mental health strategy. That set out the need for reform and is one of the ways in which we are trying to govern that whole area to make change happen.

The strategy has 35 actions that set out a direction of travel to support and promote good mental health across the region and to reduce stigma. There are three main themes. The first is to promote mental well-being, resilience and good mental health. We will do that by increasing public awareness of the distinction between mental ill health and mental well-being. The Public Health Agency (PHA) recently developed a three-year early intervention and prevention action plan. We all accept in principle that intervening earlier, before somebody faces more severe mental health challenges, must be the right thing to do.

The second theme is to provide the right support at the right time. That relates to, for example, increasing the funding of CAMHS to 10% of the adult mental health budget over a 10-year period. The third theme is to develop new ways of working. We can always improve the way that we do things, and you will have heard from the people whom you talked to some of the ideas that various organisations have. We need to find a way of drawing those together and acting on them.

There is no doubt that the COVID pandemic has had a particular impact on mental health. You will know that better than I do. It is widely accepted that young people are one of the groups most severely affected by the COVID pandemic, and we have seen an increase in our waiting lists as a result. We have 30% more young people waiting for an initial CAMHS appointment than we did in March 2020. In total, over 2,300 young people are waiting for their first appointment. It is also important to say that, although that feels like a shocking number, we are doing lots. In the past financial year, about 14,000 people were referred to CAMHS, of whom 9,500 were accepted. The service saw 7,000 new children and young people and was able to discharge over 9,000 children and young people.

That tells us that, despite the challenges, we continue to build capacity and to treat more children and young people than before — it is not for want of trying; staff are working really hard — but it is a very challenging area, and we will come to some of the problems and reasons in a moment. Fundamentally, we are seeing an increase in demand, and some young people have higher levels of acuity — they are more seriously ill — so our inpatient unit at Beechcroft is often at full capacity, with an increased number of young people needing intensive inpatient treatment and intervention. Admissions under the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 have also increased significantly.

The top three reasons for people presenting to community CAMHS are anxiety, depression and developmental trauma, but the most common presentations for inpatient treatment are eating disorders, depression and psychosis. To address the wider issues, we need to look at three main areas. The first is to stabilise the service that we have. That looks at better ways of working and increasing capacity in existing services. The second area is to enhance and improve those services to ensure better outcomes. That means considering and implementing new initiatives. Last year, as an example, we provided funding to pilot an eating disorder service in the Belfast Trust and South Eastern Trust areas. The feedback from that pilot was positive and enabled good practice and learning to be taken away. It will now be incorporated across all the trusts as standard practice. This year, we provided additional investment to CAMHS through our mental health strategy, and we expect that to be directed particularly towards the acute end: how we can increase capacity for those inpatient services at Beechcroft that I mentioned.

The third area is longer-term improvements. That will involve scoping out new ways to enhance and improve our services. Some of the key objectives include scoping the appointment of a regional eating disorder consultant and enhancing intellectual disability CAMHS for those young people with significant intellectual disabilities who also experience mental health issues.

The reality is that a number of those initiatives need extra money. I am sure that one of your questions is likely to be around whether we can afford to do all the things that we are doing and whether we should give more priority to ring-fencing mental health and so on. I think that Kelly mentioned that, and we can talk more about that in a moment.

Before I close, I want to mention the work that is under way to develop a regional mental health service for Northern Ireland. This is a regional service to ensure consistency of access to specialist mental health treatment across all five trusts and to promote the integration of the community and voluntary sector, recognising the important part that it plays in the delivery of mental health services. We are working on an implementation plan, and CAMHS is integral to that work. We have begun to look at the preferred model.

I mentioned that the PHA is leading on the early intervention and prevention action plan. Kelly, you mentioned that one in eight young people in Northern Ireland has experienced emotional difficulties. What we also know, however, is that a large number of the referrals to CAMHS do not meet the criteria. Around 30% of referrals to CAMHS are inappropriate, and that is either because there is not enough information or, mostly, because people are not making a distinction between emotional well-being and mental ill health. Not everybody who has experienced an emotional difficulty needs a mental health intervention. That is one of the areas that we work on. We want to educate people and our first responders to distinguish between poor mental health and emotional well-being.

I have probably said nearly enough. I have lots more that I could say, but I am conscious of time and I want to give time for questions. It is great to have the chance to engage with you and to hear some of your

thinking about the things that we should be doing. It is only by talking to people that you get to learn about what it is that will make the biggest difference. I am hoping that, in the next 20 or 25 minutes, we will have the chance to learn from you some of your thoughts about the areas that you think that we should focus on.

Peter Hall: I will come to our rapporteur, Kelly, first, but I ask Committee members to indicate to Tom and me if you want to ask questions. We have a couple down so far, so make sure that you do.

Kelly You: The survey that I mentioned was last done in 2019. I was wondering whether there is going to be a more recent, up-to-date survey so that we can get a feeling of the actual numbers and the extent of the crisis now. Obviously, as you said, COVID will have had a negative impact. I believe that there is no way that we can improve these services if we do not have a proper grasp of what is going on.

Peter May: Do you want to pick that one up, Gavin?

Gavin Quinn (Department of Health): Yes, gladly, Peter. Thanks, Kelly, for your question and your opening remarks. I absolutely take the principle that we cannot develop and improve services without an accurate reflection of the data, in terms of an analysis of the data and what it is actually telling us that we need. Building on the prevalence survey that was conducted in 2019, we have mined the data that was gathered through that exercise a bit further, and we have produced six further sub-reports that have helped to inform the ongoing development of the services since the survey was undertaken.

One of the areas was around eating disorders. We have used the data that was mined from that prevalence survey to make immediate improvements, and Peter referred to some of the pilots that we have acted on. We are working with colleagues in the strategic planning and performance group (SPPG), which is the arm of the Department that oversees the performance and monitoring of service delivery in the trusts. We are working with colleagues there in updating that survey to take account of the particular issues and the impact on young people as a result of the pandemic. We are scoping that out with SPPG colleagues with a view to firming up proposals towards the end of the year.

Peter May: We do not have a date in mind to run the survey again at this stage, do we?

Gavin Quinn: Not at the moment, because that is going to be subject to funding as well. There was a significant investment, and it was right to invest money at that time. The Minister took the decision to commission that survey. We are working towards a proposal towards the end of the year, but that will be subject to further investment.

Aimee Kelly: You spoke about the 10-year plan in 2021 and the three-year plan. How much were young people involved in those? Now, with the 'Still Waiting' action plan, how can we ensure that we as young people are involved in it, because it is our mental health as well?

Peter May: Again, do you want to pick that one up, Gavin?

Gavin Quinn: Yes, sure. Do you mean the early intervention prevention programme, Aimee?

Aimee Kelly: Yes.

Gavin Quinn: In the development of the plan, young people were a critical part of the design. The PHA hosted and facilitated a number of events where we took the views of young people on what needed to be priorities within the plan, so young people were integral to its co-design. The PHA set up a steering group to

oversee the implementation of the plan, and a number of children and young people's representative bodies are in the group. For example, NICCY, Inspire and other representative bodies are around that table, ensuring that the voice of young people continues to be present in the implementation of the plan.

That is overseeing the delivery of the plan. Individual actions need to be delivered as part of that plan, and action owners will engage with young people on the ongoing delivery of the plan. Part of that will be seeking real-time feedback on how that action is making an impact on the ground so that we can respond in real time to emerging issues that young people present to us. It was absolutely critical that young people were integral to the design of the plan, and it will be critical to its implementation as well.

Caolán Gregory: I want to make a point about health infrastructure in rural areas, such as my own greater Newry area of south Armagh and south Down. We have one CAMHS unit in Newry, and it is very small and very much underfunded. In addition, in Daisy Hill Hospital, there are community mental health services. I am sure that you know that, in the past week or two, Daisy Hill nearly collapsed on itself, and we have services secured for only the rest of the summer. How are you going to ensure that we have adequate mental health services after the summer and into the winter?

Peter May: Thanks for the question, Caolán. I will maybe ask Leanne to say something specific about CAMHS in a moment. With regard to your point about Daisy Hill, it is really important to say that sometimes the way that things are reported in the media gives a misleading impression. The challenge for Daisy Hill was about the provision of what is called an internal medicine service. That is about what is happening inside your body from your throat down to your torso. It was not about mental health services. There is no threat to mental health services at Daisy Hill whatsoever, and there is no question of there being any problem at the end of the summer or anything like that. That is a separate issue from the one that was reported around Daisy Hill. There is a set of important issues about some acute hospital services, but what we are talking about today – mental health and so on – is on a different platform.

We know that our CAMHS services are under pressure. In an ideal world, we would like to be able to invest more in CAMHS to be able to meet some of the unmet need. I talked about the length of the waiting lists. At the moment, the scale of the financial pressure not just on the Department of Health but right across Northern Ireland is such that we are not going to be able to do that this year anyway. It is about making the best of what we have; how do we make the best impact with the resources that we do have?

Do you want to say something more specific, Leanne?

Leanne Thompson (Department of Health): I will also go back to Aimee to talk about the 'Still Waiting' review, if that is OK.

As Peter said, we are looking to do what we can with the budget that we have. We know that really good work is going on, and we are asking how we can make that better and stream it so that it accesses more people. One thing we looked at — Kelly You will remember that we talked about this when we met before — was emotional well-being teams in schools, which are under the CAMHS umbrella. They will provide the early intervention for young people that Peter referred to. We have experienced a delay in getting those teams implemented in schools — we will be upfront about that — but recruitment is under way, and we hope that they will be ready for young people who are starting back in the new academic term in August/September. There will be one team based in each of the five trusts, so, over a three-year period, they will access all post-primary schools across the region. That will help to educate the staff — not just the teachers, but all ancillary staff who are working with young people — to spot the differences between

emotional health and mental ill health. Those teams will also provide support and services so that people will not have to wait longer to get a CAMHS appointment and may not actually need that CAMHS appointment. That is what we are looking at to try to enhance what we already have.

I will go back to Aimee Kelly, if that is OK. You mentioned 'Still Waiting', Aimee. It is a really good time to bring that up, because we refreshed the 'Still Waiting' action plan last year. We met youth panels from NICCY, VOYPIC — Voice of Young People in Care — and Pure Mental NI as part of that refresh. We have reached a new era of the 'Still Waiting' review, because the formal monitoring of that ended when Koulla Yiasouma's term ended in March. This year, in our end-of-year progress report, we looked at anything that was outstanding from that action plan and at how we could carry that forward. The interdepartmental group that oversees that met last week. There is a strong commitment, across all the Departments, to carrying out and overseeing those actions. We are having a bit of a revamp. Rather than us getting those actions implemented, all the Departments will come together to see how they can feed into driving them. It is a really important time for us to bring young people back in to make sure that we do it right. We will engage with others, but we would love it if you could tell us whom we need to deal with. We have access to lots of youth panels, but if there are particular people with whom you think we could engage to help inform how we push forward to complete those next sessions, we would love to take anybody up on that.

Peter Hall: I will just jump in before Aimee asks her next question. As the Youth Assembly is embedded in the Northern Ireland Assembly, it is the foremost youth representative body, and it will be able to access the legislative and policymaking processes through its sister Committees in the Assembly.

There is an open invitation. I am sure that I can make this offer on behalf of the young people and those who will follow them: the Youth Assembly welcomes any and all engagement and would anticipate being able to provide a range of views from young people. That is a key role that the young people have.

Sorry for jumping in, Aimee; I know that you have another question.

Aimee Kelly: I suppose that it kind of follows on from what you were saying. As a Committee, we were introduced to the idea of mental health first-aiders. We might have spoken to you after the last session. You spoke about interdepartmental collaboration. Would it be possible to see collaboration between the Health Committee and the Education Committee on getting young people trained to be mental health first-aiders in school to alleviate the pressures on, or maybe even step in for, those who did not make the cut for the CAMHS service, so that there is somebody in place who has some sort of training behind them, rather than there being nothing?

Leanne Thompson: Yes, we talked about that, and Pure Mental was very honed in on that. We are very much at the developmental stage of the emotional well-being teams in schools, but we hope that that will be part of the core of what those teams deliver and that they will deliver mental health first aid training to their staff, who can then deliver it to the schools. We hope that there will be an opportunity for pupils and schools to become involved in that, as well.

When we last met, the mental health first aid training had paused during the COVID pandemic, but it has started up again since then. Five members of staff from the Education Authority have completed the training for trainers and are rolling that out to any staff who want that training throughout the Education Authority, in schools or at its head office. That is part of a framework called Being Well, Doing Well. I am sure that you will hear more about that: our Education colleagues are here this afternoon. There are two main areas where we hope to get that pushed out, really recognising its importance. It links in with the early intervention work that

Peter mentioned. The more people who are aware and have those conversations, the better. That is a really good point.

Peter Hall: Thank you for that, Leanne. I now turn to Clodagh.

Clodagh McAuley: Are you thinking of working with the Education Committee? There is a gap in our education system for teaching about mental health. There are classes in learning for life and work that we have had since first form. You do not do anything in them: it is basically a free period. There is an opportunity there to do something and talk.

Peter May: I suspect that the experience is different in different schools. I do not know how those classes work. There is a way in which teaching about mental health might work, and we can think about it some more. Normally, it is for schools to deliver the classes, but sometimes the material that is used for lessons can be developed by experts and then provided to the schools. That is something that we can certainly consider, so thank you for raising that: it is a possible way forward. It is a question of making sure that it sits alongside what Leanne Thompson just talked about, because we need to make sure that we do it once and do it well, rather than making lots of different little interventions. We need to work out the best way to do it. Thank you, Clodagh, for the suggestion.

Pater Hall: I come to Oliver, on our outer Benches. We have a roving mike: I suspect that you will not need it, but use it anyway.

Oliver Mercer: In your initial address, you mentioned that, over the next few years, you will raise the CAMHS budget to 10% of the adult mental health services budget. Is that correct?

Peter May: There is a commitment in the mental health strategy that, over the next 10 years, we will achieve that.

Oliver Mercer: Given that young people make up almost 25% of the population, why are those percentages so different? Why are young people receiving so much less funding, when they make up that proportion of the population, especially given the emotional vulnerability that young people experience throughout childhood during their mental development?

Peter May: I come back to one of the points that I have tried to stress. There is a difference between emotional vulnerability and a mental health problem that would require an intervention from a clinical source. It is important to remember that those are two different things. We ought to be supporting young people through the challenges during the developmental stages that all young people go through, through all that we do and through all our different services. We should not burden our mental health services with trying to meet all those needs, because it will not work if we do.

On the issue of proportions, it is my expectation — Gavin will be able to say more — that, perhaps fortunately, most young people do not present with the most serious mental health problems, whereas a greater proportion of older people have more serious mental health problems, which therefore uses a greater proportion of the resource. Have you more to say on that, Gavin?

Gavin Quinn: Absolutely. I will build on that, Peter. Thank you for the question, Oliver. The commitment to allocating 10% of the overall mental health budget to CAMHS is set out in the mental health strategy. That 10% brings us in line with other regions. Peter is quite correct: when we look at emotional health and well-

being and mental health services, there is so much more investment going into emotional health support. It should not just be seen as being a case of us working towards 10% to cover all the funding that goes into supporting young people's emotional health and well-being.

To pick up on the investment bit, Oliver, we are moving towards 10%. Last year, we were able to increase funding as part of the mental health strategy. We still have some way to go, but we are working towards that. There is another key element when looking at the investment and the overall budget: what we do with the money that we spend on services. Are we getting value for money from the services that we are funding? You have probably seen the most recent Audit Office report, which indicates that we need to do better in identifying the outcomes from the investments that we are making. That is a piece of work that is under way. For the first time, we have an outcomes framework for mental health services that can help to inform our decision-making on the investments that we make: are they making an impact on the ground? There is an element of wanting to grow the pie — for want of a better term — and investing more in mental health services, but we also want to look at whether the investments that we are making currently are having the desired impact.

There is another element, just to wrap up the investment piece. Improvements in mental health services require investment, but it is also about looking at and seeing how we can do things better with our current resources. As part of the mental health strategy, we are looking at greater collaboration and enhancement in the investment that is going into services. We looked at the early intervention and prevention programme, for example. One of the key outcomes from that work was that, for the first time, we were able to map out and see what investment was going into early intervention and prevention activities across government. That gives us a good baseline for where we are targeting our investment towards and means that we can start to make decisions on whether that is the area that we want to pinpoint.

Yes, investment and growing the investment is a critical element, but it is also part of the wider suite of interventions that we are taking to make sure that we produce value for money from the investments that we put into mental health services.

Kaitlin Caldwell: Do the teachers and staff members have to search for this training, or will it become mandatory?

Leanne Thompson: That is a good question. My colleagues in Education might be best placed to answer that in this afternoon's session. I do not know whether it is mandatory, but it is available for anybody who wants to do it; they should not need to search for it. My honest answer is that I do not know whether it is mandatory. They will be more aware of it when the teams are in schools, because our colleagues will be going in and highlighting and showing what training is available. The Education Authority certainly has a lot of training on offer for staff. I know that the inclusion of mental health training in teacher training colleges has been raised before, but hold that question for this afternoon's session and ask our colleagues. They will be able to answer that better than I can. Sorry about that.

Peter Hall We will bring that up with the Education officials when they come in; I have noted that.

Clodagh McAuley: What are the criteria for CAMHS? In your initial speech, you said that 30% of people were not accepted. What are the criteria?

Peter May: They are being referred, but then not considered; they do not need a mental health intervention.

Leanne Thompson: There are two criteria, and I have written them down, because I knew that somebody would ask, and I did not want to get it wrong. The first criterion is the basic threshold. It applies if somebody is suspected of having a mental illness or if they have a condition that is impairing what they do on a day-to-day basis. The individual could go to their GP, and the GP could identify that. The second criterion is the severity and complexity of the issue. Is it something that needs a specialist service? Or, as we have talked about today, is it related to their emotional well-being? It could be something that has happened at that particular time in the young person's life. Those are the two specific criteria.

You can access that information. All referrals to CAMHS follow that process; it is standardised across all trusts. You will be able to find that information in the CAMHS care pathway. If you look that up online, you will be able to find it. It will tell you about who can refer to CAMHS and what criteria they need to meet. All the people are triaged. It is important to say that, although 30% of referrals are not accepted to CAMHS, those people are not merely sent away with a, "Thank you and goodbye". A lot of work goes into signposting those young people to an appropriate service, be that in other children's services or in the excellent work out in the community. Nobody is turned away. They might not need a specialist service, but they will be signposted to somewhere else that will suit their needs. It could be back-to-school counselling or something like that. It sounds harsh that 30% do not make the cut, but they get support in some way, shape or form, but not via CAMHS.

Rebecca Moore: How will you ensure that children who do not fit the CAMHS criteria receive some sort of help? That is incredibly important. Not every child who is suffering mentally will go into the specifics with a doctor, teacher or parent of what they are actually thinking. Whether they have suicidal tendencies or are currently self-harming, unfortunately not all children will be able to tell their parents. That is why it is incredibly important to give help to the 30% of people who do not get referred to CAMHS. What will happen to the 30% that do not receive CAMHS treatment? That is incredibly important for those people, because we do not know what is going on in their heads; only they know that.

Leanne Thompson: Absolutely. As well as what I have just said, they will get signposted somewhere. That is where the role of the teams within schools will be really important, and that is why we are including all staff within schools rather than just the teachers, it could be a dinner lady or a lollipop man who that young person feels that they can talk to, so we want them to be able to talk to whoever they feel comfortable with, and that is why we want all those people to be aware, to look out for the signs, to listen and to be able to signpost. The teams in schools will know their local trust area and where to refer that person if it is not to CAMHS. It is a really good point.

Peter May: Of course, you are quite right, because it is not just those 30% of people who might have some problem that they would benefit from help with. One of the big challenges throughout all this, and one of the reasons that it is good to talk about mental health, is to reduce the stigma so that people can feel free to say, "I am not feeling all right." We can then go through and work out the right way to address that not feeling all right, because otherwise, as you said, you can end up with some really bad outcomes because people have bottled it up and nobody recognised and knew what was going on. Thanks for the question.

Grace McGouran: Do you have any statistical evidence of the supposedly greater mental health problems in adults than in children? Where are you getting that data from? Everyone here is a young person living in the 21st century and experiencing modern-day problems, and I think that every Youth Assembly Member would disagree with that. I am curious about where you are getting that data from.

Peter May: It is not necessarily about the proportion. It is also about the severity of the illnesses, because the amount of resources that you need and the time and effort that is needed depend on how serious the problem is. We can see what is being presented to the health and social care system at any given point, and we can see that by age. Although Oliver said that 25% of the population are young people, a lot of those young people are very young indeed and probably will not be presenting, to any great extent, with mental health problems. They may be preschool children or whatever. We have to break down those numbers and think through quite carefully what the different groups are and how that works.

Do you want to add anything to that, Gavin?

Gavin Quinn: Absolutely, Peter. Just a couple of points on that.

Yes, data is critical and, going back to the earlier points, we need the data to tell us at each part of the journey. A young person will go through a journey that will start off with early symptoms of mental ill health, right through to presenting to specialist mental health services. We need data all along there to help inform our interventions at each stage. We have the baseline of the first ever NI prevalence survey for children and young people looking at their emotional health and well-being. We are building on that and continuing to run it so that we get that real-time data at a population level.

There are elements where the data will tell us one bit of it and help inform the decision-making. Going back to our earlier points, we need to engage with those individuals who are accessing services: for example, going back to ongoing engagement and consultation with children and young people, adults and service users so that we are getting real qualitative data around how services are being experienced, how they are being accessed, what the difficulties are and where the areas for improvements are. The data will give us one piece, and the facts and figures are important, but talking to those who are directly impacted and accessing services gives us the other huge piece, and that is why we are focusing on both areas of work and investing time and resource to carry them out. It is a very good question.

Kelly You: Emotional well-being and mental health are separate, but, from my understanding, they are intrinsically linked. You said that, for a large proportion of the 30% of people who do not meet the criteria at CAMHS, there is not enough information. Are those people being seen to? What if they are in a dire state? You say that the 30% are referred to appropriate help. Does that not also take time and have waiting lists? Are we not afraid that, the longer they are left in that state, even if it is poor emotional well-being, the more likely it is, further down the line, to morph into mental illness?

Peter May: For most of the 30%, it is not due to lack of information. It is because it is an emotional well-being issue rather than a mental health issue. Leanne may know more than I do about the detail of it, but one of the limiting factors and reasons why there is a waiting list for CAMHS is that the people there have a mental health qualification and it is a particular intervention, whereas, when you deal with emotional well-being, there is a much wider variety of people who are able to engage with young people. On that basis, the waiting list ought not to be as significant. Perhaps Leanne can add to that.

Leanne Thompson: As Peter said, the number of people for whom there is not enough information is very small. The CAMHS teams will go back to the referrer, who, in 90% of cases, is the GP, and try to get that information so that the people will receive support. They will not reject it and wait for another referral to come through. They will try to get that information. All trusts are working with GPs and the GP federations to tighten up the process and make sure that they know exactly what they need to put in the referral the first time so that we do not have to take up that important time before meeting the person as quickly as possible.

They have spoken up, and they need to be seen. Trusts are working really hard with the GPs in their area to tighten up that process, so we hope to see a smaller number of inappropriate referrals. It is fair to say, however, that a large number of them are for young people who do not need to see CAMHS.

Gavin Quinn: You are right to home in on the figure of 30%. There are a couple of elements to it. It indicates that young people have not met the threshold for specialist CAMHS services. They do not meet the criteria of psychological stress or persistent symptoms of mental ill health. The fact that 30% of the young people have not met the threshold for specialist CAMHS also tells us other things. One is that we need to work with referrers on the appropriateness of the referrals that come to CAMHS. For us, that is about engagement with GPs, schools and the Education Welfare Service about promoting what an appropriate referral to CAMHS looks like so that we do not signpost young people to services that are not appropriate for them, and they do not sit on waiting lists when they could be seen sooner in other services. Absolutely, a piece of work needs to be done on increasing awareness about referrals.

The other element is part of the work that we are doing on the early intervention and prevention programme. It is about creating greater awareness of what mental ill health is and what emotional health and well-being are. For us, that means creating awareness of what requires specialist mental health services and what requires other types of services that are probably more appropriate, such as those of community or voluntary organisations or school counselling services. A huge piece of work is under way on drilling down into how we stop the referral to CAMHS of young people who do not need to be referred and ensure that they get the most appropriate and timely support elsewhere.

Peter Hall: Thank you so much for that. We could probably have stayed all day to ask more questions. Young people are very passionate about this area, as you have seen.

Peter May: If anyone wants to pick it up immediately after this, we will wait a couple of minutes, and anyone can come over to us if they wish.

Peter Hall: Perfect. I am conscious of the fact that we have overrun, and it is now officially lunchtime. I thank you for your indulgence in staying longer. We have all got a tremendous amount out of that. On behalf of the Committee, I thank you for coming in today. *[Applause.]*

Peter May: Thank you.

Rights and Equality Committee

Peter Hall (Northern Ireland Assembly): I welcome the chief commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Alyson Kilpatrick, to the Rights and Equality Committee of the Youth Assembly. The rapporteur for the Committee, Ollie, will make a brief statement. The commissioner will say a few words in response, and then we will get into the questions.

Ollie Torney (Rights and Equality Committee Rapporteur): Good afternoon. The Rights and Equality Committee has had a busy two years looking into the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, with a particular focus on the awareness of the agreement and how it is taught in schools. We also got involved in other issues that crossed our path, such as the minimum age of criminal responsibility, the

Department of Finance's investigation into amending marriage laws and the work of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Our term has been packed with meetings with key stakeholders in the implementation of the UNCRC in Northern Ireland, such as Assembly research officers, the Committee Clerk involved in the Ad Hoc Committee that scrutinised the issue of a Northern Ireland bill of rights, and officials from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. Through our conversations with those individuals, we learnt lots about the role of human rights in Northern Ireland, how the Good Friday Agreement is at the core of human rights in this country and what we are entitled to as young people.

The Committee's concerns mirror those of the United Nations, believing that there continues to be a relatively low level of knowledge amongst young people about the UNCRC. The Committee has repeatedly suggested that the Department of Education implement an initiative in schools to raise awareness of the UNCRC as well as systematic training on children's rights for professionals who work with young people. Another key recommendation of our Committee is for all policies and legislation to be subject to children's rights impact assessments.

I thank the members of the Rights and Equality Committee for being here today and submitting questions to the chief commissioner.

Alyson Kilpatrick (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission): Let me start by saying how happy I am to be here and that I appreciate the invitation. I look forward to hearing directly from the Youth Assembly on what interests you, what more we can do for you and what you can do to help us. The issues that you identified, Ollie, are clearly the pertinent ones, and I look forward to hearing what more you think we can do in relation to them. I will tell you what we are doing currently and what we plan for the future.

You referred to your focus on the Good Friday Agreement. It is reassuring that the Youth Assembly considers that to be an important agreement and it that it still resonates for you, because it has an enduring effect and impact on everything that you do. It guaranteed rights and equality for everyone in Northern Ireland, regardless of status, where you were born or your age. It is really good to see that it is still being used. I agree with you that there is still further to go.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was established under the Good Friday Agreement, and we were supposed to guarantee the peace process. We were to do that by ensuring that human rights were complied with at every stage and by every actor in Northern Ireland. That is what we do, and we advise the Government if we think that they are not doing it well. We investigate where we think that things have gone wrong, and we can bring cases against the Government or any Department or public body that we think has infringed human rights

We are very keen to work with you, hear what your issues are and support you in any investigations, litigation or things that you think that we should be doing. Come to us; our door is always open. My two colleagues, Jason and Michael, who are sitting at the back, will leave their contact details as well as mine. Feel free to contact us directly or as the Youth Assembly.

Peter Hall: Being in the Officials' Box does not mean that you can escape attention. We now turn to questions.

Ruadhan McCarney-Savage: How can you help to facilitate intradepartmental and interdepartmental communication to ensure that all policies that directly or indirectly affect young people are subject to a child's rights impact assessment?

Alyson Kilpatrick: First, we educate people that they have to carry out such an assessment. Secondly, we check to see whether they do that. We reward people if they do it properly and enforce it if they do not. Unless it is built into everything that happens, from the ground up, at every stage in designing policies and enacting laws, it is overlooked. What tends to happen — we can be as guilty of this as anyone — is that you do a piece of work and look back, at the end, to see how it may have impacted on certain people or groups. I suspect that I do not have to remind you of this, but if there is any message that I can give you today, it is that you do not have to reach a certain age to have human rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child gives you specific additional protection, which recognises different age groups as you get older. You do not qualify for rights. You were born with them. Departments need to remember that young people need to be educated as to what their rights are and how to claim them and that they must be encouraged to claim them, and, if your rights are breached, they should assist you in enforcing them and finding some sort of remedy. You need to make yourself heard. This is a great vehicle by which to do that. Do not take no for an answer.

Peter Hall: That is something to remember. You heard it here first.

I will ask Ollie Torney to ask another question, because he has indicated that he has a couple of questions. Those on the Committee can indicate to me or Tom if they have questions.

Ollie Torney: My question relates to the children's rights impact assessments. It is important to say that something like that is incredibly important for young people: we are a huge demographic that is heavily affected by laws, but we cannot vote to pass those laws, as we do not have that right. Article 12 of the UNCRC says that young people have the right to express their views, feelings and wishes. Are there any active processes seeking the implementation of CRIAs across all legislation and policies? If so, what would that look like, and how much sway would that give young people over legislation?

Alyson Kilpatrick: First, one of the most important factors is that you should be consulted directly, rather than somebody being consulted on your behalf or somebody thinking that they know what the impact on young people will be. The way in which you try to influence that, other than by what you would say if there were a consultation, is to keep writing to the Departments and to those people who should be consulting you to ask why they are not doing so. If you are not invited to enter a submission, write one anyway. Put it in or put it up — I know that you have a website where you put submissions and things up, and that that is where your views are. At least, then, they cannot say that they were not told.

Ultimately, the way of enforcing your right to be heard is, potentially, through the courts. You want to be able to do so before that, because, if you get to the courts, it is too late. That is, however, still an option. I am sure that you have looked at how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is enforced. It is not as straightforward as the European Convention on Human Rights, but cases have been brought, particularly in Northern Ireland, in which judges have been persuaded to look at the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child when looking at other enforceable rights. You can make great headway using the UNCRC in courtrooms, so get yourselves a lawyer. I have no doubt that you are entitled to legal aid. That is certainly the case if you are under 18 and you have a right at stake. That is your last port of call.

Peter Hall: With the commissioner's indulgence, I will pitch in on that. Obviously, the past couple of years have not been the ideal backdrop for the Youth Assembly to operate against. Going forward, once the Assembly is up and running, we will partner with the Assembly Committees. That will be another avenue. By communicating through them, you will get direct access to the Department. Also, during the Committee scrutiny stage of legislation, the Committees will look for your direct input. The ideal — the pinnacle of access for the Youth Assembly — would be the likes of being able to amend legislation. We may not have managed it this time around, but, hopefully, when we have the two Assemblies running side by side, we will be able to do that in a much more visible and proactive way.

Forgive me, I had to get that pitch in.

Alyson Kilpatrick: I will respond to that. That will give you a better opportunity to remind representatives why it is important to consult you and why it is important that your rights are reflected and protected. I know that it sounds corny, but you are the society. You will vote very shortly, and we want to make sure that you are equipped to do all the things that we know you are capable of doing. You will make society better. It is probably too late for people like me; it is your generation that will bring home the changes and that, I hope, will see the Good Friday Agreement finally completed, with a bill of rights and all the other things that you mentioned. Just remind your representatives that listening to you is in their interests. A healthy society is one in which its young people are healthy and are engaged and involved in politics.

Ronan Lynch: Young people knowing and being engaged in their rights is hugely important. A lot of discussion that relates to this ends up being about education and what young people can be taught in a school environment. What can be done for young people outside the school environment to engage them in learning about their rights and becoming passionate so that they can fight for their rights to the best of their ability? You mentioned the courts and understanding that and having the passion to fight for themselves.

Alyson Kilpatrick: I was hoping that you were going to help us to come up with an answer to that. From our perspective, there are some things that we can do, that we need to do more of and be better at, and that is putting together the information for you. There are other people who work in this field, such as the Children's Commissioner, who can also do that, so we can work with them.

We can definitely come into schools. We are keen to do an awful lot more of that and talk about rights in schools. However, through your youth clubs, sports, any place you engage, there will be human rights at issue. In sports, you have a number of rights engaged when, for example, playing football; whether you want to play hockey or do not want to play hockey; whatever your sexual orientation or gender identity is. All of that has a rights package around it, so wherever you are, you should be learning about rights, how to enforce those rights and how to protect yourselves.

We look forward to hearing more from the Youth Assembly because you are better placed to tell us what we need to do better. It would be rewarded if you can get people really interested and understand why it matters. They will absolutely be rewarded, and we will, too. We older generation will be rewarded too, because we will get all the benefit from you with all your potential.

Charlotte McGucken: What is stopping collaboration between Departments to support and monitor how young people are informed of their rights?

Alyson Kilpatrick: All I can do is speculate because I have never worked for a Department. My speculation, however, having looked at various topics over a number of years, is that one of the issues is precisely what

was said earlier: you are not directly voting; you are not immediately affected by or affecting what happens in those Departments, so what can happen is that you get overlooked. It can also happen to older people because assumptions are made that older people are less interested or may not vote as they get older.

There is also lack of resources. Sometimes, there just is not the time or money. Never accept that as an excuse; it is not an excuse. Sometimes, it can be a reason. Sometimes, it is not understanding the importance of it — not getting it — and sometimes it is just not even really understanding what it is that they can do better. That is where engaging with you can make such a difference. If they asked you, you might have a few good ideas for them.

Charlotte McGucken: What is taking so long? I know there was COVID and stuff. You have talked a lot about getting involved with the Youth Assembly, but this has been a problem for a while. What has been stopping this from happening sooner? Obviously taking COVID into consideration, why is it taking so long?

Alyson Kilpatrick: I honestly do not know. You will need to ask somebody in the Civil Service, in a Department. We certainly encourage all Departments to build in a strategy for young people, to consider what they are doing against the impact on children and young people's rights and to speak more to young people. The short answer is that I do not know why it has not happened yet. I wish it had been quicker.

Peter Hall: If I can pitch in there, I may have an answer to that. When I was originally designing and developing the Youth Assembly, I met officials from a lot of Departments. The answer that I was given was, "Well, we don't have an official ministerial mandate to do this". Yes, we may have a strategy and there may be engagement with young people, but that has often been on the basis of consultation, which, by its very nature, is a proactive thing. You respond to a consultation that you have found out about.

In setting up the Youth Assembly – I am going to sound like a broken record – that is really where the Assembly Commission took it upon itself to create a body that had direct access to all those issues. Instead of replying to a consultation as an individual or a group, you will have a presence in the room with the Assembly Statutory Committee that is scrutinising an issue. That will give your voice a permanent place at the table. It will also magnify your voice, because you will have the strength of the MLAs on that Committee scrutinising that Department and that Minister and backing up what you have said. Nobody, apart from young people, can tell anyone what young people think. You are the missing piece of the stakeholder puzzle. What I am, possibly, promising is that we will do better.

Alyson Kilpatrick: The Human Rights Commission can certainly put out more calls for that to happen, and, in advice and the various submissions that we make, we will remind them of strategies, policy and law that affect young people. If you think that there is a direct impact where your rights are not being realised as they should be, I suggest that you come and see us in our advice clinic, and we might be able to help.

Euan Campbell: How will you move to educate adults on the UNCRC?

Alyson Kilpatrick: In some ways, that is the biggest challenge. Adults need to understand why it is important not only to young people but to them and society to have a healthy society. We try to include it in everything that we write and everything that we put out: from advice to the Government right through to reports that are put out into the public domain, we set out all the standards and international treaties etc that are relevant to consideration. One of those is always the UNCRC, because it is relevant to almost everything that we do. Perhaps we need to be better at flagging that up and reminding adults that they have a legal obligation to take it into account and include in their thought process as they approach law and policy, and

that, if they do not, they are failing in their obligations. The Government also need to be reminded that, in international law, they have an obligation under the UNCRC to make sure that everything complies with it. They have to direct Departments and do various things to make sure that all public authorities comply with the UNCRC. It is not directly enforceable in a courtroom, but, as I said, a lot of progress is being made, particularly in this part of the world, to enforce the UNCRC in domestic proceedings as an international treaty that interprets all the local rights and laws. Quite a lot of progress is being made on that issue, but, if you are ever interested in trying to enforce a right, the way to do so would be through a court case and bringing in the UNCRC directly.

Ruadhan McCarney-Savage: Following on from what you have said, what remedies are available if a children's rights impact assessment, for example, determines that rights have been infringed upon, or if a child believes that their rights have been violated?

Alyson Kilpatrick: That is where the law becomes very unsatisfactory: it can take too long, and there is not always as immediate or direct a result as you might like. I am a practising lawyer, and I have been for many, many years. Often, the law is not the tool to be used. It is a last resort and can be very effective in some cases, but I would not rush to the law as being the obvious answer. If there is a situation where a particular right is infringed, and it is a right that is protected by the European Convention on Human Rights, for example, it can be enforced in any court in this country by relying on the Human Rights Act, because it is the Act that, essentially, incorporated the convention and brought it into your world: at home, school and in shops. You can use the Human Rights Act to go to any court, at any level, and insist that your rights are considered by a judge and ruled upon if necessary, and you do not have to have a lawyer. A judge can order a remedy. That could be damages, such as money to compensate you, or it could be an order to a public authority to behave in a certain way or to stop behaving in a certain way. The UNCRC is much more specific to the rights of young people, and it covers a lot more, which, I imagine, is much more interesting to you and which you would like to see being made enforceable. It is not directly enforceable yet, but, if you can tie it into one of the rights under the Human Rights Act, you can take that into court. You take the two in together and say to a judge, "This is my enforceable right under the Human Rights Act. I want you to use the UNCRC to interpret my rights here and make sure that all the enforceable rights are as wide as what the Government signed up to on the international stage, and I want you to give me a remedy". Everybody knows that if you do not have a proper remedy that you can enforce quickly yourself, the right is not much good at all.

I would love to see far more young people bringing their own case and more lawyers representing young people and the rights of young people and getting remedies. Ultimately, that is the way in which to force people to do what they are supposed to do, so good luck.

Sofia Wilkin: The Rights and Equality Committee has looked at trying to improve the teaching of children's rights in schools. I was curious to hear your ideas on how we can embed children's rights in the curriculum. As we know, existing learning for life and work lessons are not focused enough on individual rights and have proven to be ineffective.

Alyson Kilpatrick: Again, I have some ideas, but I would be really interested in hearing what you think would work. You could teach rights as a stand-alone subject: it could be rights and equality, or human rights, teaching all the technical stuff, such as how they are enforced, what courts you go to and what you can rely on. All of that can be taught, but it is about so much more.

You could start with almost a beginner's course in human rights and equality, but what schools ultimately need to do in every class, whether it be PE or maths, is to provide an element of human rights considerations teaching, because human rights will be relevant to everything at which you are looking. Teachers could use human rights to talk about subjects. They could use human rights to talk about life learning but also, for example, relationships and sexuality education (RSE), which is the subject of one of the reports that we have done very recently.

You need to understand what human rights really are, how they are enforced and what your rights are, but you then need to start hearing about them in everything that you do. Believe it or not, they are even relevant to maths. They are relevant to how many hours of maths homework you can be made to do.

Ronan Lynch: Consultation is a huge part of determining the youth voice and opinion on certain policies, legislation or ideas that are coming through. What kind of weight is given to the views of young people when they are consulted? If, when consulted, a group of young people do not appreciate a certain idea that is being proposed, what kind of impact can that have on the proposed idea's ability to affect them in their life?

Alyson Kilpatrick: Young people tend to be consulted on issues that are about them. The weight that is attached, however, is probably still not great enough. Some weight is given to consulting young people, but it is probably more spoken about than taken into account in practice, and that should not be the case.

Any development of law or policy, whether or not it is specifically for young people, affects everyone. People who are not young people are going to give their views. That can sometimes limit what you would like to see happen. You are not voters yet — although there is a whole debate about giving you an extra couple of years of voting rights — so you are less likely to be heard. That is unfortunate, but it is a truth.

It is about reminding elected representatives that you are going to be a voter very soon and that you are going to remember, because you have a long memory. Even if an issue does not affect the voting decision that you may make in a couple of years' time, you affect society as a whole. I know that, at my age now, if young people are happy, content and fulfilling their potential, my life is an awful lot easier. You therefore benefit everybody by being listened to.

Charlotte McGucken: You mentioned some young people taking their case to court when their rights have been disregarded. Is it practical to have, say, 200 young people all saying that they have had different rights thrown out the window while there are other cases trying to get through the courts?

Alyson Kilpatrick: Do you mean is it worth bringing a test case with a group of young people?

Charlotte McGucken: Let us say that each and every one of those young people has had a different right disregarded and each of them is therefore bringing their case to court. Is there a middle line that can be taken without having to go to the court?

Alyson Kilpatrick: You can settle cases. I am sure that you often hear that, in criminal cases, people talk about plea-bargaining and pleas being accepted. Something similar happens with civil and human rights cases. If you bring a case against a Department, school or something like that, the school or Department might say, "I think you are right. We have the court papers. We are supposed to be in court in a couple of weeks' time, but we think that you have made your point, and we are going to give you what you are looking for." That is the ideal outcome.

If you have 200 young people, all with a different sort of case, probably, the courts will take all those cases separately. However, if whoever gets in first mentions to the judge that there are all these other cases from young people — they may not all be on exactly the same point, but they are all related in that they are about ignoring convention rights — they could ask a judge to hear them all over a number of days, one after another. That could have quite an impact.

The final way in which you could do that is by bringing what is still called a test case. That is where you get a lot of people together and say, “Here are some examples of the convention not being applied to us, and we have a right to have it applied.” Let me give you an example. Charlotte is talking about education. Ruadhan is talking about the right to — let me think: what have you been denied the right to? — whatever it might be. We can use those as examples. It is a like test case that would go to a higher court and put the failure of the system in front of a judge. Therefore, you are putting the system on trial. I go back to what you said earlier about the Departments not talking to each other. A systemic type of breach might be the most helpful one in your case, but using all the various young people's examples of where it is going wrong across Northern Ireland.

Does that answer your question?

Charlotte McGucken: Yes, thank you.

Peter Hall: That is an interesting idea. I am almost thinking of a project on that.

Ollie Torney: I want to go back to the way in which the UNCRC is taught in schools. The main reason why our Committee took on this idea was because, when it was first explained to us, the number of people who did not have a clue what it was was quite shocking. We are not even the best group to look at it. We are a group of young people who are interested in politics. The fact that even a lot of us did not know what it was is quite scary. I will not repeat my question on how it should be taught. Earlier, we found out that, when RSE was being built into the curriculum, very little was done to check that it was actually being taught. Even if we say that rights and equality has to be part of the curriculum, how can we make sure that it is actually taught? It is a really important subject, and young people need to hear about it.

Alyson Kilpatrick: I do not know whether you have seen our report on RSE in schools that came out in the past couple of weeks. The conclusion that we reached was that it had to be compelled. Therefore, it had to be put on the minimum content order. Schools had to be required to teach it, not just to have a subject called RSE, or, in this case, rights and equality. It had to be scientifically accurate and comprehensive. What that means is that schools will be inspected, probably by the Education and Training Inspectorate, according to a set of standards on their RSE, or rights and equality, teaching material and what is delivered in the classroom. They know that they will be inspected and monitored against delivery. Mandating it is the only way. It would be nicer if everyone did it voluntarily, but we know that the world is not like that. Some things have to be required. If subjects are important enough, they should be required. Children have a right, while at school, to be taught those subjects. That is how you do it. You put it in the minimum content order and monitor how it is taught and that it is actually taught. Before we did our investigation, we knew that all schools had to do RSE. We did not know whether they actually taught it, and what we found out was that quite a lot of them did not.

Peter Hall: We go back to Euan. There are a few more members to speak after that, but time is getting tight, so everybody should be brief.

Euan Campbell: The Committee also expressed concern about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on young people, as well as the impact of child poverty on their growth and development. What steps can be taken to eliminate that or prevent it?

Alyson Kilpatrick: We see that in all the work that we are doing at the minute. From the funding of services specifically for young people to the support for charities, sports and education, all of it is being affected by cuts at the same time as the cost of living is going up. You are getting into the realms of much more party politics than I can get involved in, but we need to keep reminding the Government that when allocating money to certain things, there are priorities, and young people should be at the top of their priorities.

You are more vulnerable because you do not have the same autonomy. We could give you the autonomy to work earlier, vote earlier and do all sorts of things, but we have denied you that until you are 18. That being the case, the trade-off is that we take some decisions for you and in protection of you. That has to mean funding all the support that you need and making sure that all the services that you need are in place. Apart from keeping reminding them, there is not much more that you can do. If it falls to such a low level that your rights are actually in breach, people such as us, at the Human Rights Commission, can think of taking a case. The Equality Commission or the Children's Commissioner can also come to us, and we can work with them to assist in taking a case. You just need to keep reminding people of the effect that it has on you.

Again, I do not want to sound too corny, but you are at a very precious time, so everything that has an impact on you, you probably feel tenfold. I do remember that. I grew up in the 80s, when Margaret Thatcher was in power. If any of you know history, you will remember that she was not very kind about public services either. There was a cost-of-living crisis then too, so I remember how it is always the younger people who suffer first. Just keep reminding them of that. You will be voting very soon, and, if they are lucky enough to be still around, you can vote for them or withhold a vote from them.

Oliver Mercer: Following on from some of the work that the Youth Assembly did recently in participating in a consultation on the minimum age of criminal responsibility, I want to know your thoughts on that issue, and, if you think that there should be a change to the legislation, what young people could be doing to help progress that.

Alyson Kilpatrick: This is one of those subjects that really divides people. I have my view, as chief commissioner and as a lawyer. The commission has a stated view. I do not think that we have determined an agreed position on what age it should be lowered to, but we have recommended that it should be lowered. Sorry, I mean that responsibility is lowered, but the age is increased — before you panic. The consensus tends to be around 12 in this part of the world. There is a lot of good evidence that it should be higher still, at 14 probably, on balance.

Peter Hall: Fourteen was the age that we debated on. We were fortunate to have engaged with the then Justice Minister. We had a debate and, interestingly, the Youth Assembly did not vote to support 14. It was not that they did not want the age to rise; they wanted further consultation on what the age should be, whether 15, 16 or whatever.

Alyson Kilpatrick: I am just seeing whether I can find our latest position on that. I will double-check, but I am pretty sure that we said that it should be increased and that they should consider 14, because that seemed to be best practice and there was good evidence that 14 was a good age. However, that is when it starts becoming quite controversial.

I had a job before this one, in which one of my roles was to advise the Policing Board on what the police should be doing. I looked at policing with children and young people. One of the things that absolutely shouted out at me from that work was that the police needed to be much more protective and look at the issues of young people up to a much later age, rather than trying to punish them. If the criminal age of responsibility is 10, however, they are immediately looking at a 10-year-old as a potential criminal suspect and somebody whom they may end up taking to court rather than at what their needs might be. That shifts everything. It is not that you let people behave however they want, but you should look at why it is happening in the first place. It is only about retribution and not about stopping the behaviour. I know that the Justice Minister was quite keen.

It is one of those topics that older people have a reaction to, not always thinking it through and not always reading the evidence for whether it works or not.

Grace Mc Gouran: My question is about children's rights and the cost-of-living crisis. What more needs to be done to level the playing field for disadvantaged children who experience material deprivation as a result of the cost-of-living crisis and who lack the resources, especially technology and internet access, to succeed? In education now, it is assumed that you have the internet at home and access to all this stuff. You really need it to succeed in education now.

Alyson Kilpatrick: Yes. I am not sure whether social mobility is better. It may even be worse than when I was younger. It depends on the age groups that you are talking about. Clearly, most of the needs of younger children will be met by their parents, so you have to support parents. That means that the whole society has to change and support the family as a whole, or whoever the carers may be.

As a child gets older, with more and more autonomy and responsibility, they can do more for themselves. More can be done directly with young people before they reach the age of going into work and so on. Every branch of government and every bit of society needs to look at this because too much depends on where you were born and your family circumstances, and that is just not right.

One other role that I had was as a chair of a homeless charity, which also worked with young people. Some of the young people I met who were homeless, had not worked and had not really been through education were far cleverer than I ever was, but they just had not been given the opportunity that I had been given. Life was not as easy for them, and, with a tiny bit of help, maybe some technology and being able to come into a classroom, they blossomed. It was amazing to watch them. There is all the potential that we are missing from people just because they do not have the money, resources or access to the same things that some of us are fortunate to have. I agree with you.

Peter Hall: Thank you very much indeed, commissioner, for coming in and talking to the Rights and Equality Committee today. We greatly appreciate that. For the benefit of our people down the line, I am officially going to adjourn the meeting, so I can stop the recording. We thank the commissioner for coming in today. *[Applause.]* That was a really good session, and we really appreciate it.

Alyson Kilpatrick: May I thank all of you? You have given me a lot to take away and think about. It was a great privilege to be here. I would like to come back again.

Peter Hall: We very much appreciate that and, obviously, we want to maintain the relationship. We look forward to you coming again.

Alyson Kilpatrick: We can sit down for a long session and you can tell us all your thoughts.

Peter Hall: Thank you. We appreciate that.

Education Committee

Peter Hall (Northern Ireland Assembly): I welcome Linsey Farrell, deputy secretary for education policy and children's services, and Ray Caldwell, director for curriculum. Rebecca Moore, our Education Committee rapporteur, will say a few words about the work of the Committee, we will come to Linsey and Ray to respond, and then we will get into questions.

Rebecca Moore (Education Committee Rapporteur): Over the past two years, we have focused on relationships and sexuality education, and I will give a short summary of our concerns and recommendations, based on research and on meetings with key stakeholders.

I begin with the Committee's concerns. Although it is a requirement that schools in Northern Ireland teach RSE, an Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) report from April 2023 states that schools vary in what is taught and that the minimum content is not always delivered. This is also the lived experience of Committee members. Schools have the power to gloss over sensitive aspects of the RSE curriculum such as LGBTQ+ relationships, domestic abuse and menstrual well-being, to name just a few. The patchy nature of teaching on those topics is a grave concern for young people in Northern Ireland.

Further, the Committee is concerned about the biased opinions that some schools may hold about RSE. Many young people have expressed their concerns about being taught, for example, that abstinence is key and abortion is wrong.

The Committee recommends a few things on those concerns. It would like standardisation of the RSE curriculum across all schools to allow young people to form their own opinions, whether based on religious beliefs or preference. The Committee feels that the minimum content for RSE needs to be revised and extended at the earliest opportunity. That should be done in partnership with all stakeholders, including children and young people. It must be updated as frequently as possible to ensure that it remains current.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them and to have their views considered and taken seriously. Children's voices must be heard on RSE. Schools should regularly consult pupils and parents to ensure that they have a say on the RSE policy in their school. The policy should be available to all and be updated regularly to ensure that it meets the needs of the young people.

We support the recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that 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 to ensure that it includes education on sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible sexual behaviour and violence prevention."

Peter Hall: Thank you for that, Rebecca. Linsey, will you give a response before we go into the Q & A?

Linsey Farrell (Department of Education): I thank Rebecca for those comments and recommendations. I am delighted to be here on behalf of the Department of Education to address the members of the Education Committee of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. I have been in the Department for coming up on two years — it will be two years in October — and this is my first opportunity to be here, so I really want to say thank you and express my appreciation. There are some familiar faces in the room of those whom I have worked with in different ways, so I am looking forward to engaging with all of you today.

This type of engagement is vital for RSE, which is what we are here to talk about, and, much more broadly, for the Department of Education as we reflect on and develop our policies. Ultimately, you, as young people, are the beneficiaries of our policies, so this type of engagement is fundamental to us. It is important to us, as a Department, to be outward-looking and forward-thinking and to reflect on our policies and their impact. I would be very willing to come back and engage with the Committee on policies outside those that we are talking about today.

As we reflect on RSE, the questions that have already been posed today demonstrate just how engaged all of you are on issues that are important to you. It is important that we respect those views as your lived experience. That brings a richness to our work and thinking as we develop our approaches to RSE. We already know, as you rightly said, Rebecca, from the response to the ETI's recent evaluation of the preventative curriculum that young people have a real desire to learn about an increasingly diverse range of topics within RSE. We were very taken by the breadth and depth of the engagement with young people as part of developing that thematic evaluation. The desire amongst young people for the topics that are covered to be more diverse and addressed in more depth was very clear, and that has been reaffirmed today.

Before I set out the Department's vision and more detail on our position on RSE, I want to outline more broadly our vision for education and our priorities because that might get you thinking about future areas where you might want to engage with us. In the absence of an Executive and Assembly, we have brought forward a draft corporate plan that sets out a vision for every child and young person to be happy, learning and succeeding. Ultimately, that is our vision for every child and young person regardless of background or experience. Our priority in that is to champion all our children and young people and the positive impact that education in all its forms can have on all areas of life. That is to help all our children and young people, where they might need support, to engage better and more effectively with their learning and, indeed, their well-being, but it is also to inspire them to make a positive contribution to society, to meet the learning needs that they have in developing their knowledge and skills, enabling them to meet their potential, and, importantly, to deliver an effective, child-focused, collaborative and high-quality education system.

Our focus is on developing knowledge and skills, meeting the individual needs of children and young people, addressing inequalities and supporting you all to achieve and progress in whatever way works for you. That is important, not only for the individual but for society, the environment and the economy, which are all fundamental ambitions for our curriculum.

In the wider context, the Executive's children and young people strategy is the framework through which government as a whole will work to deliver improvements in the lives of our children and young people. That includes commitments to promoting and improving engagement in policy and decision-making, which the Department of Education take very seriously. We are working in partnership with the children's champions from each Department, and other authorities, to consider how we can better involve young people in policy and decision-making. Our engagement today on RSE is just one example of that. As I have already noted, that is something that we want to build on.

The curriculum, of which RSE is an important part, is central to supporting children and young people to gain the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to make positive, informed choices throughout life. As Rebecca has said, there have been many calls for RSE to be standardised and made mandatory in the curriculum, and we know that all young people want to, and fully deserve to, engage with high-quality teaching. Again, as Rebecca noted, it is important to emphasise that RSE is already part of the curriculum in post-primary schools: it is part of the personal development area of learning for life and work. The legal minimum content to be taught is set out as “high level” areas of learning. The Department remains of the view that well-supported and highly skilled teachers are best placed to decide how the curriculum should be delivered, which resources to use for the benefit of young people, and which specific topics to teach. It is that flexibility of our curriculum that is held up as one of the key strengths of the education system in Northern Ireland. The curriculum does not mean a mandatory list of detailed subject content that everyone must cover. Rather, there is limited prescription in respect of all the subjects. That means that boards of governors are ultimately responsible for the curriculum that their schools deliver, and for ensuring that it meets the minimum requirements. That is a responsibility that sits with the board of governors. It is its responsibility to make sure that a comprehensive RSE programme is delivered that meets the needs of its pupils and aligns with its RSE policy and school ethos.

The Department requires schools to consult with parents and young people on the development and review of its RSE policy. That should be meaningful consultation that is implemented in partnership and kept under regular review so that it remains responsive to changes in current issues that are of importance to young people. We know that there have been a lot of recent developments in respect of RSE, and issues related to it. Some of those have been noted already, but they include the publication of the ETI report of its evaluation on the preventative curriculum; the recent publication of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission report; the CEDAW report into the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; the regulations made by the Secretary of State in respect of the recommendations of the CEDAW report, which come into force tomorrow; the recommendations of the Gillen review into serious sexual offences; and, as we are all aware, the ongoing work on the development of the Executive strategy for ending violence against women and girls. Each of those will impact on the curriculum and, ultimately, our schools. The Department is working with its partners across the education system to consider how the issues raised in all those reports and evaluations can be best addressed within the current legislative framework.

We know from the ETI report that, while there are examples of very good practice, there is considerable variation in the effectiveness and range of approaches across schools. Too many schools avoid, or do not cover in sufficient depth, many of the more sensitive aspects of RSE. The report highlights, from the sample taken in four topics, that over 80% of schools were either not teaching them or were only teaching them to a small extent. As Rebecca noted, those topics are around gender identity, sexual identity, LGBTQ+ relationships and child sexual exploitation.

Other issues highlighted by the ETI include the growing use of social media and the associated implications for online safety; the need for inclusion of learning about informed consent, which reflects the Gillen report; and, perhaps most importantly, the need to consult with pupils on the content, relevance and delivery of the RSE curriculum. Gender and sexual identity are also highlighted, and the report notes that around 40% of pupils feel that their school is not sufficiently inclusive and does not provide a sufficiently welcoming environment. That has implications for us as a Department. We need to consider how careful planning by schools can address those gaps in pupils' skills and knowledge. We also need to consider how schools can significantly increase the level of participation amongst their pupils, and we need to provide opportunities for

teachers to develop and refresh their skills and expertise. A theme that came through very strongly was that teachers did not feel equipped or sufficiently confident around some of those issues.

Many of those issues are also highlighted by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission report on RSE. It concludes that schools should include students in co-developing and evaluating policy and that the Department should engage with teachers to invite their views on the supports that they require to enable them to deliver effective RSE.

The report also makes a number of recommendations in relation to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which is known as CEDAW. The report requires the UK Government and the Executive to:

“make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation”.

As I said, the Secretary of State has brought forward regulations to amend the legislation that sets out the minimum content of the curriculum. This will implement the CEDAW recommendations at Key Stages 3 and 4, and that change comes into force tomorrow. The new regulations also place duties on the Department to publish RSE guidance for schools and to make regulations to provide for an opt-out option for some or all of the classes on the specific topics highlighted by CEDAW. The Department is progressing that work.

As I mentioned, TEO has been developing a strategy for ending violence against women and girls. Its purpose is to identify actions to tackle a range of offences from microaggressions and misogyny through to violent and abusive behaviour directed at women and girls. The Department of Education, together with many others, has been involved intensively in the co-design process that was created to shape the design of a strategic framework. That strategy is being finalised for publication, alongside a year-one action plan, in the near future. There will be actions for the Department of Education in that plan. We have already established an oversight group to implement the recommendations and bring a more strategic and coherent response from a range of partners across the education system.

In conclusion, we can all say that the policy landscape around RSE has changed significantly in recent years, especially in relation to the dynamics brought by the internet and online apps. That will continue to be the case, so we are considering the recommendations arising from the legislation and the reports and evaluations. As I noted earlier, that is fuelling discussion around what should be included in the curriculum and whether there should be greater prescription and standardisation. However, as I have said, that would be contrary to the principles and legislation upon which our curriculum is founded, namely that it is flexible and teacher-led so that it can best meet the needs of pupils. That is something that we will reflect on.

It is important that flexibility is not lost by having an overly prescriptive approach that, in itself, may not guarantee high-quality teaching and learning. The challenge remains to provide a curriculum that engages with and for young people and that reflects their views in a meaningful way. That will be a focus of our engagement with schools and young people as we move forward. The Council for the Curriculum, Examination and Assessment (CCEA) continues to support the delivery of the curriculum through its RSE hub, which the Department has funded since 2018, and through an RSE progression framework that was launched earlier this year. The framework has been reviewed in light of the findings from the ETI in its evaluation and will be kept under review to ensure that it remains responsive and relevant to schools and young people. The Department has established a task and finish group that will have representatives of

teams from across the Department, as well as other organisations and agencies, to consider the findings and next steps that are identified in the report. We have also started important engagement with practitioners to understand how we can best work together and collaborate to move this process forward.

A lot of work has been begun and a lot of work is under way, but there is a lot of work still to do. I see engagement — more of it — with people like you as an important part of that work as we move forward. We will consult widely on the requirements set out in the regulations laid by the Secretary of State. That engagement with young people and our schools — including boards of governors, which are a key aspect of this — as well as with wider society, will be a key feature of that consultation.

Thank you again for this opportunity.

Peter Hall: We are going to get straight into questions. We are going to our plenary session after this, so we need to keep things fairly tight on questions and responses.

Oliver Mercer: The Committee thanks both of you for attending. It is very much appreciated. The question is addressed to either of you. How will you ensure that RSE is adequately provided for in each school across the country? We are all well aware that there is a minimum entitlement to RSE in schools. It is the anecdotal opinion of the Committee that that is not being met uniformly across the country. What exactly will passing more legislation do if existing legislation is not being met?

Ray Caldwell (Department of Education): It is lovely to be back and to see some familiar faces from September when I met you last. A lot has changed in this space since last we spoke. In the curriculum that teachers are actually delivering in schools, Linsey referred to the progression framework that CCEA introduced in April. That goes part of the way to addressing some of the recommendations on specific content, and it also provides resources for teachers to equip them to deliver some of the more sensitive issues. However, that process and framework will be kept under review. CCEA will revisit it each year and look for particular areas that require additional resources. That covers off the curriculum and the framework.

You also asked how we know whether schools are delivering RSE effectively. In my directorate, we are looking at bringing forward new guidance for schools, and a key aspect of that will be a strengthening of the pupil voice. There is already a requirement for schools to take on board the views of young people when they are developing their RSE policy and the outworking of that through their RSE programme and the taught curriculum. We believe it important that the views of young people are sought, listened to and responded to, and that the curriculum is kept under review by our continuing to engage with young people.

We will also take forward guidance and engage with governors so that they understand their role better, both in implementing the statutory change to the curriculum that has been brought in under the minimum content order and in the wider support resources that are available and the outworking of RSE in schools.

Martha Curran: I would like to build on Oliver's point. We focused on the minimum content when we last spoke. It is not being delivered, and I strongly agree with what Oliver says. I understand where you are coming from as well, Mr Caldwell. What are we doing to ensure that schools advertise what they are teaching and how they are teaching it? Last time we spoke, we realised that a lot of the minimum content was being secretly taught across multiple subjects and that people do not even realise that they are being taught. There is no excuse for that with the amount of resources available. Even Chris Heaton-Harris talked the other day about how we are enforcing mandatory RSE legislation. We have a lot of mandatory RSE legislation in this country, but there is very poor RSE teaching in a lot of schools.

Linsey Farrell: Ray might want to come in on this issue as well. However, in my opening remarks, I made the point about what came through in the ETI evaluation around teacher confidence. That is really important. We have seen it in a number of other issues, and it comes up around teacher professional learning. Our teaching workforce is one of the most important resources in our education system. It is envied worldwide for its skills and expertise, but when it comes to particular issues such as this, teachers tell us very clearly that they do not feel confident or properly and adequately equipped to teach. That is why we always say that standardising, being overly prescriptive and making things mandatory, on their own, are not enough. That has to be complemented by an effective teacher professional learning package or programme that will build the confidence of teachers, or those teachers who do not feel that they are adequately equipped.

As I said in my opening remarks, we want to engage very closely with teachers on that, to understand better. We are also aware of really good practice in particular schools. We have already had some sessions with schools that have a strong framework. They can speak to the challenges that they have overcome, which builds confidence in others. We know that this is a sensitive area and that there will be different perspectives. One issue with that is how, as a teacher or school leader, you can navigate your way through that. There is learning that can be shared across the system to build confidence around it.

Ray Caldwell: Recently, I wrote to schools to recommend that they use one of their school development days to focus on RSE. Resources are being provided from CCEA through the framework, and they will continue to be provided, but the review of the policy and ensuring that the views of young people are being listened to and responded to are important. You make a valid point. At the very basic level, the RSE curriculum — the programme that is being delivered across the year groups — should be shared with young people, so that you know what you are getting and whether it meets your needs. That way, you will be able to give feedback to the school if you feel that an area is not being covered or not being covered in sufficient detail. I will take that point away and ensure that it is reflected in the guidance that we bring forward.

Oran Clarke: On the board of governors of my school, there is a lot of church influence. A lot of the churches have delegates who go to the board of governors. The latest census showed that the number of people who affiliate with any church is at its lowest. Why are we letting them determine what is taught in our schools?

Ray Caldwell: There are processes in place and regulations that need to be followed in the constitution of boards of governors, so that is a matter for individual schools, but they are required to have representation, particularly across different church groups, namely the five main churches in Northern Ireland. More fundamentally, there is a requirement on boards of governors to ensure that the statutory curriculum is delivered in its entirety. Even for the change that is being brought forward, there will be a duty on the board of governors to ensure that it is delivered in the school.

Rebecca Moore: Under the current law in Northern Ireland on RSE being taught in schools, it should be mandatory. However, many schools decide to teach, as you said, the bare minimum in the classroom due to awkwardness and a lack of confidence. If teachers are not comfortable talking about RSE in the classroom, how can you expect students to be comfortable learning about RSE in the classroom?

It goes back to the fact that a lot of young people now get their information online. Plenty of websites, such as Childline, can help you with that, but if there is still a taboo around it, you cannot blame the children. It ultimately comes down to the teaching and the support that teachers may not be getting.

I have another question. How will you ensure that teachers are teaching a sufficient level of RSE to their year group? That is a really important question. In a meeting prior to this one, we talked about how you can bring an external moderator into a school, but, ultimately, the school will be told when the external moderator will be coming in, whether that is within the month or the week, and the teachers will be prepped to look golden and shine in front of the moderator.

Ray Caldwell: I will answer that in two ways. I believe that all teachers are teachers of RSE to a degree. The RSE curriculum and the areas in it are very broad. There are some more sensitive issues. The best practice that we have come across involves a framework whereby all teachers will deliver aspects, but some teachers in the school who have a particular interest will upskill and be better equipped to deliver the more sensitive issues at a higher level with the young people. It is therefore more about taking a blended approach through upskilling and having specialists in the school, but it is also about ensuring that there is a basic level of understanding, whereby all teachers can respond if something comes up in the normal course of a lesson.

Peter Hall: I will jump in and take complete advantage of my position as Chair/Clerk, if I may. Is there any sense that you might think about having a consistent external provider for the subject and perhaps contracting it out across a consortium of organisations that can provide the service? You would know that they were going into the school, whom they were seeing and the length of time that they were going to be there, and there would then be absolute consistency across all schools. To a certain degree, that would take it out of the hands of schools and boards of governors. Unfortunately, we have time for only a brief response, but is that something that you could deal with?

Ray Caldwell: The CCEA-produced framework, to which I have referred, provides a level of consistency. It identifies the areas and the curriculum that can be covered from year 1 through to year 14 progressively.

The use of external providers is, in general, a matter for individual schools and boards of governors. Whether they choose to avail themselves of external providers for any area of the curriculum is entirely a matter for them. I would, however, stress that, where a school uses an external provider, it is important that there be continuity and progression in learning. It is important that the school understands and knows exactly what is going to be delivered by the external provider so that it can build progressively on that through other areas of the curriculum and in lessons.

Peter Hall: I appreciate that. I am afraid that we have timed out. The Speaker is poised in the Chamber. People need to be seated in the Chamber, and there has to be a photograph taken, so I will draw the meeting to a close. Thank you so much for coming. I know that there will be a great deal of future engagement, and we look forward to engaging with the new Youth Assembly when it comes. Our existing Education Committee has raised a lot of issues, and, as part of our legacy report, we will want to bring those issues through to a new Education Committee, should a new Youth Assembly decide that it wants to have an Education Committee. Thanks again for coming. It is greatly appreciated. *[Applause.]*

Youth Assembly

Friday 30 June 2023

The Youth Assembly met at 3.35 pm (Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Speaker's Welcome

Mr Speaker: Good afternoon, Members. Tá fáilte romhaibh uilig. Welcome to the sixth and final plenary sitting of this mandate of the Youth Assembly. I begin by thanking all who have made today possible. It is the culmination of years of hard work and dedication that have gone into having the Youth Assembly. I mention specifically Chris Quinn, who has taken up the role of Children's Commissioner. Chris, above many people whom I know, was a strong advocate for establishing a Youth Assembly, going back many years. Out of everybody who made a big contribution to making sure that we formed a Youth Assembly, Chris was a very early advocate. I also pay tribute to the Youth Assembly team, to Assembly Commission members and staff and to MLAs from all parties, all of whom have provided tremendous support to our Youth Assembly Members throughout their tenure.

Before I move on to today's business, I will speak directly to you as Members of the Youth Assembly. It has been an absolute honour for me to watch your journey over the past couple of years and to be associated with the body of work that you have produced. The report of the mandate is a marvellous production. It will go down well and will be well read and well sourced and quoted. Thank you for that work.

Today will be the sixth plenary sitting of the Youth Assembly. I have always been very impressed by the respectful way in which you conduct your business and by how articulate and well-reasoned your contributions are in the Chamber. I even got a flavour of that this morning when Lauren Bond and Jamie Brown made a few remarks on behalf of you all on 'Good Morning Ulster'. They acquitted themselves really well.

I am proud that the Youth Assembly has been represented at some major events during the past couple of years, especially recently, when Members participated in events to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. Youth Assembly Members have made a very positive impression on everybody whom they have met, including presidents, prime ministers, taoisigh, other leading politicians and other people who have influence in our community and our society. The Youth Assembly has been well represented in talking to a number of those individuals in the past months alone, never mind through the other work that it has done, particularly that with the US consulate here.

As Members of the Youth Assembly, you have acquitted yourselves and represented this body, yourselves, your family and your community very well. You have made an impression on all those people. I spoke to them all. For example, even last week, Joe Kennedy was talking about how impressive the young people have been. He had read up on some of the paperwork and notes from the meetings, and, from talking only briefly to Youth Assembly Members, he realised how committed you are to the work that you are doing and how articulately and respectfully you present yourselves. We are all very proud of you, and the report is a testament to the energy and enthusiasm that you have all brought to the role.

We will move on to our last formal engagement, which is today's plenary sitting. It provides you with an opportunity to highlight the work that you have undertaken in the past two years, as well as with an opportunity to reflect on your experiences and your hopes for those who will follow in your footsteps. As with other Youth Assembly sittings, I will chair the plenary sitting and try to keep order, although you have always been very respectful, and, as such, there have been no issues with keeping order over the past two years. I am very lucky in that respect. As always, I will try to make sure that as many of you as possible have the chance to contribute today. I look forward to hearing about the work that you have done and your reflections on what you and the Youth Assembly have achieved. The sitting provides you with an opportunity to make sure that your thoughts go on the record.

Again, as always, Members must respect the right of others to make their contribution and must listen to what is being said. It is also customary that Members do not talk over each other. That almost does not need to be said, but I have to put such comments on the record. That is what I do with all the parties in the other Assembly. I have had to put those things on the record particularly in the other Assembly in case we have a bit of disorder, so I am just following our normal, standard rules, as we said that we would do in all our engagement with you.

The first part of today's business will involve opening up the debate to Youth Assembly Members to share their personal reflections on the work and achievements from this mandate. The business will last for approximately 30 minutes. The second part of the plenary sitting will provide an opportunity for Members to share their hopes and aspirations for the future. Again, that business will last for approximately 30 minutes.

Personal Reflections

Mr Speaker: Members, this item of business provides an opportunity for you to reflect on your experiences and on what your work has achieved during your time on the Youth Assembly. As I said, today's proceedings will be transcribed and published, and they will become a lasting official record of the final plenary sitting of our first Youth Assembly.

As you did before, please indicate that you wish to speak by rising in your seat. That means going up and down like a jack-in-the-box, but that is how our officials will identify who wants to speak. Please remember to state your name for the record when you speak. On that basis, I will call our first contributor.

Oliver Mercer: I pay personal tribute to all the people who have made the first Northern Ireland Youth Assembly such an outstanding success. I will take a moment to reflect on and recognise the contributions of some very significant contributors to the success of the first term.

To begin, I offer my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, for your unceasing commitment to making these events possible. Your support of the Youth Assembly throughout its incubation and its creation process has undoubtedly defined its success. Your support shows true dedication to the purpose of this place, which is to give a voice to those who lack one. As we all know well, young people are one of the most under-represented demographics in this country. Despite constituting 25% of the population, we have no MPs, no MLAs, no vote and, moreover, no voice. Through your support of the Youth Assembly, you have set a prime example of what it means to represent all your constituents, and, for that, we are immensely grateful.

Furthermore, it would be remiss of me if I were to fail to extend my gratitude to the Youth Assembly team for all their hard work in making the Youth Assembly function as an organisation. Lucy, James and Laura, thank

you for all the time, effort and commitment that you have poured into this project over the past two years. Your contributions to the expansion of the youth voice in Northern Ireland will serve to promote the interests of all young people, and, for that, we are grateful.

My gratitude must also be expressed to all members of the Assembly Commission — some of whom are present today — for their continued support of the Youth Assembly as a project. I also express my thanks to Peter Hall for his contributions.

More than anyone, however, I express my thanks to my fellow Youth Assembly Members. Over the past two years, I have had the pleasure of working with you on a variety of projects. I have met some truly incredible individuals. Having the opportunity to work alongside such individuals gives me a great sense of hope that young people will always have their champions. From bearing witness to your passion for the well-being of all young people, I truly believe that that passion will not die out with time but that you will continue, throughout each of your lives, to amplify the youth voice. In that and every other endeavour, I wish you all the best as you go forth from this place. For some of you, it will be for the last time, but, for others, perhaps it will not.

In conclusion, the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly's first term was undoubtedly something of an experiment, but it is my firm belief that, in the past two years, we have laid a strong foundation for establishing a force that will project the youth voice and allow it to ring out through these very halls for many years to come. The Northern Ireland Youth Assembly has boundless potential to change the lives of many young people for the better across the country, and I am immensely proud to have contributed to that in my own small way.

My participation in the Youth Assembly has given me many opportunities that I never thought were possible. It has taught me many things about myself and the country in which I live, but, more than anything, it has given me hope that, one day, the young people of this country will get the recognition and the voice that they deserve. With that having been said, I will conclude my remarks, and I wish all the best to the next generation of Youth Assembly Members. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Oliver.

John Kane: Over the past two years, I have enjoyed my membership of the Youth Assembly. Through the body, I was given the opportunity to have a voice and to use the platform that was provided to me to have a tangible impact on the lives of the young people of Northern Ireland.

It would, however, be remiss of me if I did not say this: the method by which we were all chosen to become Members of this institution was not the right one. I truly believe that we must follow the example set by the UK Youth Parliament and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum executive committee by choosing the next Youth Assembly by election, not selection. That will allow it to better represent the views of all young people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, John, for that contribution.

3.45 pm

Rebecca Moore: I am a member of the Education Committee. Throughout my Youth Assembly experience, I have developed many transferable skills, such as effectively communicating with my Committee, developing

confidence when speaking publicly and listening to and understanding opinions and views different from my own that my peers may have.

Being part of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly has meant that I have had many more opportunities to get involved in other youth groups, one of which allowed me to take part in a meeting at the United Nations in Geneva to quiz members of the UK Government on concerns about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, with the help of UN task force members. Overall, my Youth Assembly experience has been invaluable. From attending plenary sittings in Parliament Buildings to meeting the US President, Mr Joe Biden, I have entered a world of politics of which I never thought that I would be a part. I will start university next year, to study law in Glasgow, and I hope to progress into the political world afterwards to continue to make a change for the young people of Northern Ireland.

Thank you to Lucy McClelland, Laura Whinnery, James Stewart and Peter Hall for this invaluable experience and for making it all possible. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for listening to our views, opinions, worries and concerns about topical issues in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Thank you also, Rebecca.

Ronan Lynch: It is hard to believe that the first two years of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly will have come and gone by the end of today. I remember timidly sitting in front of a computer screen for a Zoom meeting on 2 July 2021, wondering what was ahead of me. A lot has changed since then. I have grown into a more confident person and a clearer communicator. My teamwork and cooperation skills have also improved. That personal growth is the kind for which I can thank the Youth Assembly and that I could not possibly have believed that I would achieve in the way in which I did.

The opportunities that the Youth Assembly provided to me and all its Members through the resources that we accessed and the people whom we met equipped us to fight to create change in Northern Ireland: change for the better for all those whose futures will be hosted in this country. For that, I cannot thank the Youth Assembly and the incredible team behind it enough.

Being one of the first 90 Youth Assembly Members is an honour and privilege that I cherish like no other. As our term draws to a close, I wish all my fellow Members good luck in their future endeavours and the Youth Assembly as an institution every success imaginable. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Go raibh maith agat, Ronan. Thank you.

Robert Moore: I pay tribute to the Youth Assembly team. Without them, we would not be able to do any of this. We would not have been able to have any of the great experiences that we have enjoyed over the past two years. I pay tribute to Laura, Lucy and James, and to Peter, our amazing Clerk, for the work that they have put in and for how they have allowed us to have such amazing opportunities.

In my experience as a Youth Assembly Member, I have done so many things that I thought would not be possible for me. Two years ago, I would never have dreamt of meeting the people to whom I have spoken across the political divide and the people in positions of power to whom I have spoken and who have listened to my voice and all our voices here. It is a reality now, however, and we are all part of history. We are all people who have used our voice effectively to make change and to make noise for change. We must all be grateful to ourselves for having the confidence and courage to stand up for what we believe in and for making our voices heard.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Robert. That was very well put.

Ollie Torney: I want to thank the Youth Assembly Members for what has been a really interesting two years. I do not think that I will ever forget some of the friendships and bonds that I have made over the past two years. I thank Lucy, Laura, James and Peter for helping us with all the activities that we have done over the past two years; it has been really fun. I also want to give thanks to some of the groups that lent us their time, particularly the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, which we have seen on multiple occasions. It has been interesting to see how different bodies work and inspiring to see how willing they are to work with young people. I also want to thank the Speaker and those at the Table for overseeing these plenary sittings and for sitting through many hours of our ramblings.

I reflect on some of the experiences that I have had, including meeting Joe Biden, going to the vote count in 2022 and taking part in the minimum age of criminal responsibility debate, where we saw just how compelling some of the young people in this Chamber can be when it comes to debating things that they are passionate about.

I want to say how inspiring it is to see such a diverse bunch of people all in the one place and working so well together. That is really inspiring and sets a great precedent for what can be done when people set aside their differences and work towards common interests. Thanks to everyone.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much for that, Ollie. We do not have anybody else on the list to speak. Martha wants to speak.

Martha Curran: Over the past two years, I have thoroughly enjoyed my membership of the Youth Assembly. Education is my passion, and the decision of the Youth Assembly to dedicate an entire Committee to the youth voice in that arena was a gift.

I fundamentally believe that knowledge is power. The Youth Assembly has further educated me on our political system and provided me with a multitude of transferrable skills and amazing opportunities, from influencing the independent review of education to personally chatting with prime ministers and presidents.

I would like to express my thanks to Laura, James and Lucy; to Peter and Lesley; to all the stakeholders; as well as to you, Mr Speaker, for listening to us and offering your assistance and mentorship on a number of occasions. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Martha. That was succinct and very appropriate.

Charlotte McGucken: Back at the start of our term, I do not think that any of us imagined that we as young people could have our voices heard. Throughout the term, we have been provided with ample opportunity, and, when the chance came to be on the interview panel for the next Children's Commissioner, I knew I had to go for it. From that experience, I grew in confidence and in friends. Being a member of the Youth Assembly has opened my eyes to the world of politics and the opportunities that are out there. I would love to see the next generation of the Youth Assembly carry on our legacy. I say a massive thanks to anyone who has contributed to the Youth Assembly over the past two years.

Kaitlin Caldwell: My experience over the past two years is that we were able to enlighten all those whom we came into contact with. As a group of young people, we were able to show that we have thoughts and that we can and will be able to help create a better way, not only for ourselves but for those who were, and still

are, willing to listen. Those experiences have helped me to overcome fears, such as speaking in public, and with confidence issues. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, Kaitlin, and thanks to the previous Member who spoke, Charlotte McGucken.

We do not have any other names down to speak in this session. If anybody else wants to make a few remarks, please indicate now, otherwise I will move on to the next item on the agenda. Are you all happy enough?

Please go ahead. Lauren Bond.

Lauren Bond: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have been a member of the Education Committee. I still remember my first ever Youth Assembly plenary session. I was so nervous. I had an awful migraine and could barely see the sheet that I was trying to read from. I also could not name any of the political parties, because politics was so distant from my world. Over the past few years, I have completely changed. I have gained the skills and confidence to get involved with some of the most incredible organisations, and I have had some of the best experiences of my life.

As a young person living in Northern Ireland, it is all too easy to feel frustrated and hopeless about the lack of progress, the political instability and the division that, for many of us, have shaped many aspects of our lives. However, there is truly nothing but hope, inspiration and innovation within our young people. Too often, young people in Northern Ireland are let down and left behind. Yet, to see the passion and determination of our young people, despite the many challenges that we face, fills me with hope for not only the future but the present.

I am incredibly grateful to the Youth Assembly and all youth voice organisations as well as to all those in power who not only listen to our voices and views but actually take meaningful action. I truly hope that the strength of youth voice in Northern Ireland only continues to grow.

Mr Speaker: I thank Lauren Bond for that contribution. I would not worry too much about the migraines because I get them after I chair every other Assembly meeting, so do not worry about it. *[Laughter.]* I am only joking by the way.

So, we have no other Members to speak in the session. Oh, we do. All right, Jamie.

Jamie Brown: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I just want to say that everyone who has made a speech today has said one thing: every single one of us would like to thank every person who has helped to put the Youth Assembly together — our Clerk, Mr Speaker, Laura, Lucy and James, we would like to thank you all.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, Jamie. Thank you for that. Everybody really appreciates those messages.

Hopes and Aspirations

Mr Speaker: We are making wonderful time, thank you for that. We now move on to the next item in the Order Paper, which is hopes and aspirations for the future.

Ronan Lynch: Northern Ireland's situation has always been one of complexity and uniqueness. Whilst the times that we live in now are certainly an improvement on what once was, it does sometimes feel like a step back is taken for every leap forward. The Youth Assembly's very existence is progress personified in the best way possible, but the lack of an Executive for it to scrutinise is another example of how there is still progress to be made.

For children and young people, I genuinely believe that this period is one of great excitement for the future, but we must put in the work to keep it that way. I also believe that the Youth Assembly is key to that. We are the guinea pigs, and, like all things, this test run has not been perfect, through a variety of circumstances, often beyond our control. However, with the right tweaks, I believe that we are already close to a system that, in both recruitment of its members and the process of their work, is nothing short of inspirational.

I hope to see the Youth Assembly flourish as I know it can, because, in the years to come, children and young people all over the country will look to this place, asking questions, and we have the potential to — and have to — give the answers that nowhere else can.

Mr Speaker: OK, who do we have next? All very quiet. I know that you have had a long day and have been working all day in Committee sessions and so on, so do not feel under any pressure whatsoever, but, again, you have all the confidence in the world to say a couple of words if you wish.

Oliver Mercer: I look around this room today and am filled with hope — hope of a better future, hope of progress, hope of cooperation and hope of unity. I see a generation that is willing to set aside differences and divisions in the pursuit of a better future for every person in this country. That is something that we all too often feel that this place lacks. That hope and sense of cooperation are vital to acting in the interests of the people of this country, as the people who are supposed to be sitting in these seats now are supposed to do. One day, perhaps, some of us will take their seats, and I cannot imagine it going the same way.

I look around this room and see brilliant people — not just a set of brilliant individuals but a group of people who are willing to work together. Frankly, if this group of people were to run the country, I would feel in very safe hands.

4.00 pm

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, Oliver. Your remarks are very commendable and inclusive altogether.

Martha Curran: I like to think that the future of the Youth Assembly is bright. Our Committee meetings this morning show that there is still a lot of work to be done. Should the next Youth Assembly choose even one of the Committees that we currently have, it will have its work cut out for it. We would all like to see the formation of the Executive, which would allow us to get some legislation put through. It would enable the provision of a more robust relationships and sexuality education curriculum, which our Education Committee has been working on, and an improvement in mental health services, as outlined by our Health Committee this morning, in a country that is one step forward towards our net zero targets, as outlined by our Environment Committee. This morning, we all recognise that the one puzzle piece that is missing is the Executive. Hopefully, with the next Youth Assembly, that will come through.

Mr Speaker: Martha, thank you for that. Does anyone else wish to speak?

Coran Morris: I apologise for nipping out earlier; I had to attend a prize-giving. When the prizes had been given out, a speech was given by the family of Sir James Martin. The phrase “I wish politicians were more like engineers” was used. The person speaking did not continue, probably to avoid a punch-up in the car park, but I took from his comment that politicians need to be like engineers and work together to make change.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, Coran. Are there any other takers?

Olivia Smith: For the majority of our mandate, I have been part of the Environment Committee. In our first mandate, at least, the Youth Assembly has shown us that, when people in power are quite literally not showing up for us, we want to show up for ourselves. I am incredibly proud of us for doing that. We have learnt that not everyone will stand up for young people. You have to do it for yourself, and that is what we have done. We have been vital in cooperatively building the bones of this fantastic institution. I can only hope that we will continue to grow and flourish. For as long as the Assembly is not here, we will continue to be here, making decisions for ourselves and pushing the people in power to start making them for us, hopefully soon. Thank you to Lucy, Laura, James and Peter for believing in us and giving us the opportunities to make decisions for ourselves when nobody else is doing so.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much for that, Olivia.

Oliver Pearce: My only hope is that the Youth Assembly continues. If it is effective, that is a bonus, but, really, existence is all that we need to demonstrate the presence of a youth that cares and to show the existence of a future. I therefore advocate the continuing commitment of those who are willing to demonstrate the importance of youth in society.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that contribution, Oliver. I am open to takers. I am not going to flog a dead horse; you have been working here all day.

Ollie Torney: One of my favourite things in my experience of the Youth Assembly has been cross-examining the experts and stakeholders, as we have done today. I have found it really engaging, and it was interesting to see how things work and that, if we put enough effort into things, we can make a difference. In the next mandate, Youth Assembly Members will, no doubt, be just as excited to pursue the issues that they are passionate about and will strive to make a difference to this country. I hope only that they will get the opportunity that we did not: that they will get to speak to MLAs and Ministers and ensure that they are held to account by the youth.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, Ollie.

John Kane: My greatest hope for the next Youth Assembly is that the Youth Assembly staff — all of them who are in the room right now — can continue and that they will support the next Youth Assembly as much as they have supported us, give it the voice that they have given us and continue to allow us to make change as best we can.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that, John. Does anybody have any words of advice to the incoming Members of the Youth Assembly? A couple of people have asked whether there will be another Youth Assembly. The answer is yes. The Assembly Commission has long agreed that there will be a Youth Assembly from here on in. You were the pioneer group, and congratulations on that: that is a wee bit of history. The publication on

the pioneer phase will stand the test of time. Every one of your names is in it, and you have made the big contributions to that.

Does anybody have any wee remarks or advice? I have two YAMs to call first — Rebecca and Ruadhan — so reflect for a moment or two on whether you want to give any additional words of advice for the next cohort of YAMs to come, probably around September.

Rebecca Moore: My piece of advice for the new Members coming into the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly is this: what you put into the Youth Assembly is what you will get out of it, and, if you work hard, you will see a change.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Rebecca. Well said.

Ruadhan McCarney-Savage: I will add just a few words to what my colleagues have said. If the past few years have demonstrated anything, it is that the future is forever uncertain. With virus, war and negativity fuelling our news cycles, it is easy to feel pessimistic about our future. After all, our future is the young people sitting here. When those in power are absent, it is the responsibility of the Youth Assembly to provide a voice, and I am forever thankful for the voice that it has provided to me. I hope that the next cohort can hold a functioning Stormont to account, equipped with the power to alter legislation.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, Ruadhan. Go raibh maith agat.

John Kane: My advice to the next Youth Assembly is to work together. Together, you can make friends, and you will bond with each other. That is what will make you effective and able to function as a body. That is what will allow you to effect change.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, John.

Charlotte McGucken: I have just one thing to say to the next generation of Youth Assembly Members, and that is to slay it. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Martha Curran: I agree with almost every word that has been spoken and will just say that, exactly as Rebecca said, what you put in is what you get out. Jump in, and keep an open mind and a level head. It does not matter how much background knowledge you have of the political system. You will get there. It is worth it.

Mr Speaker: Thanks very much for that, Martha.

Oliver Mercer: If I were to offer advice to the incoming Youth Assembly Members, I would tell them that the weight of this place is immense. Only together will they be able to move it. Quite frankly, the weight is placed on young people, because we are left out of politics. We are not permitted to stand for election, and we are not permitted to vote in elections. It is through organisations such as this that we have to make the moves to promote ourselves. Sometimes, frankly, there is no one else to do it for us. I say to those organisations that run the Government and that are supposed to protect every citizen of the country: with the existence of the Youth Assembly, you have no excuse not to take on board the youth voice. You know exactly where to find it.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much for that, Oliver.

Lauren Bond: My main piece of advice for the next Youth Assembly Members is to be yourself and speak about what matters to you. I came into youth politics with no idea about what politics was like. I thought that I had to act or think a certain way to fit in with my idea of what politicians were like. Your thoughts, views and experiences matter, however, and you absolutely have a voice exactly the way you are. You might bring something to the table that nobody else can. You should absolutely be yourself, because you will shine that way.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much for that, Lauren.

Ollie Torney: One piece of advice that I will give for the next mandate is to jump at every opportunity that comes your way. In the Youth Assembly, every time I pushed myself to take on something new, I found that I got a huge amount out of it, and the only regret that I have relates to every opportunity that I did not take. If I were to say one thing to future Members, I would tell them to strive to do as much as they can.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, Ollie.

Grace McGouran: My advice for future Members is that the Youth Assembly is for everyone and that no one should feel that they are not the type to go for this kind of position. Maybe, as others have said, they do not have the level of knowledge that they think is required, but everyone is welcome, and it does not matter what background you are from or anything like that. No one should feel that they are not good enough at public speaking or working with people. There is a place for everyone, and what makes the Youth Assembly successful is having such a wide range of people with different interests and skills.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, Grace. That was very well put.

Ronan Lynch: This is the advice that I would give to the next batch of Youth Assembly Members who will come in after us. Going in, you may feel many things. I know that I had an emotional rollercoaster in the build-up to the first plenary sitting: excited, frightened and something else entirely. The people who come in next have two years of opportunity. If I could tell them one thing, it would be to use them. Fight for what you believe in. Fight for what you see as right. Whether you have swum in the seas of politics before or you walk in feeling like a fish out of water, you belong here. Do not let anyone tell you otherwise. Never doubt that you belong here just as much as anybody else and that you can make a difference. Please make the difference that you dream of a reality, because nobody is going to do it for you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that, Ronan.

Martha Curran: I promise that this will be the last time that I contribute. This is more of a piece of very practical advice. I hope that future Members read the minutes and look at the legacy report. I had a flick through those documents this afternoon, and I would love it if the people who take over from us in the next Youth Assembly were to use the links that we have already established. We have worked with so many people, and the Business Committee received a lot of things from so many people. I hope that future Members draw on those links and take them further, because I almost wish that we had more time to explore them all.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that, Martha. Anyone else?

Oliver Mercer: I encourage every single incoming Youth Assembly Member to do one rather strange but, to me, significant task. At least once, on your way up to a plenary sitting, walk up the Stormont hill. You will get a sense of the ineffable gravitas of this place and see the seat of governmental power — the most of any place in this country. When you feel that feeling and you walk up and take your seat in the Chamber, only then will you truly understand what you are doing here, what your purpose is and just how significant an opportunity lies before you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that, Oliver. Are Members content that what needed to be said has been said? You are all on the record in relation to this wonderful production. It seems that you are all happy enough. You have had a long day.

On that note, we have come to the conclusion of the sitting. I will make a couple of points. First, I commend and thank you all from the bottom of not only my heart but those of the officials to whom you referred and the others who have been working behind the scenes that you do not see that often. They are, however, all working frantically. It is a bit like a duck under the water; they are paddling like mad. People are working hard and are very committed to working for you.

The answer to whether there will be another Youth Assembly is simply that, yes, there will be, and it will be formed early this autumn. We will look at the points that have been made about how we recruit and select the Members for that, but one thing that we will insist upon is having a Youth Assembly that is reflective of our wider community, to the best of our ability to achieve it.

4.15 pm

Listening to all your very eloquent contributions has been remarkable. You have been quite dispassionate in rhyming off your points, and you believe in what you are saying. You have all come together despite most of you not knowing each other. You worked well together and very professionally. We made sure that we put the Assembly's resources at your disposal, and you have been very quick to work with the research team, the PR people, officials, departmental staff, Committee staff and so on, as well as some Ministers and their Departments. Notwithstanding the fact that the Assembly has not been functioning for a period, a number of Ministers contacted you, and the Minister of Justice asked you to act as consultees for a piece of legislation that she was advocating.

You have made a big contribution. You probably do not even understand it yourselves, to some extent, although you have made it very eloquently. Please be under no illusions: you have made an impact. You are the pioneer group. This is the first Youth Assembly, so historically you are in there: you have ticked that box. That is very important. You will go on to any other aspect in your life and aspire to do what you have done here, which is to open and apply your mind. Work with everybody: do not be afraid of that. Work with all people, because everybody has their own set of opinions, perspectives and narratives. You have the same rights and entitlements to have your own opinions on anything, from climate to health, education or the constitution.

Whatever you have opinions on, it is important that you inform those opinions and educate yourself. If you want to talk to other people, do so respectfully and convince them, if you can, of the rightness of your argument. Sometimes, while you might be passionate about something, when you delve in deeper, you might find that you are going in a different direction from the one that you wanted to take. You will get all that through informed and respectful debate.

You have made yourselves into a very important beacon. You have given all of us confidence — I know and we all know — that, as we go to set up the second Youth Assembly, we have the first two years' experience under our belt. You have made your contributions to any changes that we intend to make. We will be making some changes, and the Assembly Commission will deliberate on that over the next while and finalise all the details around that.

You can be sure of this: you have left an imprint. As someone said earlier, you have a voice. All of you are echoing that. You have a voice, and you are grateful that you have had an opportunity to have a platform. Every one of you, more or less, has talked about the value of being able to come here, knowing that you are as good as anybody else and as welcome as anybody else. I hope that every one of you has felt that welcome since day 1. Certainly, in my experience of working with the officials, I know that they have been working very hard, not only to make you feel very welcome but to make sure that you are able to develop yourselves and your arguments, and to consolidate the need for such a body as the Youth Assembly. When you are 18 years of age, you have a vote. When you are under 18, you do not, but you still have opinions and a say. You still have rights, in my view — in our view — to make sure that you have a platform for those voices to be heard.

I wish you good luck in the time ahead. Have a nice summer, and good luck in the next stage of your education or employment, or whatever you are going off to do in the next wee while. I know that you have a lot of work ahead of you in the next few years, as these are the foundation years of your life. Make the best of them: get stuck in and do whatever you have to do. No matter what walk of life you are in, go and do your best for you, your community and your family. You have all expressed that as an aspiration and, indeed, as your objective in future.

We look forward to stage 2, which is the next Youth Assembly, and we have a lot to thank you for in making sure that we can move on and give another 90 young people the same opportunities that you have had. They will feed off the experience that you have gained, as will our officers and those of us who have been working with you. It will be about trying to work out how we can improve on things and make them better.

At the end of the day, even though it is not functioning at the moment, when we come here with the Assembly, our job when it is functioning is to serve all the MLAs to make sure that they are fully able to represent their constituents and communities. You have given us a very good example of how to do that. You have come here not affiliated with parties but as independents. This is the biggest crowd of independents that has been in the Chamber. You have all worked collegiately, which is wonderful and a great example.

Thank you all for your participation. Thank you to your families, your friends and the groups around you who have helped you to be here and who kept encouraging you to be here, and thank you for giving your encouragement to all the others. You have given one another collective support to take part in what has been a very successful achievement for the Assembly to have had you as Members of the Youth Assembly. You have left us on very solid ground for moving forward with the next Youth Assembly.

I thank each and every one of you. I wish you all the very best for the future. I have been honoured to work with you through chairing the plenary sittings and to work with our officials on the preparation of all your work over the past couple of years. Good luck. Have a good summer, and have a good life. Thank you.

Peter Hall: Before we finally draw things to a close, I am going to do something that I do not normally get to do. We rarely get to a point at which we can thank the Speaker. From my perspective, having developed the

model for the Youth Assembly, I can tell you for a fact that, without the Speaker and the Clerk to the Assembly, Lesley Hogg, it simply would not have happened. Their support and their fighting for this to happen is why you are here now *[Inaudible]* and I thank them for that support. My doing this is highly unusual and highly unconventional, because the Speaker and our Clerk never get thanked, but it is something that I really wanted to get on the record. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Do I still owe you a fiver for that? Thank you. Give yourselves a round of applause at the end of this historic period. That is more important. *[Applause.]*

Adjourned at 4.22 pm.