



**YOUTH
ASSEMBLY**
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

OFFICIAL REPORT

Youth Assembly Mandate Two 2023-25
1st Sitting

At 2:15 pm on Saturday 2 December 2023
Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast.



Members of the Youth Assembly

Adams, Molly	Mac Dougall, Aiden
Bloomer, Isaac	MacAskill, Ross
Bowman, Alexandra	Mackiewicz, Nadia
Breadon, Joshua	Magee, Erin
Brennan-Collins, Paige	Maginn, James
Brown, Rory	Da Cruz Marinho, Victoria
Cheung, Shu ya	McAlinden, Isaac
Chojak, Vanessa	McCarthy, Shea
Clarke, Ellie	McClintock, Jack
Clendinning, Jake	McConnell, Tom
Collins, Jay	McCoy, Fionn
Cox, Thomas	McCusker, Lorcan
Creber, Ciaran	McDonald, Grace
Cummings, Portia	McFarland, Charlie
Cyriac, Leon	McFarland, Kyle
Daly, Erin	McFarlane, Trae
Doherty, Katelyn	McGill, James
Ewing, Brooke	McGouran, Daniel
Fallis, Jack	McGucken, Daniel
Farry, Christine	McGuckin, Marcus
Finnegan, Kerrie A	McKenna, Clodagh
Fogarty, Catherine	Mclaren, Kiara-Nikolle
Gilmore, Joshua	McNulty, Weronika
Girvan, Bláthnaid	Meighan, Declan
Gracey, Daniel	Moore, Matthew
Green, Mia	Mulholland, Victoria
Green, Shaun	Mullan, Donal
Gregg, Tyler	Murray, Mia
Griffin, Sophie	Ní Cheallaigh, Cara
Hagen, Lilliana Ollala	Noakes, Lily
Hamadi, Lila	O'Brien Haughey, Erin
Harkin, Sophie	Parsons, Yvaine
Hazley, Caleb	Quinn, Emma
Healy, Isla	Robb, Harry
Hegarty, Niamh	Sachno, Willow
Hunt, Marcella	Sestakova, Taisija
Jess, Robbie	Sneddon, Andrew
Johnston, Harry	Sotonye-Frank, Telema
Kealey-Bennett, Addison	Strange, Charlotte
Kearney, Ryan	Thompson, Isaac
Kerr, Harrison	Varghese, Joash
Kerr, Darragh	Watson, Georgia
Lauro, Lorenzo	White, Jude
Leonard, Oliver	Williamson, Bryony
Lewis, India	Wong, Lucy

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Plenary Session

Saturday 2 December 2023

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

Opening Remarks

John Blair (Northern Ireland Assembly Commission): Welcome, all of you, to the first plenary sitting of the second Youth Assembly, here in the Assembly Chamber of Parliament Buildings. My name is John Blair, and I am a member of the Assembly Commission. The Speaker, Alex Maskey, had intended to chair today's proceedings, however, unfortunately, he is unable to be with us following a medical procedure yesterday. The Speaker is extremely disappointed not to be with you today, and he is very much looking forward to meeting you at the earliest opportunity. The Speaker has therefore asked me and my Assembly Commission colleagues Trevor Clarke and Robbie Butler to carry out his duties today, and we are all delighted to be with you.

First, I congratulate you all on becoming Members of the Youth Assembly. It is great to see you take your seats in the Assembly Chamber for your first plenary sitting. This morning, you heard from the Members who sat in the first term. Those legacy Members will have a lot to share with you from their experience. I encourage you to learn from them, but it will be for you to shape your term as a Youth Assembly Member. The focus today is on this tremendous opportunity and on you. You will be supported today by the members of the Youth Assembly team and other officials who have been very committed to the Youth Assembly. They may even be more excited than you are. I thank all of the team in the Assembly for all their hard work that has got us to this point. I know that the Speaker, the Assembly Commission and Members of the Assembly will be keen to engage with you in the weeks and months ahead to get your views on the issues that will affect you and other young people.

Let us move on to what is ahead today. Today is your opportunity to make your voice heard. Today is absolutely about you. During today's proceedings, once we have heard from the legacy Youth Assembly Members, you will have the chance to talk about what you want to achieve as a Youth Assembly Member. My job as Chair is to make sure that everything runs smoothly. I want to try today to hear from all of you who want to speak. Do not worry if you have not got a speech prepared. If you just want to make a brief point or even simply to say that you agree with someone or another point made, I will be glad to hear from you. Please do not be nervous today. If it helps at all and gives some comfort, I say that I have never sat in the Speaker's Chair before, so, if you are nervous at all, I know exactly how you feel. Do not let that be an issue, please. When other people are speaking, listen to their views. That is about showing each other respect, obviously. While the discussions today might involve serious subjects, I hope that you will enjoy today's proceedings. Even in the Assembly, major issues can be dealt with, with good humour, banter and strong personal relationships between all sides. That helps to get business done, even when that business is challenging. I hope that you make the most of today, and, most of all, I hope that you enjoy yourselves. If you need any help at all today, please let one of the team know, and we will be happy to assist you as best we can.

Legacy Youth Assembly Members: Personal Reflections and Official Handover to New Members

Jessica-Elise McArdle: I was a Youth Assembly Member during the term of 2021 to 2023. We had four Committees: the Health Committee; the Environment Committee; the Rights and Equality Committee; and the Education Committee. I was a member of the Education Committee. In our Committee, we discussed numerous topics such as relationships and sexuality education (RSE); school transport; the rights of children and young people with disabilities regarding their education and transport to school; and a consultation on the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages.

At our first plenary meeting, we did a team-building exercise, which helped us to get to know each other and to familiarise ourselves with politics and issues that have occurred. I was very nervous that day, and I am sure that most of you are nervous today. However, I can assure you all that you will not be nervous when you get used to the work of the Youth Assembly. My key advice for you is to be yourself, to speak out and to expand your knowledge in many different ways by talking to other young people in the Youth Assembly. We also debated topics relating to the criminal age of responsibility. The majority voted no to changing it from 10 to 14.

Throughout my time as a Member of the Youth Assembly, we met such key figures as the then Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma. I was on the panel to choose the next Children's Commissioner, Chris Quinn. We also had the amazing opportunity to meet the President of the United States at Ulster University to celebrate the Good Friday Agreement, and MLAs and many other important figures in today's politics. Myself and others had the opportunity to present a speech at an event to mark the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement — an event that celebrated peace and power-sharing since 1998.

During my time in the Youth Assembly, I learned that I had many skills and qualities that I did not know I had. Due to that, I became much more confident in speaking and communicating effectively; I learned how to work in a team; and, most of all, I learned how to speak out. I also learned much about politics and issues that other young people and children have. My time in the Youth Assembly enlightened me and made me aware that other people face similar issues to those that I face.

The diverse range of young people in the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly is tremendous. The Youth Assembly enables us, as young people, to work together to discuss and debate the issues that we face on a day-to-day basis. The opportunity to do that was life-changing; it is something that I will remember forever. We are the future generation, and we will succeed in bringing hope to our future. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

John Blair: Thank you for that insight and information.

Oliver Mercer: One day, two and a half years ago, I made a snap decision to submit an application to the Youth Assembly — an application that every Member present has made. I recognised that that decision was unlikely to lead to anything: there was a seemingly impossible chance. Besides, what right had I, who had a vague awareness of politics — at best — to be placed into such a programme? I would soon come to discover that I had been accepted and that I, who had no experience of public speaking or knowledge of politics, would be sent off to stand in the halls of government to be listened to. What an absurd, yet amazing, situation to be in. Over the course of my journey through the Youth Assembly, I became more confident in my ability to put myself and my ideas before a crowd, as I am doing today. I learned the skills that are

necessary to make the most of the opportunities that I was incredibly fortunate to have. I hope that all of you will do the same.

I was given amazing opportunities that I could never have imagined having. Even to be standing in the Chamber is a huge privilege that should not be overlooked. Other opportunities included engagement with the American consulate; regular engagement with, and access to, politicians, Ministers and other figures at the top level of government; and engagement with other young people and their organisations to work towards achieving our common goal of driving change on behalf of young people. I encourage everyone in the Chamber to engage with the Youth Assembly to the fullest degree possible. I saw many Members slowly disengage over our two-year mandate, missing out on many fantastic opportunities. It sounds unbelievable, but every opportunity that I was able to take through the Youth Assembly was a result of nothing more on my end than sending a few emails confirming my attendance. You have taken the hardest step; you are here now. All the opportunities lie within your reach, and all you need to do is to reach out and grab them.

One thing I will say is this: during today's events, I have met several of the new Members, and I am left with a resounding sense of hope. Hope that an organisation that I worked with for two years will be in safe hands, carried on by the next generation into an even brighter future than any of the Members of the premier mandate could have imagined. The Youth Assembly has a fantastic power to transform your seemingly boundless energy and enthusiasm into tangible change and action. So do not let this opportunity slip by you.

The plenary meetings that I was able to engage with dealt with a range of issues, including standing items, such as Youth Assembly Committee updates, and topical matters, such as consideration of the involvement of young people in the preparation of future Programmes for Government, a debate on the minimum age of criminal responsibility and a session in which Members scrutinised the tenure of the outgoing Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

However, as with every plan, there are always a few unexpected challenges. The pandemic, and restrictions on meetings at the inception of our pioneer phase, meant that initial discussions and the first plenary sitting were held online instead of in person. That created a change in process but not in tempo, as Youth Assembly Members took those changes in their stride and simply varied their approach in order to deal with a starkly different environment.

The Assembly not functioning normally meant that interaction with the scrutiny Committees was not available and engagement with MLAs was more limited. However, the Youth Assembly Members did participate in the Education Committee's pandemic youth engagement and My Life and Learning in Lockdown project. Youth Assembly Members used that time afforded to them to participate in a number of departmental consultations, including on the independent review of education, school uniform policy, the Irish and Ulster-Scots language heritage and culture strategies, marriage laws and the minimum age of criminal responsibility. It is encouraging to know that the voice of young people will be reflected in departmental policy development related to those issues.

In addition, Youth Assembly Members participated in a number of tasks with various statutory agencies, including on the period dignity project, the development of an education rights resource for the Children's Law Centre and a statement on children's rights in Northern Ireland with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. A number of Members also sat on the selection panel for the new Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, met the Chief Constable of the PSNI and attended an election count to observe proceedings.

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

Our time with the Youth Assembly has been instrumental in building skills, confidence and understanding of democratic principles in every single one of the first generation of Youth Assembly Members. Great relationships, professional and platonic, were built over the course of our mandate that will last a lifetime. Team-building days, such as the one held at the Belfast Activity Centre, which notably featured engagement with the Speaker on a personal level, were critical in that respect.

It is my hope that the next generation of Youth Assembly Members will build upon the successes of the pioneer phase and learn from the challenges that we experienced. The young people of NI watch on with hope as you take your seats today, so make no delay in getting to work. It would be remiss of me to fail to mention that you are going to be the beneficiaries of the incredible work of Lucy and the team, backed up with support from key figures such as the Speaker. The Youth Assembly would not have been possible without the support of the Assembly Commission, which furnished us with resources, and we are more than grateful for its continued support.

I have no doubt that you are all overburdened with information, so I wanted to take this opportunity to offer you support in any way that I can, in your capacity as the next generation of Youth Assembly Members or in any other capacity, and to emphasise to you that if you engage fully in the Youth Assembly project through this initial set-up phase of your mandate, the endless opportunities that I and many others enjoyed will start flowing in. They can only come to you, however, if you are as active as you can be in the group.

2.30 pm

Very shortly, you will all have an opportunity to speak about your hopes and aspirations, and I encourage every single one of you to stand up and speak. Even if you say just a few simple words, you will get this process in motion and get your name on the record next to your speech.

With that in mind, on behalf of the pioneer group of Youth Assembly Members, it is my pleasure to officially hand over to the new Members for the 2023-25 mandate and wish them all the best in their work for the second Youth Assembly mandate. *[Applause.]*

John Blair: I thank and congratulate the legacy Members for their service during the pioneer phase. I thank them for coming here today to share their perspectives with the new Members of our Youth Assembly. I now invite the legacy Members to take a seat in the Public Gallery to mark the handover to the Members of the new Youth Assembly.

Pledge of Membership

John Blair: This pledge was taken two years ago by Members in the pioneer phase, and now it is your turn.

The Clerk: The pledge of the Youth Assembly states:

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

John Blair: Members, please signal the confirmation by saying "Aye".

All Members: Aye.

John Blair: The Pledge of Membership is confirmed. Congratulations on officially becoming Members of the Youth Assembly.

New Members: Hopes for the Second Mandate

John Blair: We will now hear from our new Members, which we have all been looking forward to. This is your opportunity to talk about you, what you would like to achieve and what matters to you. I will introduce the two people sitting next to me at the table: on my right is the Clerk to the Assembly, Lesley Hogg; and on my left is Youth Assembly manager, Lucy McClelland.

If you wish to speak, you should rise in your place. That is what normally happens in the Chamber. It means that we have an easy way of seeing that you want to speak. However, if it is easier for some of you, you can raise your hand to let us know that you want to speak. Also, if it is easier for you, you can speak from your seat when I call you. When one of you is called to speak, everyone else should take their seat to listen to the contribution. When that person has finished speaking, you should rise in your place to raise your hand again so that we know that you still want to speak. When you are called to speak, please state your name, as that helps everyone to get to know each other.

Finally, I know that some of you might be nervous, but, as I said earlier, we will all support each other to help us to enjoy the day. If that is clear, we shall proceed. If you would like to speak, please rise in your place or raise your hand.

Mia Murray: Thank you. Good afternoon to my fellow Members of the newly formed Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. Briefly, I wish to mention a hotly debated topic that I am passionate about. I truly believe that due to a lack of integration in this country, our education system suffers, Northern Irish people suffer and the youth suffer. I believe that by implementing efficient, fit-for-purpose integrated education projects, we can begin to break down societal norms of separation between the two opposing communities in Northern Ireland for generations to come.

I will finish with a quote from my personal hero, who sat in this Chamber, the late John Hume:

"Difference is the essence of humanity."

I hope that we, the new Northern Ireland Youth Assembly — a group of very different people — can take that quote into consideration in everything that we do during the mandate.

Yvaine Parsons: I would like to discuss an important topic. We should use this session to discuss what we want to fixate on. I agree with Mia that we should fixate on education. However, we should not fixate on just one topic; we should, in fact, have multiple ones. For example, we should work together to provide environmental protection for Northern Irish wildlife. Red squirrels have become increasingly rare due to the outbreak of grey squirrels. As Youth Assembly Members, we could perhaps work on protection protocols to keep that species alive and active. I will finish with a question. What makes you think that education is so important; and which education topics should we fixate on, given that there are several different ones?

Marcus McGuckin: As you know, I am officially a Youth Assembly Member. I would like to focus on not one but many topics: poverty; agriculture; work; and overall human rights and freedoms in the Province of Ulster. I would like to focus on a problem that we, as a country, suffer from, though we might not mention it: extreme poverty in many places. Many people suffer from poverty, and it puts entire generations in a mindset of “dragged downness”. It is as though they are stuck in the mud and cannot get out of it. I want to bring those people out of that position, unionise them and nationalise them together into one cohesive mass, so that no one individual feels as though they are alone. It is about all of us as a whole.

Agriculture and industry are things that we must work on and on which we must combine, unionise and nationalise. Those things could pull us, the people, out of not only that problem but hunger and the ever-increasing length of chain around the mind. We can do that. I know that it will take a long time, many protocols and much thinking, but we can get there with the right strategies and my policy. Thank you very much.

Shea McCarthy: I was inspired to stand here today mainly by my grandfather, who, as some of you may know, sat in the Chamber for 18 years — on this very seat — as an Alliance MLA representing Strangford. I was also motivated by some local representatives whom I often have the privilege of chatting to about the issues that interest me.

I am passionate about working to ensure that young people aged 16 and 17 are eligible to vote. At 16, citizens can pay taxes, join the army, drive tractors on public roads and even buy a house with parental support, but they cannot have a democratic input to society and their Government through voting. I hope that, in the two years to come, we, in the Youth Assembly, can discuss that and many more issues for young people. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Rory Brown: There are a lot of different things to talk about right now, but I would like to focus on one that I have experienced, and that is special educational needs provision. The special educational needs system that we have in place now is good. I would like to not only help maintain that but adjust it, if needs be. Thank you.

Sophie Griffin: I would like to say how grateful I am to be a part of the Youth Assembly and to highlight an issue that I am passionate about: teen mental health. Since the pandemic started in 2020, teens have suffered with their mental health hugely, so we should talk about teen mental health in order to give teenagers the support that they need after the pandemic and even with the issues that happen now.

Fionn McCoy: It is a privilege to be part of the Youth Assembly. Over the two-year mandate, I would like to raise the issue of the public transport system and discuss how we can improve it. I am looking forward to

working with my fellow Youth Assembly Members over the next two years to make positive change for the young people of Northern Ireland.

Daniel McGouran: I am glad to have been selected as a Member of the second Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. I am excited to be able to make real, tangible and substantial changes in order to improve the standard of living for every person in Northern Ireland and, above all, to represent the voices of all young people in Northern Ireland, who are peers to those of us who sit in this Chamber as Youth Assembly Members.

John Blair: Members we are doing really well, and, even if it is a short point, please point out what is important to you. Please feel free to rise in your place so that you can put your point across.

Georgia Watson: I am extremely passionate about the environment and the conservation of endangered animals. When I am older, I would like to build an animal sanctuary in order to raise the numbers and improve the welfare of the most vulnerable species in the wild. In order to address earth's worst problems, we need to first address the earth itself. Therefore, I hope that, with the Youth Assembly, we, as a whole, can come closer to reducing our carbon footprint, to planting trees and to achieving a sustainable future for our country.

Bláthnaid Girvan: I am 15 years old, and I am a young carer. The Department of Health conducted a review of children's social care services in Northern Ireland. I was very disappointed when I found out that young carers, or the services supporting them, did not feature very much in that review. Therefore, during the next two years, I would like to be involved in any group that will focus specifically on how the new arrangements would better serve young carers' health, social care and educational needs. Young carers' voices need to be heard so that we are not left out.

Donal Mullan: I am passionate about rural issues. Our internet speeds are shocking. We have not had internet for the past few days, and that leaves us isolated and with no contact with our friends. That can affect young people's mental health. It leaves us with no option but to travel to urban areas in order to get an internet connection. All that travelling leaves a lasting impact on the environment. We will not even be able to start businesses in rural areas in the future because of unreliable internet connections. Being in the Youth Assembly is important to me, as it will provide me with life skills and give young people a voice. It will, hopefully, be a great opportunity to meet new people and to discuss our ideas.

John Blair: On behalf of the MLAs who have raised the issue of internet speed in the Assembly many times, I offer you their thanks. Officials and I will take that on board and convey to the MLAs that the issue was raised today.

We are doing really well, Members. You are testing my ability to scan the Chamber in a timely way. Please keep rising if you want to speak, and I will be happy to call you.

Victoria Mulholland: I am interested in diversity in Northern Ireland and in having more diverse schools and work environments so that upcoming generations can grow up alongside each other.

Leon Cyriac: I am highly privileged to have been accepted into the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. There are plenty of issues that need to be discussed, but there is one in particular that I feel needs to be out there, and that is criminal justice. Many people in prison have been wrongly convicted and are innocent, and that is not the best feeling. I want to be here for the next two years to have a say on and try to change that.

2.45 pm

There are criminals in prison who do not get mental health support. They have many issues, such as depression and suicidal thoughts, and they should have more mental health support while they are locked up in a small space somewhere.

Harry Johnston: I am delighted to have been chosen as a Member of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. I believe that young people's voices are important and need and deserve the platform that we have with the Youth Assembly so that we can better deliver for Northern Ireland's youth. I hope that we, as Members of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, can encourage and inspire positive change for the youth and the wider population of Northern Ireland.

Over this term of the Youth Assembly, I am looking forward to meeting some of our country's politicians and to having my voice heard on the issues that affect our country. My hope is that we can participate in crucial political conversations about important sectors, such as education and health, that concern our age group and the wider community of this country.

Harrison Kerr: I live near Coleraine on the north coast. It is a pleasure to be here today and to have the opportunity to participate in the Youth Assembly. I put my name down for the Youth Assembly because I love to try new things, have new experiences and listen to the opinions of people from all over Northern Ireland. This is especially true of the Youth Assembly: I can express my thoughts on issues that I care about and even learn more about our local system of government. I look forward to hearing everyone's thoughts, and I hope that we all work well together.

Harry Robb: One of the things that I would like the Youth Assembly to look at is the agriculture industry and the support that is available for young farmers.

Thomas Cox: I applied to be in the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly for a new experience that not many people have the chance to get. I also decided to do it to make new friends, and I am extremely grateful to be in this position. I believe that teens face a lot of issues with mental health and that, coming up to exams, more should be done in schools to help them with the stress and workload at GCSE that they are not fully prepared for in Key Stage 3.

John Blair: Members are raising a wide range of very important topics, which is much appreciated. For those of us in the Assembly who are present, please feel free to keep it coming.

Charlie McFarland: The amount of homework that we get nowadays is absolutely shocking. I can see you all agreeing. You go to school for six hours and 30 minutes, doing back-breaking work, and then you get home, thinking, "Finally, that's over. Well, for today". Then you realise — you see when you check your phone, Google Classroom or whatever — that you have to write a five-page essay on a brick wall and why that wall was so important to history. We should abolish that cruel and unusual practice *[Laughter]* and save ourselves a ton of stress.

John Blair: Charlie, thank you. In my job, I have met brick walls many times, and I join you in that challenge to being given such futile tasks.

Catherine Fogarty: I would like to talk about bullying, which I have experienced, and the actions taken on it. Bullying can affect people's mental health and lead to many things: people changing their identity and who they are, self-harm and other things.

John Blair: Thank you for raising that very important issue.

Brooke Ewing: I am grateful for the opportunity that I have been afforded. As a Member of the Youth Assembly, I truly believe that, during this mandate, we can make a difference on children's access to mental health support and, in turn, raise awareness about the widespread mental health issue that faces the young people of Northern Ireland. It is a very serious issue that we need to discuss.

Addison Kealey-Bennett: I feel that it is important to address mental health in this country. It is a clear fact that Northern Ireland has one of the worst mental health services of anywhere in the UK. Areas such as the north-west are especially badly served. My hometown of Limavady has its own suicide prevention service because the mental health services there are not doing enough. Whilst it is a credit to our community that those services have been made available independently, we, as a Youth Assembly, could propose solutions to help deal with the problem.

James McGill: I joined the Youth Assembly because I want to make a significant difference to how our country is run. I want to raise the issue of addiction among young people. I have experienced that, and so have many of my friends. Sadly, I lost one of my friends to it. I do not want to see anyone else go through the pain that I and my friend group did. I want policies to be implemented that will provide help for people who are dealing with substance abuse problems.

John Blair: Thank you for raising that very serious issue.

Portia Cummings: I am grateful to have been given this opportunity to discuss social and environmental issues, and to meet new people. One issue that I would like to raise is the lack of education on environmental issues. We are aware of environmental issues but not enough of us care sufficiently to act as individuals to stop the problems.

Andrew Sneddon: I am really pleased to be a part of the Youth Assembly. I hope to hear and understand a range of different viewpoints, meet people from lots of different backgrounds, and get a better understanding of politics in Northern Ireland. Exams are very important to young people right now. Exams put great pressure on young people, but I do not believe that they are not a good way of measuring intelligence or success in schools.

Caleb Hazley: I appreciate the opportunity to be a Youth Assembly Member and to talk about matters that we all find important and matters that are close to my heart, such as ecological and wildlife preservation in the UK and surrounding area.

Joshua Gilmore: I look forward to the next two years in the Youth Assembly. I plan to address topics that I am passionate about such as healthcare and waiting times for people who need treatment most but, sadly, are not getting it.

Lucy Wong: Members of the Youth Assembly: greetings to each of you, the bright minds and leaders of tomorrow. As young leaders, our voices matter and our actions can pave the way for positive change. Let us

advocate an inclusive education system that supports the unique strengths of each individual, recognising the diverse ways in which we all learn and grow. Everyone can contribute to our shared society in the future.

As stewards of our planet, let us work together to promote sustainable practices, reduce our carbon footprint and ensure a healthier, greener future for here and beyond. I thank Members for their commitment as, together, we build a brighter, more inclusive and environmentally conscious future for all.

John Blair: Members, you are absolutely on fire today. You are doing very well.

Willow Sachno: I am so thankful to have been given this opportunity. I hope that we can help make legislation on social media, particularly on children's safety and data protection, and educate young people on the dangers and harm of cyberbullying.

Jay Collins: I have done a lot of youth work in my time. I have got a lot from it, and I want to give a lot back. One thing that I am looking to get out of this opportunity is to challenge our local councillors and the committees in our communities. Mental health is awful. It is not being looked at, and people are not getting enough support.

Councillors and local councils are not giving us the areas that we need for youth clubs, and there are buildings that can be used by bands and paramilitaries but cannot be used by our young people. Councils say that we do not want to attend youth clubs, but we cannot attend them if we do not have them. We are being looked on unfairly and not being treated fairly. I want to challenge that.

John Blair: Thank you for raising that.

Victoria Da Cruz Marinho: I am quite passionate about school funds for the education of young children and about NHS health wages.

Vanessa Chojak: I totally agree with what everyone has said, but what I want to speak about most is definitely mental health. Mental health is not really spoken about enough. People try to raise awareness about it, but I do not think that awareness about it is raised enough. People who struggle with bad mental health deserve to get the help and support that they need.

Grace McDonald: I am extremely grateful to be part of the Youth Assembly. One issue that I want to raise is that of the lack of resources for Irish language speakers. People should be able to walk into a public-service building such as a hospital and speak their native language. Moreover, students in Irish-medium education deserve far more support than they are given.

Jack McClintock: I want to raise many issues during my two-year mandate, including mental health and how the health service across Northern Ireland can help young people in today's world. I know that my friends have experienced harsh mental health conditions in their time, and not enough has been done to help them and to help them grow as people in general.

Jack Fallis: There are two topics on which I most want to focus. One is our education system, especially given that I grew up in Belfast. We have amazing teachers and support, but it is mostly the lack of funding that lets schools down. If we had the right amount of money and help for schools, just imagine the number of possibilities that we could create for the people of our generation and the generations after us.

Another issue that I want to bring up is the growing amount of antisocial behaviour. As somebody who grew up on the Woodvale, I know that antisocial behaviour is apparent from the number of teens who are under the legal age drinking in public parks and engaging in vandalism or violence. Sure, a police officer can come into schools and say, “No, you cannot do that”, but I do not think that that is enough. Somebody should say to those kids, “What you are doing isn’t right. If you need someone to talk to or support on how to get out of this life, you are more than welcome to that.”

3.00 pm

Mia Green: I am pleased to be here today. I am very passionate about the Irish language, mental health and the rights of children in Northern Ireland.

Ellie Clarke: I am passionate about women’s issues. Last year, a survey revealed that Northern Ireland had the highest rates of femicide — the murder of women and girls — in Europe, tied first with Romania. The main killers of women here were domestic partners and relatives. I feel that the violence ends with education on sexism and misogyny and not just for young girls, because it is also vital to educate young boys on misogyny in our country. It is very apparent that, in our culture, there is a very sexist streak to our traditions, and those traditions end with how we educate our young people on women’s issues.

Telema Sotonye-Frank: I would like to talk about school systems putting more emphasis on less academic career paths to equip those who do not excel in conventional education systems. That could be helped by introducing more non-academic job opportunities and more productive routes for those who do not pursue further education.

Jake Clendinning: I would like to focus on IT in schools. There should be a bigger focus on IT because it has become one of the biggest things in the world and has been for a good many years. However, we are not forced to learn it for GCSE. It should become a GCSE topic because it is becoming as important as English, maths or science.

Molly Adams: I am grateful to be here today as part of the Youth Assembly. I would like to raise the issue of discrimination in this country, whether it is to do with age, gender or race. People in this country have always been discriminated against, whether they are from other countries and living in this country or from this country and living in other countries. People make broad generalisations of them, which should not happen. People should not be treated differently just because they look different or worship a different God from someone else. There should be more education about different cultures in schools.

Alexandra Bowman: Over the next two years, one of the issues that I would like to discuss is vaping and the regulations, accessibility and marketing surrounding it.

Ryan Kearney: The importance of the youth voice in decision-making cannot be overstated. Our perspectives, dreams and concerns shape the future that we are collectively inheriting, so it seems only fair that we have a seat at the table. It is an active and meaningful role in shaping policies that will influence the course of our lives, looking at issues of food insecurities, mental health services and the urgent need for reform in our education system. The list goes on. We should look past the issues that we have inherited and that divide us, such as religion, race and gender, and instead address the issues affecting young people like us. Young people in our communities are affected by decisions made in rooms like this.

The Youth Assembly symbolises more than just a meeting; it is a platform for us to voice our aspirations and contribute to the betterment of our community. Through collaboration, empathy and understanding, we can bridge the gaps and build a future that resonates with the dreams of every young individual. Let us embrace the challenges that lie ahead with optimism, knowing that our collective voice possesses the power to influence and inspire. We can create a legacy that echoes a spirit of unity, progress and resilience. I am genuinely thrilled to be part of that journey with every one of you. Let us amplify our voices, advocate for meaningful change and make history as we champion the cause of the youth in NI.

Cara Ní Cheallaigh: I want to address the issues of the Irish language and cultural diversity in Northern Ireland, especially in schools. Languages, music, sport and cultural celebrations are completely ignored and ridiculed today. Even schools that claim to be integrated are completely ignorant of cultures and lack resources. Over the next few years, I hope that the Youth Assembly can improve that by providing young people with initiatives to help us incorporate our Irish culture and many other cultures into our daily lives and form a greater understanding of them. This is a country that needs improvement. An improving country is an inclusive one. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Kiara-Nikolle McLaren: Hello. I feel strongly about issues surrounding mental health and education. I hope to be able to share some of those issues with Members over the next few years. I look forward to working with all Members.

Lilliana Ollala Hagen: I want to cover the subject of vaping. Teenagers need to be reminded of what vapes do our body.

Nadia Mackiewicz: I want to speak about the lack of action that is being taken on discrimination in schools. It is an important issue to be discussed here. I express my sincere gratitude for being accepted on to the Youth Assembly. Thank you.

Matthew Moore: I am honoured to be part of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. I look forward to being able to work with all Members to help create a better future for the young people of Northern Ireland.

Although there are many issues facing us, the biggest one is climate change, because, if we do not do anything, it is possible that, in not even one hundred years' time, Belfast will be under water. Although it may be hard to help regulate against an increase in greenhouse gases, I hope that, through our combined efforts, we will be able to do that. I thank Members for listening.

John Blair: Thank you. Does anyone who has not already spoken hope to speak? Yes.

Shaun Green: I am privileged to be a part of the Youth Assembly. I applied because I want to speak up for kids in care, be a voice for them and express our concerns with the care system.

Weronika McNulty: During my time as a Youth Assembly Member, I want to influence changes to transport to and from school. Every young person in Northern Ireland who uses public transport to get to and from school should be able to use it for free.

Sophie Harkin: I am grateful to be part of the Youth Assembly, as I will get an opportunity to speak on behalf of the youth of Northern Ireland. School funding is an issue, not only because we cannot access resources that we need but because lack of funding impacts on students' mental health when schools cannot

afford counsellors to help them. The underpaying of teachers also affects us, because the strikes impact on our education.

Paige Brennan-Collins: I want to address the problem of the sectarian attitudes that still linger here in the North of Ireland. I also want to express my gratitude to Members for welcoming me to the Youth Assembly. Thank you.

Yvaine Parsons: I know that I talked earlier. Having listened to many Members, however, I realise that another issue that we could talk about is — how will I put it? — different education needs and how we can aid and typically support people with special needs and disabilities. In the process, we should encourage those with different love interests, such as those who are bisexual, to educate other people. With the other topics that Members have mentioned, we should aim to lower the risk.

Charlotte Strange: I am excited to be here to meet new people and improve skills such as debating and public speaking. I would like to raise the issue of healthcare, specifically the underpayment of nurses, the long waiting list times and mental health services for children in Northern Ireland.

Aiden Mac Dougall: I want to talk about mental health. Having good mental health is a big issue at our ages to make sure that we do not go down the wrong path.

Emma Quinn: I want to talk about the Irish language Act and education. The curriculum does not reflect what we actually want to learn. Doing the tests in summer is not healthy. You do one test for a grade that what you do in later life depends on.

Erin O'Brien Haughey: I hope, as a young Youth Assembly Member, to help children with special needs find a voice.

John Blair: Members, we are slightly over time. I am still keen to take any comments from anyone who has not spoken. In the interests of time, I will restrict it to Members who have not spoken before.

Lorcan McCusker: I want to focus on the climate crisis and wildlife protection.

James Maginn I am honoured to be a Member of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. During my mandate, I would like to raise the issue of examinations. During the academic year, there are usually two set periods in most schools for examinations. Examinations should be spread throughout the year so that students are less stressed during specific times of the year and are able to revise and focus more on particular subjects.

John Blair: Members, that looks to be the conclusion of today's plenary sitting. Before we move on to a few other matters, as the MLA who occupied the Chair today, I thank you for the range of issues, the seriousness of the issues and the suggestions that you made on the issues that you raised and brought to the Youth Assembly in the Assembly Chamber. I am sure that my colleagues Trevor Clarke and Robbie Butler, who are sitting over there, will join me in that. I am looking forward to further engagement with you as an MLA. I know that colleagues will say the same thing. I thank you again for that before we go on to our next item of business.

I congratulate all of you for how you have marked the opening of the new Youth Assembly. I thank all those who have made today possible and those who supported Members of the Youth Assembly in being here.

Following the Adjournment, please remain in your seats while my Assembly Commission colleagues Trevor Clarke and Robbie Butler present you with your Youth Assembly membership certificates as evidence that you are now full Members of the Youth Assembly.

Adjourned at 3.13 pm.