



**YOUTH
ASSEMBLY**
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

OFFICIAL REPORT

**Youth Assembly Mandate Two 2023-25
2nd Sitting**

At 2:30 pm on Saturday 24 February 2024
Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast.



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Contents

Speaker's Welcome.....	1
Confirmation of the Code of Conduct.....	2
Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly.....	2
Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly: Vote.....	15
Adjournment.....	16

Plenary Session

Saturday 24 February 2024

The Youth Assembly met at 2.30 pm (Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Speaker's Welcome

Mr Speaker: Good afternoon. I welcome you all to the second plenary sitting of the Youth Assembly here in the Assembly Chamber of Parliament Buildings. I am delighted to be with you in my new role as Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. As I said when I was elected to this position, just three weeks ago on 3 February, considerable progress has been made over the past number of months. I am absolutely delighted that we have been able to get the Assembly up and running again, because there is so much to do for the public, and that includes our young people.

I would like to congratulate you all on becoming Members of the Youth Assembly. It is great to see you taking your seats in the Assembly Chamber for my first plenary meeting with you as Speaker. The Assembly Commission and Members of the Assembly will be keen to engage with you to hear your views on issues that will affect you and other young people in the months ahead. I will introduce the two people sitting next to me at the Table, who are the Clerks. On my right is Stephanie Mallon, and to my left is Youth Assembly manager, Lucy McClelland. My role as Speaker of the Assembly is to chair the sittings and make sure that everything runs smoothly. Let us move on to what is ahead of us today.

Today is an opportunity for your voice to be heard. Today is about you shaping the work that you will undertake in your mandate. During today's proceedings, once we ratify the code of conduct, you will have the chance to debate the issues that are important to you. You will then vote on your top three priorities, which will form the basis of your Committees. You have heard from young people in Northern Ireland through the Big Youth Survey, and I hope that you all had an opportunity to read the survey report, which contains a summary of the views of young people from all over Northern Ireland. I am delighted that almost 1,800 young people completed the survey. I am told that that is an 89% increase on the 2021 survey, which was carried out for the previous Youth Assembly mandate. So, well done for promoting the survey amongst your peers.

I want to hear from as many of you as possible today who want to speak. Do not worry if you do not have a speech prepared: if you want to make a brief point or say that you agree with someone else, I will be glad to hear from you. When other people are speaking, listen to their views: that is about showing each other respect. I hope that you make the most of today and enjoy yourselves. If you need any help at all today, please let one of the team know and we will assist you as best we can.

Confirmation of the Code of Conduct

Mr Speaker: Members have already discussed and agreed the code of conduct that will guide their actions as Youth Assembly Members.

Moved —

That Members of the Youth Assembly confirm they will abide by the code of conduct, as previously agreed through discussion.

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

Members: Aye.

Resolved:

That Members of the Youth Assembly confirm they will abide by the code of conduct, as previously agreed through discussion.

Mr Speaker: The code of conduct is confirmed and is now in effect.

Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly

Mr Speaker: We now proceed to the main part of our plenary meeting, the discussion of issues. Through the Big Youth Survey, which I mentioned earlier, completed by you and other young people, a number of issues have been identified for discussion at today’s plenary meeting. I will now open the Floor for around 40 minutes.

Members should keep their remarks brief in order to allow as many contributions as possible. Members should not talk over each other and they should respect the views of their colleagues. If you wish to speak, rise in your place: that is what normally happens in the Chamber. If it is easier for some of you, however, you can raise your hand to let us know that you want to speak. Also, if it is easier, you can speak from your seat when called, but we would hope that most of you will be able to stand. When a person is called to speak, everyone else should take their seats to listen to the contribution. When that person has finished speaking, you should rise in your place or raise your hand again so that we know that you still want to speak. When you are called to speak, please remember to wait for the lights on your mic, then state your name. That is very important, as that helps everyone to get to know each other, and it helps Hansard in its reporting of the plenary meeting.

If that is clear, we shall proceed. The Floor is open.

Yvaine Parsons: Today, I will discuss the environment. Did you know that Northern Ireland has the worst levels of environmental protection in the whole of Europe? That is seriously terrible. Out of 100 countries, we are the worst at protecting our species, and, because of that, farmland bird numbers have decreased by 43% since 1996. Farmland birds — in case you do not know — are an important part of our ecosystem. Without them, several other species will go extinct through a chain reaction.

It is not only birds and animals that are affected but plants. Did you know that 891 plant species have declined by 14% between 1970 and 2019? That is bad. It is not just that several of Northern Ireland's species are at high risk, but that 12% of all Northern Irish species are at a high risk of extinction. If we do not act fast, we will not be able to see those species on our planet anymore. They will be gone. They will be extinct.

It is not only our species but our ecosystems that are going out. Lough Neagh is dying, due to chemicals like fertiliser that are used in farming and released into the lough. Those chemicals are going down into the lough and typically causing blue-green algae to grow in our primary water source.

I hope that you have heard my point.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much.

Bláthnaid Girvan: Issues for young carers bridge the areas of education and rights and equality. Young carers save the Government millions of pounds every year by doing the job that they do for free. They need to be protected from the pressures and challenges that they face in the role. Young carers are at a disadvantage when compared with their peers who are not in that position. I ask everyone to support the promotion of care for young carers: they deserve it.

Telema Sotonye-Frank: An issue that greatly concerns me is the ongoing deterioration of the environment. It is evident that the future of our planet lies almost exclusively in the hands of young people, and that has been made apparent through multiple surveys revealing that, compared with older people, a higher percentage of young people are eager to do more for the environment. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of young people like us to counteract the pernicious effects of the older generation's disinterest in the preservation of the environment. It is imperative that we set a precedent of environmentally conscious behaviour for future generations, as it will help them to maintain a thriving planet and will shape the world that we will grow old in.

Marcus McGuckin: We have heard a variety of issues being raised today. Most of them share one thing in common: our farmers and workers of Ulster. You may defend the education system and you may want to reform and change it, but to feed our students and the youth of tomorrow, we need farmers to farm the crops that make the food. If you want to help young carers or to have buildings for schools, you need food for those young people, and that food will be farmed by farmers.

This entire Building, in fact, was built by the workers of Ulster. Historically, we had ports, salt mines and a variety of other amenities and buildings that were built by Ulstermen, united working Irishmen and people who came forward and decided to build the future and the tomorrow of Northern Ireland. Nowadays, however, we disrespect them. They are underpaid and taken advantage of. Quite frankly, if we keep it up, we will not have any more schools, hospitals or a stable food supply. Quite frankly, if we keep disrespecting them, believe you me, the self-reliance that we will need in this country will be immeasurable. In fact, no, the farm reliance that we will need will be immeasurable, and it will be catastrophic. Unemployment would be at its highest, people's nutritional intake would decline, and education would be at its lowest. You need buildings for schools, don't you? Quite frankly, if those were to go due to us disrespecting our workers any more — for which they have the perfect right to strike — we will lose the very foundations of Ulster, from the farmer to the worker. Members of the Assembly and people of Ulster, cast your vote if yes, and stand with me, as I have done today, for the farmers and workers.

Harry Robb: I would like to talk about education and teachers' strikes. When coming up to the exam seasons, we are not getting enough class time or enough time to study for exams, so let us please get our teachers a pay rise so that we no longer have to worry about failing exams due to lack of knowledge.

Grace McDonald: As a Gaeilgeoir, I am proud to say that the number of students enrolled in Irish-medium education has risen by 7,000 in the past five years. That means that an entire generation of young people will grow up with the gift of Gaelic, so why can it not be used in our daily life? The Irish language should be embraced in Northern Ireland, not suppressed. My language is not a threat to people's political beliefs or identity; it is simply a language that deserves to be cherished. If you live in Northern Ireland, you own the Irish language, and it is your right to learn and use it regardless of political or religious background. We need signage, translators and Gaeilgeoirí in the public sector to keep our beautiful language preserved and utilised daily. Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam: a country without a language is a country without a soul. Let us vote for culture and identity.

Rory Brown: My top priority is education. Kids in school are not just students. They are the minds of the future and the path forward, and I feel greatly privileged to be part of this next step in human history. However, kids with special educational needs may never get to use their unique set of skills to benefit our future. The hostile bullying that they get on a daily basis distances them and makes them lose sight of their goals. An Education Committee in the Youth Assembly could help to resolve those issues, make a difference and help to shape our future.

Portia Cummings: The topic that we most urgently need to discuss is the environment. We can easily blame our climate crisis on celebrities, and say, "Tsk, big T Swift took a 13-minute flight. She is single-handedly killing our planet." However, we cannot ignore our own role. Our environmental citizenship has an impact. During COVID, the ozone layer healed by 30% due to the lack of flights. Imagine what a difference we could make if we actively tried. Therefore, I urge you to walk when you can, recycle and help us to make a difference.

Sophie Griffin: Education is the most important issue as it helps to shape our future. However, as many young people highlighted in the Big Youth Survey, we all feel that our curriculum is outdated. Some of the curriculum for 2024 was made in 2007, but times have changed, and some of our curriculum needs to be reviewed and modified so that the young people of Northern Ireland and this generation feel more prepared and supported for when they leave school to go into the world of work. That is why we should vote for education today.

Donal Mullan: The important issues for me are mental health and education, and definitely funding the Education Authority's REACH — resilience education assisting change to happen — project, which works tirelessly in schools throughout Northern Ireland helping children and young people. That organisation has provided me and other teenagers with many opportunities and much information about mental health and supporting our emotional health and well-being. I call directly on the Education Minister to sign off on that very important project and to continue funding it — now.

2.45 pm

Mia Murray: After taking a comprehensive overview of the results of the Big Youth Survey, it is very clear to me that health and education should be at the forefront of our minds. Help is especially vital for sustaining a fulfilling and extensive education for all. We can paint over the mould with a pay increase and a big shiny

new shared campus, but we cannot continue to ignore the root of what plagues education. That cannot be fixed in one clean £11 million swoop.

I was robbed of an integrated education; no one else should be. It is from ideology and generational ignorance that we as a country have suffered. It begins in segregated education and affects all aspects of life. When we are brought up apart, how can we expect people not to remain apart in adult life or to develop mental barriers towards each other? For the Youth Assembly, should that not therefore be the most important and necessary topic to be chosen? Inclusion is a topic that we, as a group, represent and implement as we encourage children to come together to change Northern Ireland and to prevent this country from ever being in its current state again.

Christine Farry: The most important issues for young people today are health and education. Currently, one in eight young people suffers from mental illness; that means 10 people here right now. Our schools should be educating people on mental health and providing counsellors for those who suffer from mental illnesses, to help to reduce the number of people who are suffering from them. Five branches of the government represent education in Northern Ireland. That means that there are five jobs. If there were only one education body, there would be only one job. We could save money further up the chain and provide more money for schools so that they could provide counsellors for their students — as that funding has been cut.

Molly Adams: I will focus on a topic that I am very passionate about: equality. Did you know that nine out of 10 women in Northern Ireland feel ashamed about experiencing normal female health symptoms such as period pains and mood swings? So much negativity is associated with women's health in today's society, and the stigma surrounding the topic prevents many women from seizing opportunities and enjoying life to the fullest extent. The prejudice against basic female health must be eradicated if we are to move towards a future where gender equality is a reality, not just a concept.

Shea McCarthy: Mr Speaker, I wish you well in your new role. We have seen, as conveyed by the Big Youth Survey, that health has been voted the number-one issue for young people. Everyone will be affected by cancer in their lifetime, and 50% of people will be diagnosed with it. Macmillan Cancer found that, in 2023, at least 100 people in Northern Ireland had to wait longer than the NHS's aim of a maximum of 30 days from diagnosis to treatment. That is over 400% more than the number found by the same study when it was collated in 2012. Those numbers will continue to rise, and families will be left worried and in uncertainty until immediate action is taken. In response to the Big Youth Survey, one child stated:

"I'm scared that if I fall ill, I will not get the necessary care".

No child should feel like that, and I call on Members to vote for health to highlight and address the important concerns that young people have.

Jack Fallis: I will address an important topic that I hold very dear: education. Due to the recent teacher strikes, our education has suffered a massive impact. I know that from experience as, during the weeks leading up to our exams, people who should have been getting As and A*s dwindled down to a B or C because there had been so many strikes.

I would also like to discuss school dinners. They should be free for everybody. Not every student has the right money or resources to get a school dinner and, in some cases, the school dinner is the only hot meal that a child gets.

Daniel McGouran: Health should be our primary focus. I have a peanut allergy. From the age of four to 15, I was taken in for one yearly appointment to confirm that my condition had not changed. Now that I am 16 and no longer considered a child by the NHS, I am not expected to be seen for another appointment until I am in my 20s. That is unacceptable.

Only a few years ago, my father took sick several times during one summer, with allergic reactions to an unknown food. He is still on a waiting list. To this day, he still does not know what caused those reactions. Two days ago, I spoke to a woman who told me about an experience that she had with her friend. They entered a waiting room at 12.00 noon in urgent need of care, but they were not seen until 3.00 the following morning. More money should be invested in doctors and healthcare to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland are as healthy as they can be.

Fionn McCoy: I would be passionate about an Education Committee. I am concerned about the effect of teacher and bus strikes on young people and how they negatively affect our education. Some 30% of students have an absence rate of 10%, which equates to 19 days of learning. Strikes only worsen the situation. On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, bus drivers will strike again, and that means that young people will not be able to travel to school once more. Getting a lift to school by car or taxi costs money, and, during the cost-of-living crisis, that is not an option for families. We need to find a solution to this worsening situation, which is becoming ever more frequent. Education affects us all and should be a priority for the Youth Assembly.

Brooke Ewing: Mental health is an issue that I care deeply about. Many of my friends, peers and even myself struggle daily. One in eight young people and children in Northern Ireland battles with these challenges daily, yet there are still few adequate, helpful resources. The stigma around mental health is appalling. As well as the lack of resources, there is a lack of proper education, especially in schools. These are actions that we must take. We must educate young people, during school assemblies and personal development periods, to shine the spotlight on key mental health topics. Let us vote for health and education.

Sophie Harkin: In Northern Ireland, 320,000 people are deaf or struggle with hearing loss and yet British sign language is not compulsory in our schools. Deaf people are part of our society and deserve to be included, so why are we not being taught how to communicate effectively with the deaf community? British sign language must be welcomed into our schools to contribute to a more inclusive society where all members can communicate, express their opinions and feel understood.

Andrew Sneddon: A key issue that I feel impacts across society is the wage disparity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and that affects our education. Did you know that teachers in Northern Ireland are paid around 25% less than their counterparts in the UK? Given these alarming inequalities, how can schools in Northern Ireland be expected to attract and retain high-quality teaching staff and ensure that the quality of education is maintained? I implore you to support your teachers when they are on strike and strive for equal and fair pay to make sure that our education is what it needs to be.

James McGill: According to the NI youth well-being survey, 12.6% of young people in Northern Ireland suffer with depression. One in eight has some form of mental illness, according to the NI 'Fundamental Facts 2023' report. How can we as a country thrive when people have no access to professional help? Because of this, out of 100,000 people, 12 will commit suicide, and this is especially prominent in young males. According to the suicide statistics in Northern Ireland, we need appropriate actions to take place to prevent

any more unnecessary deaths, whether that be access to counselling or raised awareness of mental health issues.

Kerrie Finnegan: I would like to discuss mental health. Did you know that rates of anxiety and depression are 25% higher in Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK? That is huge, considering that Northern Ireland is the smallest part of the UK. Mental health is a serious and sometimes debilitating thing that impacts on every aspect of life. If we remain silent about the issue any longer, more people will have a lesser quality of life and suicide rates will rise. This harms everyone, as these people could be your friends or your family. The new generation is our future. Do you not think that we need to create a world where we teach young people that their minds are vital to Northern Ireland's growth?

Cara Ní Cheallaigh: Dia daoibh. Hello. I would like to address cultural diversity and identity, especially among young people. As a Gaeilgeoir, I feel as if my language is ignored in today's society. Gaeilgeoirí, Ulster Scots and many other minorities face blatant exclusion in our daily lives, especially in education. Therefore, in the next two years of the Youth Assembly, I would like to work on cultural diversity. The vast majority of these languages lack the resources, teachers and opportunities to be taught and used outside of schools. Language is not a weapon, nor is it an insult. It is a gift and an honour to have. Everyone says that our country needs to improve, and an improving country is an inclusive one.

James Maginn: I think that we should review the education system. My fellow Members and I should strongly consider voting for education to allow us to review academic selection at 11. For example, I am in a Dickson plan area, which allows for academic selection at 14. I believe that there are lots of alternatives for later academic selection and that it is worthwhile reviewing this area of the education system.

Lucy Wong: I would like to emphasise my passion for education, especially when it comes to special educational needs. Did you know that 18% of the population in Northern Ireland is of school age, with one in 20 children with a diagnosis of autism? Autism is a condition that affects communication and behaviour, and is something that I particularly struggle with daily. It is important that autistic people get the resources that they need as they deserve the same opportunities as everyone else. This must be taken into account as we cannot undervalue their futures.

Georgia Watson: Today, I would like to remind you all of the importance of the environment and the urgency of solving the climate crisis. Twelve million items of litter pollute the roads of Northern Ireland at all times. It is all right to encourage recycling and sustainable shopping among individuals, but, with only half the country actually taking part, can it really make a significant difference? Instead of the combined effort of everyone, would it not be more effective to legislate for putting a stop to plastic in the first place, forbidding every food, make-up and clothing company from making plastic a part of their products at all? One simple law could start a chain reaction to do what we can to help the planet internationally. We need no more evidence. The problem is right in front of us and is one that affects everyone. Recycling is only part of the solution. We face countless environmental issues, issues that we have created for ourselves. We as a country — as a species — need to put aside our "might do" and "hope to" and realise that the only way to finish something is to begin.

Caleb Hazley: Did you know that, in Northern Ireland, one in eight young people struggles with mental illness and that one in five struggles with obesity and other weight-related disorders? Did you know that physical activity has also been proven to increase mental well-being and efficiency? Therefore, if we increase mandatory physical activity in schools and strongly encourage physical activity outside school,

especially in sports like martial arts, football or anything that you can think of, which can give you skills outside of those specific fields, we will have a happier, healthier population, and we will be more efficient when it comes to our work and education. Our future will be brighter if we increase the amount of physical activity done by people daily.

3.00 pm

I, therefore, urge you to vote for sport and leisure, as it will help to make other major issues become much easier to manage for the people above us. Thank you.

Lorcan McCusker: I believe that the economy should be a major focus for this Assembly. Northern Ireland is the weakest of the UK countries economically, but it has the potential to be the strongest. To do that, we should focus on tourism. Tourism makes up 5% of Northern Ireland's GDP, but could it be more and stronger than that? Yes. If we build around Belfast and keep going to the film industry and showcasing Northern Ireland's natural beauty, we can increase tourism, which will grow the economy. Growing the economy means that we can get more funding to every other level of government. That benefits everyone, bringing up everyone's quality of life. Tourism will work. Many countries — for example, America, China and UAE — have used it, and it has grown their economies. Now is the time to take action.

Marcus McGuckin: I am sorry, but is it possible to *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Speaker: No. We will try to take as many people as possible. If you have not spoken, make sure that you get up. If you have spoken, we will see what we are like at the end, but we will not take you until everybody else who has not spoken has had the opportunity to engage.

Catherine Fogarty: Health is a major problem, specifically mental health. Teens nowadays have lots of stress, because of exams, the pressure we face, the standards we have to reach, the amount of homework we have, peer validation and the impact of bullying, which I have experienced. Due to peer validation and the feeling that we have to reach the standards of fellow students, we can experience anxiety and get really insecure. We can also be scared to talk about our mental health problems in case we are called an attention-seeker, and the teachers do not understand.

In my school, we have skip cards to skip class when we are feeling overwhelmed or stressed. I have one, but, in my opinion, I think that it makes the situation worse, because we have to catch up on all the work, and because other students try to find out information about us that we do not want them to know.

I am in the top class in school, and there are extremely high expectations of us. We are expected to be perfect and are heavily relied upon. That can also impact on our education, due to the fact that students tend to avoid what is causing their mental health problem. The causes are mainly at school and, so, they are skipping class time to try to help themselves feel better. That is why I think that mental health — health, in general — should be taken more seriously.

Ryan McClintock: Sport is such an important part of everybody's life, because it brings everyone together and is excellent for mental and physical health. I play cricket, and I would like to see more funding being provided to allow youths of any sport to get their own protective gear and equipment. Overall, I would like to see more funding for youth sports.

Matthew Moore: I am here to discuss the economy or, rather, the biggest issue that our economy faces. We all know what inflation is and that it is rising fast. The current rate of inflation in Northern Ireland is, I believe, 5.2%. That is more than double the European average of 2.7%. Who do you think will suffer the most? It is us. We are going to be in the lowest-level jobs with the lowest salaries, and we are not going to have life savings. If inflation continues to go the way that it is going, we may not be able to afford food, housing or our basic needs.

I have a friend who originally lived in Egypt. He tells me that the average person there earns about £1,000 a month, if they are lucky. Imagine having that for a month, and trying to buy everything for a family with multiple people. The last time he was there, he got two Big Macs from McDonald's, which cost £800. We are not yet at that phase, but if we neglect the economy and inflation, we might soon get there.

If you saw someone you know drowning in a lake, would you extend a hand to pull them out, or would you watch them drown? Today, you have that choice. I hope you make the right choice and vote for economy.

Harrison Kerr: In my community, I have become increasingly concerned about one issue in particular; one that many people take for granted. That is the diet of Northern Ireland's youth. You may have the preconceived notion that healthy food cannot be tasty food, but I can tell you from experience that that is not the case. I believe that, by promoting healthy options in schools and making nutritious food more affordable in supermarkets, we can break the vicious cycle of unhealthy parents raising unhealthy kids. Together, we can make known the long-term benefits that healthy eating can bring.

Our diet has been proven to affect our physical and mental health in positive ways. It can relieve stress and increase academic performance. Why are we not taking advantage of that to lead healthier, happier lives? We are the next generation and we need to act now to focus on our health and to give our bodies the healthy, tasty food that they deserve. Therefore, as a Youth Assembly, we must prioritise health and education in our list of top-three topics and we must collaborate to solve this rapidly growing problem.

Shu ya Cheung: Hello, fellow Youth Assembly Members. I encourage you to agree with me that education is the most important topic. Inadequate education is the fundamental root cause of many societal issues today. It leads people to make uninformed decisions, such as to vape, without knowing the detrimental effect that that has on their health, and to turn a blind eye to social injustices, such as the current catastrophic atrocities being committed around the world right now. Through education, the power will be embedded in us to speak against things that we believe are wrong. A change needs to be made, and it starts now, with your vote for education.

Addison Kealey-Bennett: The reality for trans teens is that most, if not all, know somebody who has taken their life. That fact has been made more bleak by the fact that 82% of all trans teens have considered suicide, and 40% have attempted it. That is indicative of a system that fails us; a system that is consistently underfunded and under supported. Therefore, please vote for mental health.

Paige Brennan-Collins: I believe that education should be one of our main priorities. Numerous problems have arisen around the topic of education, such as funding, the curriculum, mental health and costs. Those problems need to be fixed. We, the pupils, fall victim to the consequences of those problems. Actions have to be taken, as education affects all young people, including you. You have the chance to have a say in your education to fix those problems — take the chance. Your input is crucial for the future, to make the education system better for the generations to come. The student voice is the road to change.

Thomas Cox: I am very keen to work with all of you, and the main topic I want to talk about is education. Part of the curriculum needs to be changed, and a topic that should be added is basic money skills for teenagers. Only 35% of teenagers know basic money skills and how to manage, budget and sort their own money. There should be classes in schools on how to budget money, set up a bank account and manage your spending. That is vital, because, with the cost-of-living crisis, many teenagers could get into debt with a lot of people. It is a big topic that needs to be sorted out, so I hope that we take on education.

Harry Johnston: The economy is so important, because, if it is doing well, it will help with most of the other issues on the list. That was one of the points made in the Big Youth Survey, and it sums up how the economy is so important in paying for all the public services that we hold in such high regard. Most of the money that we use for our public services is obtained from taxes. What do we tax? The economy. That is why the economy is paramount to our nation, because those taxes are used to pay for vital public services.

I implore you to vote to set up an Economy Committee so that we can strive to help deliver not only a better economy but better public services and better lives for the people of Northern Ireland.

Leon Cyriac: I have enjoyed listening to all the contributions on the issues that have been brought up so far. I would like to raise the topic of health, specifically mental health. The NHS states that, on average, 6,000 people per year take their own life in this country, and three quarters of them are men. I believe that we should provide more education on suicide prevention and on ways to sustain our mental health.

Also, health came in as the number-one topic among respondents to the Big Youth Survey, with a shocking 871 people selecting it as one of their top three preferences, which is a 16% share of the vote. That is why I think that we should move forward with the topic of health in the Youth Assembly.

Erin Magee: To me, health would be an extremely important, beneficial and forefront issue to focus on during our mandate. There is a concerning need for more attention on health, be it physical or mental. From first-hand experience and that of others around me, I am aware of how a mental health struggle can take a large toll on everyday life. There are increasing rates of suicide, and the number of missing people is rising without the issue being tackled. Mental health needs to be destigmatised, and it needs to become more normal to open up about it. A better support system is needed.

As well as that, the NHS needs greater funding and pay. The health sector is overworked and underpaid, which leads to many strikes, with over 2,800 workers currently involved in such action. Our Big Youth Survey reflected that, with health the most voted for issue, taking 16% of the vote overall. I ask that we consider supporting it during the next two years together.

Vanessa Chojak: I would like to raise awareness of mental health. In our Big Youth Survey, a total of 871 respondents from Northern Ireland selected health as one of their top three preferences. That is 16% of the 1,798 people who filled it in.

I have struggled with mental health issues, and it was probably the worst part of my life, with constant stress due to school and social media. Did you know that one in three women and one in five men experiences major depression throughout their life? Through my position as a Member of the Youth Assembly, I would love to help those who struggle and those who cannot help themselves, because they do not know whom to tell or how to tell them. I want to tell people that it is OK to feel that way and that there is always someone who cares and who will listen. Mental health is not a destination but a process. It is about how you drive not where you are going. I want you all to help me and vote for health. If I can get my voice out, so should you.

Mr Speaker: We have around five minutes left, so keep rising in your place if you have not spoken yet.

3.15 pm

Charlie McFarland: I think that the amount of homework nowadays is shocking. At times, I have spent over three hours on homework, and I know others who have done the same. It is not the only reason that you should vote for education — there is the fact that teachers are on strike, as has been mentioned — but it is the main reason. Children should have the right to play outside and socialise, but they are being deprived of that right due to homework. Sure, you could vote for environmentalism and get electric cars, but I say this: education and getting rid of homework is the main thing.

Lilliana Hagen: The top issue that I would like to focus on is the environment. The climate not only affects animals but us, mentally and physically.

Oliver Leonard: The issue that I would like to present is poverty, with an emphasis on childhood poverty. It is an issue that touches billions of lives globally. A recent study found that over a third of British adults run out of money before they get their monthly wage. It is recorded that, out of the 440,000 children who live in Northern Ireland, 103,000 live below the national poverty line. Poverty cannot be just a statistic; it is a harsh reality that is faced by individuals and families daily. It deprives people of their basic needs, robs them of opportunities and perpetuates a cycle that is difficult to break for future generations. The current cost-of-living crisis has led to hundreds of families having to choose between basic necessities, such as food and heat. All young people deserve opportunities and the right to enjoy an education, not just the people who can afford it. I encourage everyone in this forum to vote for my issue.

Alexandra Bowman: I am most concerned about health and all its related issues. That is the area about which I am most passionate. Did you know that one in eight children in Northern Ireland has a mental illness? It is not only mental illness that we need to be concerned about; our physical health is equally important. There are so many issues in health, like NHS waiting times, which I am sure that we have all heard about at least once. Health is vital for our future. It is clear that the young people of Northern Ireland know that, as it received the most votes in our Big Youth Survey. That is one of a multitude of reasons why we should vote for a Health Committee.

Daniel Gracey: I would like to talk about equality. My mother suffers from spina bifida. It means that she has a hole in her back at her spine. It has developed throughout her life. She could not move her legs since she was quite young. She was told that she would not be able to have a child. She had three. She was told that she would not live for very long, but she is thriving at 47 years young. She won awards for her skill in wheelchair basketball. She was one of the best female wheelchair basketballers in the UK. She proved everyone wrong, but not everybody can. She faces lots of challenges. She cannot go to lots of places because she is in a wheelchair. There needs to be more support for the thousands of people like her in Northern Ireland. Do we not think that they deserve to have a full life, too? For those reasons, we should all vote for equality.

Darragh Kerr: Education is the main focus of a child's life. Therefore, everyone should feel happy and comfortable in school, no matter what that form of education looks like. It would be good to introduce some level of the Irish language into primary and secondary education, and perhaps even give it parity in the curriculum with subjects such as art, geography and PE in primary school. Furthermore, any person who needs more help in education should get it. More needs to be done to support children who struggle in the education system.

Rights and equality fall over almost every issue in today's society, whether in education, healthcare, poverty or employment. It is important that we, as a society, try as much as possible to include everyone and give everyone an even playing field for opportunities in life. Discrimination and prejudice definitely exist. Combating them should be a top priority to improve everyone's safety and well-being. Considering our past sectarian conflict, we, as young people, all need to ensure that prejudice and discrimination become things of the past.

Mr Speaker: Time is now up, but if the many people who have not spoken still wish to speak, will you stand up? Yes, there are quite a few. The benefit of being the Speaker is that I can make the decision to extend the sitting if I so desire. I desire it, because I am hearing a lot of really good speeches.

India Lewis: Like my fellow Youth Assembly Members, I want to raise concerns about issues surrounding education, particularly the lack of general political knowledge that is being introduced to young people. As a GCSE politics student, it continues to surprise me how limited other young people's understanding of the world of politics is, simply because not enough is being done to encourage young people to get involved in the big political debate. Politics is a universal topic, yet only 12 schools here in the North even offer the subject at GCSE level. That is a real shame, especially given our circumstances. We are growing up in the peace process of a deeply divided society, which has enabled us to have a unique perspective on politics. Likewise, so many of us feel disconnected to the political world as it is. However, reforming the current learning for life and work curriculum might encourage more people to get involved in politics. That is why I urge the other young people here today to consider voting for education. Establishing a healthy relationship with politics at a young age will help to include all ages in the political discussion.

Ciaran Creber: The most important point is education, as it is a key part of our nation. Without education, there would not be any jobs, and, without jobs, there would be little to no economy in Northern Ireland. Integrated education is the path that we must take to avoid conflict and segregation in our local communities.

Charlotte Strange: I am most passionate about the links between poverty and education. There are 103,000 children in Northern Ireland who are living in poverty, and, too often, we see those children missing out on academic opportunities due to financial restrictions and a lack of funding. In my school alone, incredible trips to Spain, France and Germany that would benefit countless skills and provide lifelong memories have starting prices of £1,500, which is absurd. That problem even stems out to high fees that need to be paid to attend extracurricular activities. We can all agree that it is hard to watch parents struggle to give their children the best opportunities in a cost-of-living crisis. Therefore, we need to provide better financial aid for children so that we can watch their potential flourish, build experience, attend third-level education and achieve their goals, all by voting for poverty and education as our issues.

Tyler Gregg: Throughout the mandate, my goal is to improve physical and mental health for young people. It is becoming increasingly apparent that young people are not as healthy as they once were in not only physical aspects but mental aspects, which is becoming a more significant issue. Health was reported in the Big Youth Survey as the most important issue, with 16% voting it as such. People are not educated on health across the board, and that is one of the key issues. The health epidemic is merely a lack of education.

Mia Green: There needs to be more education in schools for mental and physical health, such as programmes and workshops for coping strategies and how to talk to family members or friends.

Willow Sachno: Education is the most important issue that affects young people. We need to change our education system. In particular, we need to shrink class sizes in primary and secondary schools. On

average, 25 children fill a primary-school classroom in Northern Ireland. That is much larger than in other developed nations, thus enabling children to fall through the cracks and receive little attention from their educators. That puts their education and safety at risk, and stress on overworked and underpaid teachers.

Jake Clendinning: I am from Enniskillen, where the South West Acute Hospital is situated. The hospital has recently lost lot of its functions. They have started to remove parts of it to cut the funding. People who need that hospital have to go to Altnagelvin Area Hospital, which is quite unfair, especially in emergencies. I had a family member who recently passed away. She had to spend an hour and 30 minutes going to Altnagelvin. That was really unfair. More funding should be put into hospitals to make sure that they can provide services for everything they can do.

Katelyn Doherty: The education curriculum needs to be changed. Our lives are consumed by school. However, we do not learn vital skills that are needed for later life — for example, budgeting, paying bills and basic repair skills that are needed around the house.

Nadia Mackiewicz: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency states that 124,000 foreigners were living in Northern Ireland as at 2021. In our society, more and more children are bullied in schools due to their cultural backgrounds. The sheer and unacceptable number of hate crimes happening to those poor children is terrifying.

As a person of a different cultural background, I firmly believe that we must take a stand against the unreasonable bullying in today's society. We must focus on educating today's youth about the importance of the acceptance of different nationalities, cultures and religions. Rights, equality and acceptance of cultures differing from our own are beneficial to our society and should be taken more seriously if we want to achieve a diverse and harmonious society in Northern Ireland.

Ellie Clarke: In our country, 98% of women report experiencing a form of abuse or harassment at some point in their lives, according to Ulster University. I am passionate about the safety of women and girls like myself, and that safety is greatly endangered in this country. Right now, Northern Ireland has the second highest rate of femicide in Western Europe, and most victims here are killed by their male partners or relatives. That is dozens of friends, sisters and daughters whose lives are stolen from them, and it has to stop. Change begins with education. Young people and governmental bodies need to actively challenge and combat even harmless sexist behaviour in order to prevent the ultimate violence against women in this country.

Lila Hamadi: I live in Belfast city, a big and prosperous place that some may even say is cosmopolitan. Yet it is here that I see an alarming health crisis. We are aware that the NHS waiting list is long – tediously long at approximately 14·5 weeks of waiting. However, it is the young people, people like us, who are experiencing a downfall, suffering from alarming health issues: physical, mental and emotional. They all interlink.

I could rhyme off statistic after statistic but I am sure that we all know from first-hand experience someone — it could be you — who has, at times, suffered the detrimental effects of ill health. It is for your own benefit that we hone in on this topic. Your health is your wealth, as they say. I could not agree more, and, hopefully, you do, too.

Daniel McGucken: I am passionate about the environment. We need to tackle climate change. Animals are dying and forests are being cut down. That is not a sustainable future. I have a couple of solutions. First, solar panels should be pre-built so that homeowners do not need to pay £5,000 to save electricity to save

the planet. Secondly, we have to restore the lost trees. In 2022, Northern Ireland lost 437 acres of natural forest. I feel ashamed. We need to take action now and not just sit around and make speeches. Actions are more important than words. Together, we will create a sustainable future.

3.30 pm

Emma Quinn: We should focus on education. Young people should have more of a say on the curriculum, as it does not reflect what we want to know. Also, teachers should have been given a pay rise by now rather than having strikes, because we are just delaying the inevitable, and the strikes are affecting our grades. In school, we should learn more about life skills than just core subjects such as maths and English that we will never use in day-to-day life.

Joash Varghese: Something that affects everyone in the Youth Assembly is education and, specifically, homework. Homework is a leading cause of stress amongst adolescents. One in five young people in the UK is a carer in one way or another. Piling homework stress on top of that is not fair. The average teenager is recommended to get between eight and 10 hours of sleep per night. How is that possible if pupils are expected to take on other commitments and responsibilities in school, such as sport? Homework must be removed from our schools today. Please vote for education.

Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly: Vote

Mr Speaker: I thank all those who participated, and I apologise to those who were not called. We managed to get in 60 Members, but it is now time for you to vote to decide the issues that will form the basis of the establishment of the Youth Assembly's Committees. The three issues with the highest number of votes will set the priorities of the Youth Assembly's Committees.

Please begin the voting process as directed.

Youth Assembly Members voted.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is now time to announce the outcome of the vote.

The votes were cast as follows:

1.	<i>Education</i>	67
2.	<i>Health</i>	55
3.	<i>Rights and Equality</i>	31
4.	<i>Environment</i>	28
5.	<i>Culture and Identity</i>	13
6.	<i>Poverty</i>	13
7.	<i>Sport and Leisure</i>	12
8.	<i>Economy</i>	10
9.	<i>Jobs</i>	6
10.	<i>Housing</i>	2

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

Mr Speaker: The issues that you have selected will provide the direction for the establishment of the Committees of the Youth Assembly.

Adjournment

Mr Speaker: That concludes the proceedings of today's plenary sitting. I thank you all for your participation. You are much more succinct than the people whom I usually deal with, so we got lots of speeches in. They were really interesting, vibrant and encouraging speeches, and I thank each and every one of you. If you did not get the opportunity to speak today, make sure that you are first up next time and that you get your opportunity on that occasion. I look forward to seeing the progress of your Committees over the coming months and to being kept informed of that.

I wish you all a relaxing weekend without too much homework, because that seems to be a bit of an issue for some. It was an issue for me, when I was at school, by the way. I hope that you all make the progress that you wish to make in all the important issues that you have discussed.

Adjourned at 3.46 pm