

OFFICIAL REPORT

Youth Assembly Mandate Two 2023-25 4th Sitting

At 2.00 pm on Saturday 22 March 2025 Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast.



Members of the Youth Assembly

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Plenary Session

Saturday 22 March 2025

The Youth Assembly met at 2.00 pm (Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair) in the Chair)

Deputy Speaker's Welcome

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Good afternoon, everyone; please take your seats. Members, welcome to the fourth plenary sitting of the second Youth Assembly. I am very pleased that the Speaker has, again, given special permission for the Youth Assembly to gather in the Assembly Chamber today. It is a privilege for me, as Deputy Speaker, to be asked to preside over your event today. It is great to see all of you taking your seats again in the Assembly Chamber.

I will start by introducing the two people who are sitting next to me at the Table, who will, by now, be familiar faces to you. On my right is the Clerk/Chief Executive, Lesley Hogg, and to my left is the Youth Assembly manager, Lucy McClelland. My role as Deputy Speaker today is to chair the sitting and make sure that everything runs smoothly. Let us move on to what is ahead of us today.

During today's proceedings, once you have updated the Assembly on the activities that you have been involved in since your last plenary sitting in October, you will have the chance to debate the issue of votes at 16. I know that you are always keen to hold a debate in the Assembly Chamber, and that is an issue that you have suggested and are passionate about. A lot of preparation has gone into the debate, so I hope that you will take the opportunity to make your comments heard. I want to hear from all of you who want to speak. Do not worry if you have not got a speech prepared; if you want to make just a brief point or even say that you agree with someone else, I will be more than happy to hear from you.

I am going to ask, though, that when other people are speaking, please listen to their views. That is about showing each other respect. I hope that you make the most of the day and that you enjoy yourselves. If you need any help at all during the proceedings, please let one of the team know and we will assist you in any way that we can.

Members' Updates

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): We now move to the second item in the Order Paper. The Youth Assembly has been busy since the last plenary sitting in October 2024. This is your chance to update those in the Chamber today on the activities that you have been involved in during that period. A number of Youth Assembly Members have prepared updates for us, and I will call each of you in turn. The first section of updates is about the work that you have done with Assembly Committees.

Fionn McCoy: On 7 November 2024, the Public Accounts Committee invited Youth Assembly Members to the launch of its child poverty report. We heard from the Committee Chair, Daniel McCrossan MLA, and the Deputy Chair, Cheryl Brownlee MLA, on the report's findings and the recommendations that, they believe, should inform a future anti-poverty strategy. There was a panel comprising Public Accounts Committee member Colm Gildernew MLA, Trása Canavan from Barnardo's, Goretti Horgan from Ulster University and Alex Tennant from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). Youth Assembly Members had the opportunity to question the panel on how child poverty would be addressed, and to interview MLAs after the event.

I wrote a blog article reflecting on the event, which can be viewed on our website, along with a new initiative, YAM TV. We make monthly videos on topics that we are working on. For the first episode, we interviewed the Public Accounts Committee members about the child poverty report.

Bláthnaid Girvan: On 22 January 2025, Youth Assembly Members met members of the Public Accounts Committee and officials to discuss the Committee's inquiry into skills and careers in Northern Ireland. We were invited to give evidence directly to the Committee on 30 January. At the evidence session in the Senate Chamber, four Youth Assembly Members — Rory, Paige, Harrison and I — spoke about our experience of careers provision in our schools, access to and promotion of vocational education and apprenticeships and whether the curriculum was meeting the skills needs in Northern Ireland. We produced a YAM TV video of our experience, 'Behind the scenes: giving evidence to the Public Accounts Committee'. It can be viewed on our website.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) asked the Youth Assembly to work with it to gather the views of a wide range of young people about their experiences of careers education in their schools, the access and promotion of vocational education and apprenticeships, and whether the current curriculum was meeting skill needs in Northern Ireland.

We put on record our thanks to Committee members, and to Lucia Wilson, Clerk to the Committee, and Kirsten McClelland, Assistant Assembly Clerk, for their help in facilitating our voices being heard.

Matthew Moore: The Youth Assembly was asked by the Committee for Justice to give its views on the Justice Bill. The Bill aims to amend retention periods for DNA and biometric material, make changes to bail and custody arrangements for children and young people, improve services for victims and witnesses, and improve the efficiency of aspects of the justice system.

Youth Assembly Members met online to discuss the Bill, and the Youth Assembly will be meeting the Minister of Justice, Naomi Long, next week to discuss the aspects of the Bill that affect young people. The Youth Assembly plans to bring a report to the Committee for Justice by the end of April.

Weronika McNulty: In April 2024, Youth Assembly Members (YAMs) gave evidence to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health on the UK Tobacco and Vapes Bill. The Youth Assembly was invited once again to give views on the new Bill. The Clerk to the Committee for Health met Youth Assembly Members in November to discuss the Bill and to answer questions about how it would be enforced and how to tackle tobacco and vape use by young people. A report on the views of the Youth Assembly went to the Committee for Health.

YAMs were mentioned in the Chamber by the Chairperson of the Health Committee, Philip McGuigan, Deputy Chair of the Committee, Danny Donnelly, and Committee members Alan Robinson and Claire Sugden. In April, we are meeting officials from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, and the Chief Medical Officer, to find out how the Bill will be implemented. We put on record our thanks to the Committee Clerk, Keith McBride, for his time and support in helping us to have our voices heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): We now move to the Youth Assembly Committees for updates.

Mia Murray: I represent the Education Committee. Since our first meeting in March last year, we have been busy. At the last plenary, my fellow Committee member, Tyler, informed the Chamber of our decision to focus on Learning for Life and Work (LLW) in schools. We have compiled a plethora of evidence on the topic from experts and best practice, which we are keen to share. On 5 November 2024, the Youth Assembly Education Committee met Lesley Emerson, from Queen's University, Belfast, and Lauren Bond, from the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland, to discuss the need for a review of LLW. We also discussed how LLW is taught, what needs to be included in the LLW curriculum, the need for teacher training and the possibility of specialist LLW teachers.

We believed that we needed to see at least one example of best practice, which come few and far between. Therefore, at our next Committee meeting in December, we met teachers Nadine Dorrian and Gillian Gibson from Strangford College to discuss how LLW was delivered in their school. That was really informative for the Committee, and it heavily influenced our decisions.

We had a lovely Christmas break and hit the ground running with survey planning. January and February were busy months for Committee members and Youth Assembly staff, getting our survey prepared and ready for release.

We are now in the final stages of reviewing: crossing the t's and dotting the i's, so that it is perfect. We cannot wait to release our survey to the young people of Northern Ireland on 31 March and to hear the views of arguably the most important and reliable source. Once the survey has concluded, we will compile our results into a report that we hope to present to the Minister in June. Thank you to all the stakeholders, experts and young people who engaged with us throughout the process. Most importantly, a big thanks to the Youth Assembly staff, who have worked tirelessly to prepare and support us throughout the whole period that we have been a Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. I call Leon Cyriac.

Leon Cyriac: In November, the Youth Assembly Health Committee met representatives from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) — the chief inspector, Faustina Graham; assistant chief inspector for early years, primary, post-primary and special, Nicola Byrne; and director of policy, planning and organisational development and improvement, Cathy Galway — to learn more about how the mental health of pupils can be measured and how the Education and Training Inspectorate assesses well-being in schools. That meeting informed our research into what makes a school a happy school that promotes good mental health and well-being.

In December, we discussed plans for our youth stakeholder event and prepared for a meeting with the Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt MLA. The meeting took place in January. We told him about our work on mental health in schools, discussed the provision that is available in the school setting and learned more about what the Health Department is doing to improve the mental health of pupils.

In February, we met to plan the mental health stakeholder event, which was held on Saturday 8 March. The aim was to gather the views of young people on mental health in schools. Over 50 people from schools and organisations, such as the Children's Law Centre, Angel Eyes NI, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and Belfast YMCA, as well as Northern Ireland members of the Youth Parliament.

Next, the Committee will produce a report. We plan to meet the Assembly's Committee for Health, and, in June and July, with the Minister, to present our findings.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Catherine Fogarty.

Catherine Fogarty: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. In November, the Youth Assembly Rights and Equality Committee met Jamie Plant, adviser on youth participation at the Education Authority (EA), who was working with young people on the ending violence against women and girls strategy. We asked how sexism is addressed with young people and the various projects that she currently coordinates. We asked questions about the policies that schools currently have in place to deal with sexism and about the laws that protect women from sexual harassment, such as upskirting becoming a criminal offence. That will further inform our research into how sexism is addressed in schools and how young women's rights can be promoted in schools.

In December we met John McCloskey, a teacher from Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock, to discuss an innovative project on women's rights that he and a group of pupils are promoting in their school.

In January and February, we met to plan the survey on young women's rights in schools, which was launched online on Tuesday 18 March.

Our next plan is to meet the Assembly Committee for the Executive Office and Ministers in June to present our findings.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Catherine. Thanks to all of you who gave updates.

We now move on to the consultation work that has been undertaken by the Youth Assembly. I call Molly Adams.

Molly Adams: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. On 23 October 2024, Youth Assembly Members met officials from the Executive Office (TEO) and junior Ministers Aisling Reilly MLA and Pam Cameron

MLA to discuss the draft Programme for Government 2024-27. That is an important document that sets out the Executive's priorities and includes things, such as reducing NHS waiting times, ending violence against women and girls, providing more housing, supporting children with special educational needs, delivering more affordable childcare, growing the economy and protecting the environment. At that meeting, Youth Assembly Members spoke about what they would like the Executive to prioritise in the Programme for Government, including tackling mental health issues, curriculum reform, awareness and promotion of children's rights, support for young carers, climate change, poverty, homelessness and issues around culture and identity.

The Youth Assembly welcomed the recent publication of the Programme for Government and will monitor its implementation.

2.15 pm

James Maginn: In January 2025, the Youth Assembly worked with the Department of Education on a number of issues. On 25 January 2025, Youth Assembly Members received a briefing from Jonathan Boyd from the Department of Education explaining the review of free school meals and uniform grant criteria. Members had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss key points. During the briefing, Youth Assembly Members gave their views via a Mentimeter survey, and a report of those views was sent to the Department.

Members of the Youth Assembly welcomed the review of free school meals and uniform grants and recognised the importance of that financial assistance in supporting families on low incomes, asylum seekers and children with special educational needs who require a special diet. Members appreciated the current budgetary landscape and the fact that a rise in expenditure in those areas will need to be found elsewhere in the Department's budget. Most Members felt that the criteria for free school meals and uniform grants should be changed. Most Members said that the best use of the Budget is to prioritise a rise in the low-income threshold for free school meals from £15,000. They felt that that would be the most cost-effective way to reach the greatest number of young people in need. Members would also like the Department to consider annual reviews of the income threshold and to ensure that all stakeholder voices are heard, including those of young people.

Members would like the Department to consider a flexible approach to free school meals criteria that takes into account not just family income but the size of the family. Members also asked whether the Department might consider a graded system for those who earn slightly above the threshold. Members are concerned about the fact that the provision of free school meals over the summer period is no longer available. We are also concerned about the impact of the rising cost of providing free school meals, including on staff wages, food and energy costs, and about the rising cost of school uniforms.

We believe that recent changes to the menus in schools mean that the options are not as healthy as they could be and feel that that has been done in order to encourage children who are not in receipt of free school meals to buy a meal in the school canteen, thereby raising revenue. Members report that, even when in receipt of a free school meal, some children in post-primary schools do not take a meal at all or do not take a proper meal, opting instead for a drink and a snack. We believe that the Department needs to do more to tackle the stigma of both not applying for and not taking a free school meal. More of an effort must be made to raise awareness of the entitlement among young people and their families, setting out the advantages of receiving that entitlement for the young person, their family and the school.

Members feel that there is not enough emphasis on the uniform grant in the consultation. The amount that is currently offered does not cover a uniform and a PE kit, particularly in post-primary pupils, and is not available at all for children in nurseries, although many of them require a uniform to be worn.

Daniel McGucken: Youth Assembly Members were asked to give their views to the Department of Education's curriculum review. Two meetings were held with Lucy Crehan, who is conducting the review. Youth Assembly Members felt that subjects are too packed and too rushed; that there is an over-reliance on booklets; that there is a lack of time in lessons for crucial discussions; and that teachers are stressed out and too focused on exams, and that that stress is passed on to pupils. We

feel that primary school does not prepare you for post-primary school. You are not given much independence in primary school. We are worried that learning differences are not diagnosed early enough. We feel that there is not enough emphasis in the curriculum on topics such as life skills, PE, money matters, languages and presentation and communication skills.

Learning for life and work has a serious image problem. It is not taken seriously by pupils or teachers. The GCSE spec is too packed. There do not seem to be enough specialist teachers. We want and deserve to be taught relationships and sexuality education by expert teachers. There is a lack of education on the history of Northern Ireland, including on the Troubles, unless you take GCSE history. We are not all taught the same content; it really depends on the school.

On 21 January, Members met officials from the Department of Education's school improvement team to discuss a revised school improvement policy. We talked about how the Department's vision statement:

"Every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding"

is working in schools. We discussed a range of matters relating to teaching and learning, including GCSE and A level choices, sources of help, involvement of pupils in school decisions, feedback from teachers, support for exams, availability of resources and what makes lessons enjoyable. On pastoral issues, we discussed how happy we are in school, preparation for adult life, extracurricular activities, school refusing, and community links.

The Department will take on board our views when drafting its revised policy. The end-to-end review of school improvement has almost completed its programme of engagement with children and young people. The Department has told us that the new school improvement policy will take account of the feedback that was received from primary and post-primary school students and youth organisations. A new draft school improvement policy is being developed and will be published for public consultation in late spring.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Daniel, thank you.

Members, Daniel raised a number of points on education issues. As I did with the Members who spoke previously, I will point out that the Chair of the Assembly's Education Committee, Nick Mathison MLA, is in the Public Gallery today and will have heard those points.

We now move on to the events that Youth Assembly Members have been involved in.

Donal Mullan: On 20 November, Youth Assembly Members attended the launch of the 'Compassionate Schools' report by Marie Curie at Riddell Hall, Stranmillis. The report looks at bereavement support and grief education in schools across Northern Ireland. Youth Assembly Members had previously participated in a workshop with Marie Curie and Cruse Bereavement Support on bereavement support and grief education.

The aim of the project is to:

"make every school a compassionate community which has culture, practice and policies in place to support bereaved pupils."

At the report launch, Youth Assembly Members had the opportunity to hear more about the report and the evidence that Marie Curie had collected. We asked questions of the panel, which included key leaders from the Department of Education, the teaching unions, the Childhood Bereavement Network, teachers and a bereaved young person.

Nadia Mackiewicz: This year, Air Ambulance NI is the Assembly Commission's Charity of the Year. Did you know that it costs £2.5 million a year to run the Air Ambulance Service? To raise money for this cause, a Christmas Market took place on 27 November in the Great Hall of Parliament Buildings. The Youth Assembly had its own stall, where Members sold candy canes and ran a Christmas quiz and a "Guess how many sweets are in the jar" challenge. Youth Assembly Members had a great day fundraising for Air Ambulance NI and the Christmas Fair raised over £1,600 for this important cause. **Kerrie Finnegan**: From 18 to 22 November, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) hosted the Road to Rights roadshow across Northern Ireland. The roadshow visited five locations, one each day, stopping in Newry, Enniskillen, Magherafelt, Derry/Londonderry and Belfast. The roadshow aimed to highlight the importance of children's rights and called on the Government to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into domestic law. All young people who attended gained a further understanding of children's rights as they took part in workshops across Northern Ireland. We were glad that Youth Assembly Members were able to attend every stop on the roadshow and get some selfies with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Chris Quinn.

Shu ya Cheung: In November 2024, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was developing its next strategic plan, which will shape its mission and focus across the next three years. The Youth Assembly was invited to consult with the commission on its draft strategic plan. We met Michael Boyd and Jason McKeown online. We are grateful to them for their time and ongoing support. Youth Assembly Members were then invited to attend the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission Annual Statement event in Parliament Buildings. The statement is a detailed report assessing the state of human rights in Northern Ireland.

Baroness Shami Chakrabarty CBE PC, a human rights lawyer and campaigner, Labour peer and former shadow Attorney General for England and Wales delivered the keynote address, entitled 'Human rights: the case for the defence'. Youth Assembly Members also had the chance to ask Chief Commissioner Alyson Kilpatrick and Baroness Shami Chakrabarty questions about the event afterwards in our latest edition of YAM TV, which can be viewed on our website.

Lucy Wong: On 20 March, Members met online with an organisation called Speakers for Schools. It is a UK-wide social mobility charity, which helps empower young people to reach their potential. It has a dedicated Northern Ireland team, which is based locally. Its mission is to level the playing field for young people so that everyone gets a chance to develop the necessary confidence, skills and knowledge to become better prepared for the world of work. It wants to close the opportunity gap between the most and least advantaged young people in Northern Ireland by providing fair, free access to high-quality work experiences and inspirational talks in schools. We found out about the programmes that it offers to young people, such as providing work experience opportunities. Its representatives asked us about our views on career-related learning and work experience. They will use that learning to consider how they can ensure that their programmes and influencing work reflect the experiences and needs of as many young people in Northern Ireland as possible. Young people who are going through the education system and making employment and career choices are best placed to know where changes are needed.

Cara Ní Cheallaigh: On 20 February, Youth Assembly Members attended the Women's Parliament event in Parliament Buildings. Members took part in round-table discussions with MLAs and women's organisations including NI Rural Women's Network, Women's Resource and Development Agency, NI Women's Budget Group, Women's Forum NI, Women's Platform NI, Women's Support Network, and Women's Aid NI. They also met MLAs including Diana Armstrong, Carál Ní Chuilín, Kellie Armstrong, Sinéad McLaughlin and Emma Sheerin. They explored issues affecting the women of Northern Ireland and shared their own experiences as young women. The event was hosted by the Women's Caucus chair, Claire Sugden MLA, and deputy chair Paula Bradshaw MLA.

Youth Assembly Members also met the Ministers who responded to statements in the Chamber: the Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt MLA; the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Andrew Muir MLA, and junior Ministers Pam Cameron MLA and Aisling Reilly MLA. During the session in the Assembly Chamber, which was chaired by Speaker Edwin Poots MLA, the issues that were raised included: Rural Women's Issues, Access to Health Services for Women, Affordable Childcare, Women in the Economy, Older Women's Issues, Disabled Women, Equality and Human Rights Legislation, Carers and Unpaid Work, and Violence against Women and Girls.

The Youth Assembly Members who attended the event made an episode of YAM TV about the inspirational women whom we met on the day.

Mr Deputy Chairperson (Mr Blair): Finally, we have an update on the Youth Assembly social media and communications activities for the period.

Christine Farry: We have recently launched YAM TV. My fellow Youth Assembly Members have mentioned it in their updates. YAM is a term that we use for Youth Assembly Members. Now we have a platform to showcase the causes that we are passionate about, and we speak with MLAs to bring focus to those issues at the highest level. YAM TV episodes include: an interview with MLAs to bring Accounts Committee following the child poverty report launch, an interview with Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's Chief Commissioner, Alyson Kilpatrick, following the annual statement 2024 launch, 'A Look Back at the Year 2024', 'Behind-the-scenes: giving evidence to the Public Accounts Committee' and 'Behind the scenes at the Women's Parliament'.

Youth Assembly Members also write blogs about the events and projects that they are involved in so as to raise awareness of their work. Recent blogs include Youth Assembly Members' reflections on the Public Accounts Committee careers inquiry, the Committee for Education's relationships and sexuality education (RSE) youth engagement event and the Department for Education's curriculum review. YAM TV and YAM Blogs can be viewed on the Youth Assembly website. Thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Christine, and thanks to all of you for your updates. You have certainly been busy in the past few months. I am delighted that you are working closely with Assembly Committees and that we have heard some detail on that because it is important that your voice is heard on policy and legislation.

2.30 pm

Votes at 16

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): We will proceed to the debate on votes at 16. I will open the Floor for about 40 minutes. Youth Assembly Members should keep their remarks brief to allow for as many contributions as possible. Members should not talk over each other and should respect each other's views. If you wish to speak, you should rise in your place — that is what normally happens in the Chamber and means that we have an easy way of seeing that you want to speak. However, if it is easier for you, you can raise your hand to let us know that you want to speak, and, if it is easier for you, you can speak from your seat when called. When a YAM 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 light on your mic to turn red, then state your name, as doing so helps Assembly Broadcasting and the official reporters.

If that is clear, we shall proceed. Clerk, please read the motion.

Moved —

"That this Youth Assembly believes that the voting age should be lowered to 16 for all elections in Northern Ireland."

Yvaine Parsons: At age 10, you are legally able to take criminal responsibility. At age 14, you can get a part-time job. At age 12, you can start training for dangerous stunts. Why not vote at 16?

Currently, at 16, you can start work, work full-time, make decisions on education, leave education, pay taxes, get national health insurance, join the military, get married and consent to medical treatment. You can do all those things at 16, including joining a political party, yet you cannot vote. Personally, I think that that is an unnecessary restriction, as there are many benefits to it.

For example, in several countries, including Germany, Hungary, Malta, Puerto Rico, East Timor and Greece, young people can vote from 16 or 17. They have had no reason to withdraw that and have had no second thoughts of, "Maybe not. Let us not do this". There has been no such thing as that happening. In research, there have been no negative consequences where the extension to votes at 16 has been introduced. As I stated, there has been no cause to change that back.

Civil engagement and taking part in elections earlier are way more likely to appease and benefit 16year-olds, and they will be more politically engaged in the future. You might argue that those under 18 are more vulnerable, but that is not true. At age 18 to 24, you are actually far more vulnerable. Several studies have shown that that is the most vulnerable age at which you are most susceptible to things such as scams and gaslighting. That is the age at which you are most susceptible, whereas 16year-olds are still quite young and therefore have a better and more open view of political activity.

Bláthnaid Girvan: I believe that the voting age should be lowered to 16. Many teenagers, such as those who are young carers, already have adult responsibilities and adult jobs, so why should they not be able to vote at 16?

Harrison Kerr: As Yvaine said, at 16 we can work, pay taxes and make life-changing decisions, yet we are denied a voice in the policies that shape our future. Why are we trusted to take on responsibilities but excluded from the most basic right of a democracy — the right to vote? Young people are those most affected by decisions made about climate change, education and the economy in this very Chamber — decisions that will have an impact for decades to come. A 2019 study showed, however, that only 20% of young people in Northern Ireland feel optimistic about their future. That speaks to the deep disconnect that many feel about politics. We are here, as part of the Youth Assembly, to make young people's voices heard, but that is just one step. Young people need to have a way to make a tangible effect on the decisions made about their lives. If we can contribute to the economy, and join the military, then we deserve a say in who represents us in Government. Too many young people feel that their concerns are not listened to and that the political system is not built for them. That must end. The question being debated today is not about whether young people are ready to vote; it is about whether politicians are ready to listen to them.

Harry Robb: Young people who are my age of 15 or 16 are not responsible enough. Each day in our schools, we see people who are 16 who just act like pure eejits. Are those really who we want to make decisions for us?

Georgia Watson: Rights that 16-year-olds have in Northern Ireland include leaving school, working a full-time job, getting married with a guardian's permission, leaving home, changing their name and giving consent, but we cannot vote. Why can I get married, have children and work a full-time job but cannot vote for laws to be made on those topics? There is no logic whatsoever for it. Many 16-year-olds are perfectly capable of choosing who to vote for. The very fact that the Youth Assembly is open to young people from the age of 12 proves that.

Furthermore, whilst the difference in maturity levels between a six-year-old and an eight-year-old might be enormous, the same cannot be said for the difference between a 16-year-old and an 18-year-old. An 18-year-old can be just as mature or immature as a 16-year-old. We should have a right to have our voices heard. There is no reason why we should not have votes at 16.

Mia Murray: it is an honour to stand here today as a member of the Youth Assembly to discuss how we can best give young people a better voice in politics. However, I do not believe that voting at 16 is the best way that we can undertake that task. Voting at 16 could cause a plethora of issues, especially in Northern Ireland, which is a very politically sensitive nation. I am in year 11 in school. By the time I go back to school in September, a number of my year group will have turned 16, and who, in my view lack the emotional maturity to vote.

If the vote for 16-year-olds was enacted, it would alarm me for a number of reasons. One is the lack of political education in schools, which contributes to a lack of political literacy and, therefore, a more extremist and often sectarian approach to politics by young people. Also, they would be heavily influenced by who their parents vote for. Furthermore, without improved political education, giving a vote to 16-year-olds tomorrow would be a pointless exercise as they lack any political knowledge to enable them to understand different parties, their aims and their messages.

Without a seismic change in the political makeup of this country, and improved widespread political education, votes at 16 can never become a reality. I will not support it until those actions have been met.

Harry Johnston: Ladies and gentlemen, whilst it is crucial to engage young people in politics, granting votes to 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland is premature. At that age, many individuals are still developing their understanding of complex political issues. Most 16-year-olds are still completing their education and lack the life experience necessary to make fully informed decisions on matters that affect the entire country. Furthermore, research shows that political engagement typically grows with age and maturity. We should focus on empowering young people through education and awareness, not lowering the voting age before they are truly prepared. Let us ensure that, when they vote, they do so with a solid understanding of the stakes involved.

Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, if you have indicated that you wish to speak and have not been called, please keep indicating. We have plenty of time and I will continue to look around. If you have not been called yet, there is every possibility that you will be, so please keep rising if you wish to speak.

Rory Brown: Originally, I was undecided on the issue. I asked a few of my peers in school and my community what they thought. Some of them believed that they could vote at 16, others that they could not: they did not think that they were emotionally mature enough yet. I am still undecided on the issue. Sixteen-year-olds face a lot of pressure in their lives and voting would just be extra pressure that could manipulate them and make them feel that they are being forced to grow up too early. However, their voices need to be heard because they live here, as much as we do. It would not be right to not consider their perspective on issues that would affect them. However, many believe that they are not ready for that responsibility yet because they are not ready to grow up yet and take on such a responsibility. They want the right to vote but they want it in a way that is rightly facilitated for them.

Victoria Da Cruz Marinho: The ability to vote should begin from the age of 16. People say that young people deserve the right to be heard. At that age, they can get a job, finish their GCSEs and be preparing for college. Many students choose politics for A levels but cannot vote for another few years. Some younger people are also into politics and voting, which applies to most of us here. People consider 16 to be a mature age. The public also see young people discuss votes that have just been made — with some upset and some glad. I cannot see why we cannot vote at 16.

Weronika McNulty: The voting age should not be lowered. At 16, young people are often too focused on exams and school, so becoming engaged in politics is not a priority for them. That could lead to them making an uninformed decision. Also, many young people are pressured by friends and family in a number of ways, including politics. It could lead them to vote a certain way, even if they do not want to vote for a certain party, which means that it would not give an accurate representation of the views of the young people.

Ross MacAskill: Even if we lower the voting age, it does not mean that they have to. With all the pressures they are facing with GCSEs, they do not have to vote.

Ciaran Creber: The question that we have been presented with today is, "Should 16-year-olds be able to vote?" However, the real question is, "Why should they not be able to vote?"

At 16, we can join the armed forces, we can start a job and, most importantly, we can start paying taxes, yet we cannot vote on who deploys the armed forces or who receives our tax money. I urge my fellow Youth Assembly Members to vote for voting at 16.

2.45 pm

Fionn McCoy: I am honoured to speak on the idea of young people getting a vote at 16. It is a misconception that we do not care about the issues of today. We might not all have a strong view on economics or pensions, but we care about so many other urgent issues, such as climate change, inequality and our education and schools. Deciding to allow young people to vote at 16 will start a trend of the young people of today voting and having our say in Northern Ireland's elections, which, in turn, will increase voter turnout. That can only be a good thing for the health of our democracy.

Charlie McFarland: As 16-year-olds cannot gamble, smoke, drink or even be deployed to a combat zone in the military, they do not have the maturity to vote and should not make decisions that will impact on our nation.

Cara Ní Cheallaigh: To an extent, I am in favour of changing the voting age to 16. The issue is complex and has numerous sides to it. It is imperative to incorporate young people's views in elections and that we should have, and are entitled to have, a voice in the construction of our future. That begins by being able to elect politicians who, we believe, represent our ideals and aspirations. However, 16-year-olds may be biased when it comes to their votes, due to familial beliefs or experiences or the opinions of their peers or friends. I ask Members to reflect on the recent presidential election in the US and even on elections closer to home, such as in England, during which political parties posted TikTok edits and uploaded satire online. I understand that that will not affect every young person's vote, but there is undoubtedly a minute minority who would base their vote on such posts and not on the actions, aims and prospects of the political parties.

I acknowledge the kaleidoscope of benefits that would come with providing the vote to 16-year-olds and that doing so would help to fulfil the need for a diverse range of voters, especially in the 21st century. However, the other, negative factors must be considered and reviewed.

Sophie Griffin: I am against votes at 16. Peer pressure is already a huge part of a young person's life. If 16-year-olds were allowed to vote, they would be influenced by social media, friends and family on the party to vote for. There would also be a divide amongst young people, especially in schools, because of their political views and opinions, if votes at 16 were to happen.

Alexandra Bowman: I support the motion calling for votes at 16. At that age, we are regarded as mature enough to make decisions about our education, health and even marriage. We are also allowed to join a political party, yet we cannot fully show our support for it, because we are unable to vote. Changing that situation would encourage more young people to pursue their interest in politics, as they would get to have a say at their age. Many countries have already introduced votes at 16, and it has been nothing but successful. It is clear, from the volume of us agreeing with the motion, that many young people are interested in voting. Therefore, we should introduce votes at 16.

Lorcan McCusker: I support votes at 16, as that will increase the promotion of political activity around Northern Ireland, which will make young people more informed and counter the wave of misinformation that is spread about at the minute.

Lila Hamadi: In the North of Ireland, young people are our future. They are a generation that lives without the first-hand experience of our troubled past.

Votes at 16 will allow 16-year-olds with political views to express them in a democratic and legitimate way, contrary to the violence that this country is used to. In a country like this, the youth voice is imperative. I urge for education in Learning for Life and Work (LLW) classes to support students in understanding the political system so that they can make an informed choice on a vote that they are entitled to.

Mia Green: The voting age should be lowered to 16. It depends on the maturity of the young person so, if 16-year olds can get a job and get paid, they should be able to vote.

Shea McCarthy: Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise: I have a bit of a toothache. On my first speech in this Chamber as a Youth Assembly Member, I affirm my support for votes at 16. I spoke to RTÉ today and stated that, despite what some wish to believe, young people want to get politically involved and have their input in the political process through voting. Votes at 16 will happen, whether people like it or not, and I support the motion.

Donal McMullan: I would like to comment on what Scotland has done about the right to vote at 16. There it was introduced for the 2014 referendum, which had a 21.6% rise in voter turnout compared with the Scottish turnout in the 2010 UK general election. Furthermore, 14 countries, besides the UK, currently have votes at 16, while seven have votes at 17. At 16, you can work and make many decisions about your life choices. Finally, young people are the future, so giving them the right to vote

two years earlier will help them engage with politics. This will improve their lives, as they can vote for the candidate who best represents their views.

Molly Adams: My name is Molly Adams. Legislation should be passed to change the voting age to 16. Many issues debated and discussed by local politicians directly affect people below the age of 18. They affect our daily life, education, prospective careers and the very earth that we will inherit. If a 16-year-old can work, get married, have children and pay tax, who is to say that they are not mature enough to vote? Northern Ireland, a politically segregated and sensitive country, needs new voices to revolutionise the outdated views that many older people try to keep rigidly in place. Whether those new voices are influenced or impacted by others is irrelevant. Peer pressure is a factor at all ages, and the main aim of many political campaigns is to influence voters.

Nadia Mackiewicz: I am positive that a lot of young people today will be for votes at 16. Young people should have the right to choose those who are making decisions in their name and should be able to decide which politicians will affect their future. However, as a 16-year-old, I firmly believe that if we got votes at 16 now, we would not be ready. If young people are given the right to vote, they should be properly taught about the political options that they have. The education system should teach young people about who is responsible for them and help them make an informed decision by themselves, without media bias or the influence of a parental figure. Youth is the future and deserves to be properly educated about the politics that it can get involved in.

Addison Kealey-Bennet: The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children should be politically represented. That is the same ideal that created the Youth Assembly. If children in Northern Ireland can be emancipated from their parents, join the military and marry, why can they not vote? Alternatively, to turn the question around, if they cannot vote, why can they marry? Why can they emancipate themselves from their parents? That is the question that Members need to ask themselves.

James Maginn: The subject of lowering the voting age to 16 is a long and varied debate. Whilst many have argued that not all 16-year-olds are mature enough to vote, let us first ask ourselves this question: would you trust all 18-year-olds, 20-year-olds and 25-year-olds to vote? The question of whether to lower the voting age is not one of maturity but of whether we value the contribution of 16- and 17-year-olds to society. Whilst the subject of being able to enlist in the armed forces at the age of 16 is a debate for another day, if 16-year-olds can join the army, they should have the right to vote for their country's leaders.

Portia Cummings: Voting at 16 encourages young people to have conversations about politics. There is a stigma that young people do not want to vote. I believe that that stems from the voting age, which suggests that politics is too complex, which would make adults not feel comfortable about 16-year-olds voting.

Matthew Moore: I agree with lowering the voting age to 16. A recent survey by Channel 4 showed that 52% of young people would be fine with a leader coming in who could bypass the democratic system. Many have been wondering why that is the case. The answer is simple: young people are done with being ignored, so if the Government wish to restore faith in the democratic system of this country, our voices must be heard, and we must be allowed to vote at 16.

Marcella Hunt: Lowering the voting age would strengthen democracy, increase political awareness and ensure that policies reflected the needs of our generation. It is time to trust young people with the vote because if we are old enough to contribute to society, we are old enough to have a say in it.

Christine Farry: As many Members have already said, you can leave school at 16, pay taxes, join the army, get married and join a political party, yet you cannot vote. When Scotland introduced votes at 16, there was a high turnout of 16- and 17-year-olds, which shows that they do have an interest in voting, unlike as some Members said. Giving the vote from 16 would make for a more engaged, diverse and vocal electorate. There is evidence that when people start to vote at 16 it becomes a habit for life, which will increase voter turnout over time.

Lucy Wong: Young people in Northern Ireland are being left out of democracy and that needs to change. Sixteen-year-olds deserve to have the vote because, as was mentioned, we have already taken on grown-up responsibilities. If we are trusted with such heavy responsibilities, why not engage in democracy, knowledge about politics or even contribute to the future of our Government? Parts of the UK and other countries have already done it, so why should Northern Ireland be left behind?

Kerrie Finnegan: I will be arguing for votes at 16. Did you know that in the 2024 UK general election only 60% of voters went to the polls? Along with that, in the 2019 election, only 47% of those aged 18 to 24 voted. Voter turnout is decreasing rapidly, especially among young adults. That is why votes at 16 would be a good change. As was shown in Scotland and Austria, those who vote at 16 are more likely to continue to vote. It also gives young people a voice in an ageing voter base. There is an issue about whether 16-year-olds are informed enough to vote. A simple course or manual given to 16-year-old voters, explaining briefly how politics and voting work, and what candidates are claiming, could help to alleviate that. That is an important policy to consider, as a YouGov survey found that 37% of 18- to 24-year-olds did not think that their vote mattered.

We must increase their voting confidence quickly; that can start by giving that power and vote to 16year-olds.

3.00 pm

Daniel McGucken: Votes at 16 is a good idea. You can join the army at 16 but you cannot vote for the person who can send you to war when you are 18. Come on — there is no sense in that. This is a democratic country, and we deserve to be able to vote young because we will be shaping the future generation. I hope that you agree with me.

Catherine Fogarty: You can do many things at 16, such as quitting school, having a job, getting married or — if you did not know it already — you can even drive a tractor, but you cannot vote. That is really silly. Other people say that we are mentally unaware and stuff like that, but I disagree. Anyone can be mentally unaware of what is going on. People who are 16 can be smarter and wiser than older people and that is why they should have the vote.

Willow Sachno: One of the popular arguments against votes at 16 that I have heard is that young people are uninterested in politics. However, that is untrue. You only have to look as far as the young people who are gathered here today to see that there are many passionate young people who would benefit from the ability to vote and have their voice heard. Before votes at 16 are put in place, however, education in politics needs to be improved. As the Youth Assembly's Education Committee found, the current Learning for Life and Work (LLW) curriculum is not fit for purpose and too many young people are misinformed. That needs to change for votes at 16 to be effective.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I know that some people who have already spoken are indicating again. I am going to leave the Floor open for those who have not yet spoken, so that they have a chance. If you have not yet spoken, please continue to rise in your place or raise your hand and I will try to call you.

Isaac Thompson: I believe that voting at 16 is the way forward. If you do not believe that you are emotionally mature enough to vote, you should simply not vote. Just because you are not emotionally mature does not mean that you should stop the rest of us who are from voting.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Is there anyone else who has not yet spoken?

Leon Cyriac: I agree with those who have called for votes at 16 because you can join the army and pay taxes, but you cannot vote. *[Pause.]* May I have a wee minute?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Yes, of course. Please feel free to come back in when you want.

Yvaine Parsons: I would like to respond to something that Mia said earlier. She said that several people in her year do not feel that they are capable of voting because they are unprepared. As I mentioned earlier, the most easily targeted and manipulated demographic is the 18- to 24-year-olds. They are the most influenced group because they are easily targeted and gaslighted.

If they start at 16, by the time that they are 18, they will be more prepared. Mia said that everything needs to change, and it does need to change. People might not feel capable, but the fact is that they can get married — married — at that age. They can choose their husband at 16; they can go to war at 16; and the age of criminal responsibility is 10. All those factors, including the fact that you can get a part-time job at 14, certainly do not go against it at this stage. If you are able to do all those things at a ridiculously young age, why not vote at a ridiculously young age?

Georgia Watson: Research by the psychologist Solomon Asch found that the vast majority of university age students conformed with their peers when answering questions. If their peers said something, the participant would say that as well. It is, therefore, not only 16-year-olds who are peer-pressured but those who are 18 and older. Everyone can be influenced by their family and friends, and by social media. It is not just younger ones who are not emotionally mature enough; it is really everyone.

Mia Murray: In response to Yvaine's argument, it is not that I believe that 16-year-olds are not as emotionally mature as 18-year-olds, but a lot of them are not. Those two years are really important for the development of the frontal cortex of the brain, which keeps developing until you are 21. In the 18-to-24 age bracket, voter turnout is often lower, which can be attributed to coming out of school and not having the political education to deal with having the vote. Even if you make the voting age younger, you will still miss out a lot of 16-year-olds. While some stay on at school, some leave and miss out on two pivotal years of political education that they could have had to help them to proceed.

When young people turn 18, they have left school, and, if they go on to university or a further education college, they will be able to meet more people and gain more political knowledge and more knowledge of adulthood. That is the difference between a 16-year-old and an 18-year-old. Most 18-year-olds are going out into the working world, going to university or finishing at further education college. They have more life experience than a 16-year-old fresh off the bat. If 16-year-olds were to gain the vote, most would still be in year 12 at school.

The lower voter turnout at age 18 to 24 shows that, without correct political knowledge, people do not feel enabled to vote. Only if we improve the political knowledge that young people receive in schools will 16-year-olds have that knowledge and be able to apply it when voting.

Matthew Moore: A big criticism that is often made is that young people do not know enough about the political atmosphere to be able to vote. A way to rectify that would be to bring members of political parties into schools to talk about their politics. In that way, young people could learn more about the political system without having to worry about bias from teachers influencing their decisions.

Rory Brown: I wish to respond to what some Members have said. I remain split on the issue, but I fear that young people may be vulnerable to peer pressure and may even split into separate friend groups simply because of who they vote for. For example, some people may section themselves off, simply because they vote for a party that the rest of their year does not vote for. That can happen in universities and secondary schools, and it could increase tensions and damage some younger people's mental health. Members may want to consider that consequence of lowering the voting age.

Katelyn Doherty: Votes at 16 should be allowed, because we are a democracy. There are many things that 16-year-olds can do, such as join a political party, yet they cannot vote, even though, in reality, they may know more than adults about modern life and may be more informed through the media.

Ross MacAskill: To everyone who says that the voting age should not be lowered because 16-yearolds are not politically aware, I put this question: do they magically gain political awareness at the age of 18? Is it not more of a systemic issue, meaning a school issue? We know that it is, but I just ask the question.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Before I call anyone else, I will give another reminder to anybody who has not already spoken that, if they wish to speak —. I see someone rising in the middle row, in the corner. Go ahead.

Paige Brennan-Collins: Members, if you think that you lack political knowledge, the internet is there: you can research.

Telema Sotonye-Frank: Sixteen-year-olds should be able to vote. People are at their most curious when they are young, and they are more willing to consider new information. Today, young people are more open to change than ever. By contrast, there are people in the mid-to-late stages of their life who have never once stopped to question why they believe what they do. Yes, young people may be more impressionable, but the world does not stand still, and young people are much more able to adapt to changing times. They should therefore be able to vote.

Niamh Hegarty: I will go back to what Mia said about the difference between 18-year-olds and 16year-olds. Sixteen-year-olds are far more susceptible to societal pressure, so their votes would not be truly reflective of their true thoughts.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): We are now doing well with Members who had not spoken previously. Do any more Members wish to speak in the debate for the first time?

Erin Magee: Like a lot of Youth Assembly Members, I am in favour of changing the voting age to 16. One of the main concerns about this topic is that 16-year-olds do not have enough experience or maturity to vote, but, as Ross said, you have to gain that knowledge eventually. It is up to individuals to decide when to educate themselves about it. At 16, a lot of people have done so. The opportunity should be there for those who have.

Shea McCarthy: I will make a quick response. There has been a misconception today that all 16- to 17-year olds are not politically aware and do not have political education. Many Members here study GCSE and A-level politics. Even if they do not, they will have political knowledge and education, which is why they are here today. It is a misconception. I support the motion.

Fionn McCoy: Many young people might not have political experience or knowledge, but they have a sense of morals and know what is right and wrong. Many adults do not have political knowledge and still vote on the basis of their morals.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): We have around five minutes left, Members. I ask Members who still wish to speak to be brief, so that we can get more in.

Nadia Mackiewicz: Gen Z is the most politically aware generation. That was proven during COVID, when the only way in which we could voice our political opinion was online. We are not afraid to get involved in politics online, so why should we not be allowed to express ourselves via voting?

3.15 pm

Addison Kealey-Bennett: To further Nadia's point, it has been proven that Generation Z is the most politically aware generation — possibly ever. I was very lucky to take part in many community events last year, many of which were politically driven. There were 16-year-olds, and even younger people, showing up for their community at politically driven events, showing that they are aware and want to do better for their community. If they are able to do that, why would they not be able to represent themselves in our Government?

Isaac Thompson: I have thought about what Mia said in a recent point. If we lowered the voting age to 16, we would, I believe, see an increase in voting among 18- to 24-year-olds. As Mia said, those younger people are developing, so voting would become a habit for them; they would get used to it and become more interested in finding resources to increase their political awareness.

Bláthnaid Girvan: Everyone faces peer pressure. It is not only peer pressure that forces people to vote certain ways but past experience and influences such as parents and grandparents and even, as has been said, social media. We have grown up in a society where everything is based around social media.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair) Is there anyone to my left who has not spoken, or who may want to continue? No, we are OK —. Yes, go ahead.

Molly Adams: I wish to respond to the point that many have made, which is that 16-year-olds do not have the political awareness to vote, and that 16-year-olds should have the correct political education from people who have the authority to bestow that knowledge. How are we supposed to gain such an education? We become involved in a catch-22 situation: we cannot vote because we do not have that political education but cannot advocate for our right to have that political education unless we can vote for it.

Harrison Kerr: I have a quick point to make. I would like the Assembly to note the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's concluding observations from 2023 and this Youth Assembly's Big Youth Survey. Both advocate implementing votes at 16.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): That concludes the debate on the issue of votes at 16. I thank you all for your contributions and for your ability to make points in a short time. Believe me, Members of the Assembly could learn from that when we come back on Monday or Tuesday.

Question put.

The Youth Assembly divided:

Ayes 37; Noes 14

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

"That this Youth Assembly believes that the voting age should be lowered to 16 for all elections in Northern Ireland."

Adjournment

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): That concludes the plenary sitting.

I thank you all for coming. I also thank all those who made the sitting possible and those who supported you to be here. I and other MLAs look forward to seeing the progression of your work in the coming months. I heard, through your updates, how much you have worked outside the Chamber and how you have worked with Committees. I am very aware of the work of the Youth Assembly. Some of your work with Committees has been mentioned by MLAs in the Chamber in recent times, and I hope that that continues.

Until we meet again, I wish all of you the very best.

Adjourned at 3.27 pm.