

YOUTH ASSEMBLY

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

OFFICIAL REPORT

Youth Assembly Mandate Two 2023 – 25

5th Sitting

At 2.00pm on Saturday 1 November 2025
Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast.



Members of the Youth Assembly

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Jack McClintock
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Plenary Session

Saturday 1 November 2025

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

Speaker's Welcome

Mr Speaker: I welcome you all to the fifth and final plenary sitting of the second Youth Assembly. I am very pleased to, once again, preside over the final event of this mandate of the Youth Assembly in the Chamber today. I would like to welcome your parents to this, your final plenary. I know that they are watching with considerable pride from the Public Gallery. We are also joined by the next cohort of Youth Assembly Members (YAMs). I welcome the young people who have been elected and selected to be Members of the Youth Assembly. I offer a very special welcome to all our new Members and, indeed, their parents, and I look forward to seeing you all at future plenary sittings.

Let us move on to what is ahead of us today. During today's proceedings, we will hear updates on the activities that you have been involved in since your last plenary in February 2025 and on your Committee work. You will then have the chance to share your final reflections. I will do my best to call all of you who wish to speak today. I hope that you make the most of today and enjoy yourselves.

Members' Updates

Mr Speaker: This is your chance to provide an update on the activities that you have been involved in since February. A number of Youth Assembly Members have prepared updates on the events and projects that you have worked on.

Donal Mullan: On 25 March 2025, Youth Assembly Members were invited to attend the Volunteer Now Impact Awards, which is an annual event that celebrates youth volunteering across Northern Ireland. The ceremony was hosted by Q Radio presenter Ibe Sesay and featured presentations from young people representing a range of organisations, all sharing the incredible work that they have been doing in their communities.

We were recognised for our individual contributions and received certificates for our volunteer hours. Some of us have completed over 150 hours of service, which is a huge achievement and is something that we are really proud of. We were also delighted to receive the empowering youth award, which highlights the work that we do to support and believe in the power of young people as volunteers. It was a brilliant opportunity to connect with other youth organisations and celebrate the impact that volunteering has across Northern Ireland.

Matthew Moore: Between January and June 2025, a group of Youth Assembly Members came together in an Ad Hoc Committee to examine the Justice Bill, which was introduced in September 2024 by the Minister of Justice, Naomi Long. The Bill covers a range of issues that directly impact on the lives of young people, including the bail, remand and custody of children and the retention of biometric data. On 6 March, we met online to discuss the Bill and how it could affect children and young people. During the meeting, Members developed a list of questions to help to deepen their understanding ahead of their meeting with the Minister.

On 26 March, we met the Minister of Justice, Naomi Long. The discussion focused on the importance of hearing a wide range of young people's views on the Bill and ensuring that children's rights are central to justice processes. We raised concerns about the arrangements for the bail, remand and custody of children and the length of time that biometric data can be held. We asked why the issues of raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility and equal protection are not being tackled in the Bill. We are very grateful to the Minister for taking the time to meet us and listen to our views.

On 10 April, we were invited to give formal evidence to the Committee for Justice. Cara, James,

Ciaran, Brooke and I presented the Youth Assembly's report on the Bill and shared our thoughts on how the Bill may impact on children and young people. We thank the Justice Committee for the opportunity to contribute to that important conversation.

Fionn McCoy: On 29 March, we attended an event hosted by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) at the Greenmount campus of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). The day brought together young people, environmental organisations and academics to explore the connection between climate action and children's rights. The event featured inspiring talks, interactive workshops and plenty of opportunities to network. Youth Assembly Members joined discussions on how caring for the planet directly supports the rights and well-being of children and young people. It was also a chance to hear a wide range of youth voices and build connections with others working in climate and rights advocacy. We were really encouraged by the sense of community and collaboration throughout the day. It was a reminder that climate action is about protecting not just the environment but the future of children and young people.

Daniel McGucken: On 17 April, we took a break from policy discussions and Committee meetings to enjoy a team-building day at Dundonald International Ice Bowl. The outing was a chance to relax, have fun and strengthen connections across the group. Members took part in bowling and karaoke, with plenty of friendly competition and laughter throughout the day. One Member even scored an impressive 150 points in bowling. Such events are a great way to build trust and teamwork and remind us that behind every policy idea and debate are young people working together to make a difference.

Willow Sachno: The Youth Assembly has been actively involved in discussions on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill since April 2024, when it was first scrutinised by the Committee for Health. Our continued engagement since November 2024, when the Bill was reintroduced, reflects a strong commitment to shaping legislation that directly affects children and young people.

On 30 April 2025, we met online with the Northern Ireland Chief Medical Officer, Professor Sir Michael McBride, alongside officials from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency. The meeting focused on the progress of the Bill, its potential impact on young people and how concerns raised in earlier consultations are being addressed, in particular those on enforcement and youth-focused measures. It is important that, once we give our views on a Bill or an inquiry, we hear how they have or have not made an impact. That feedback loop with the Department of Health is a good example of how to do youth participation. We thank the Committee and the Department for their ongoing engagement.

Nadia Mackiewicz: On 8 May, I was honoured to attend the national Victory in Europe Day commemorations in London. The day began with a service of thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey, marking 80 years since the end of World War II in Europe. The event brought together dignitaries, veterans and young people to reflect on the sacrifices that were made and on the importance of peace.

Later that evening, I attended a concert at Horse Guards Parade that celebrated resilience and unity through music and remembrance. That was a powerful experience and a reminder of the role that young people play in carrying forward the values of peace and understanding. Mr Speaker, I was so pleased to see you at the event.

On 31 May, I had the opportunity to represent the Youth Assembly at the Speaker's Polish engagement event here in Parliament Buildings. I myself have Polish heritage. The day celebrated Polish culture and community and featured an address from the Polish consul general, a performance by a Polish folk group and a panel discussion with MLAs. I took part in a question-and-answer session in which I spoke about my role in the Youth Assembly and offered advice to young people in the audience who were thinking about applying. That was a great opportunity to connect with others, share experiences and highlight the importance of youth voice in civic life.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Nadia. It would have been good if you could have arranged for me to go on 'The Hairy Bikers' Poland trip.

Brooke Ewing: On 17 May, Youth Assembly Members were delighted to take part in the Balmoral show, Northern Ireland's largest agricultural event. That was a brilliant opportunity to meet the public,

share more about the work of the Youth Assembly and encourage young people to apply. Throughout the day, we spoke to visitors about the importance of youth voice in decision-making and how the Youth Assembly provides a platform for young people to influence policy. The team also hosted a special round-table event with you, Mr Speaker, at which we asked you about your role, what inspired you to enter politics and why it is so important for young people to get involved.

The Balmoral show was brilliant fun and a great chance to connect with the wider community, highlighting the impact that young people can have in shaping Northern Ireland's future. We hope that the next Youth Assembly Members will also have the opportunity to attend the event.

Rory Brown: On 29 May, Youth Assembly Members attended the launch of the Public Accounts Committee's report on 'Developing the skills for Northern Ireland's future' in Parliament Buildings. The event marked the culmination of months of collaboration between the Committee and the Youth Assembly and focused on improving careers education and pathways for young people.

The journey began in January 2025, when we met the Committee ahead of giving formal evidence to it in the Senate Chamber. During that session, we shared our personal experiences of careers education, vocational options and apprenticeships. Those insights helped to shape the Committee's understanding of the challenges and opportunities that face young people today. During the evidence session, we recommended that the Committee seek views from a wider group of young people. That led to the development of a young people's Citizen Space survey that was launched in March. We helped to promote the survey, and it received over 500 responses from 11-to-18-year-olds across Northern Ireland. The Committee's final report reflects many of the Youth Assembly's contributions and ideas, and its launch was a proud moment for everyone who was involved.

I will also talk about the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill. In June 2025, Youth Assembly Members gave formal evidence to the Committee for Education on the School Uniforms Bill. That session was an opportunity for us to share our views on how school uniform policies can better reflect fairness, affordability and inclusion. We expressed strong support for the principle of school uniforms, recognising their role in promoting equality and school identity. We also highlighted key areas for reform, including concerns about the high cost of branded items, the need for genderneutral options and the need for greater flexibility for pupils with disabilities. Members also called for an end to punitive measures for minor uniform breaches that can disproportionately affect vulnerable students. We advocated for clear statutory guidance that protects the rights and dignity of all pupils, especially those from families facing financial pressures.

We would like to sincerely thank the Committee for Education for the opportunity to contribute to the important conversation, and we hope that the Bill, which has now passed its Final Stage, will have a positive impact on the lives of young people and their families.

Mia Murray: On 25 June, Brooke and I were invited to attend a gala screening of 'The Negotiator' in Belfast as part of the Docs Ireland festival. The documentary explores the life and legacy of Senator George Mitchell, focusing on his pivotal role in the Northern Ireland peace process.

Following the screening, we attended the question-and-answer session with Senator George Mitchell, chaired by RTÉ broadcaster Miriam O'Callaghan. Senator Mitchell shared personal reflections on the challenges and breakthroughs of the peace negotiations, offering valuable insights into the importance of communication and leadership.

2.15 pm

Lucy Wong: On 26 September, we attended the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs consultation event in Belfast, organised by YouthAction NI. The consultation was part of Northern Ireland's first climate action plan and gave young people the opportunity to contribute their ideas and priorities for a greener future. The evening was interactive and engaging, with games, activities and discussions designed to ignite creativity and ensure that everyone's voice was heard. We explored key issues such as sustainable transport, renewable energy and how local communities can play their part in tackling climate change. It was encouraging to see so many young people who are passionate about protecting the environment and eager to shape meaningful change.

Events like that show the importance of youth voice in policymaking and highlight how consultation can be both fun and impactful. We thank YouthAction NI and all the organisers for creating a space where young people's perspectives on the environment were genuinely valued.

Harrison Kerr: On 2 October, we attended the youth and policing partnership forum in Belfast, chaired by the office for the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner. That was the latest stage of an ongoing project to strengthen dialogue between young people and the PSNI. We work alongside other organisations, including the NICCY youth panel, Include Youth, Diverse Youth, the Children's Law Centre and ADD-NI.

The session gave us the chance to raise important issues, including how the police engage with neurodivergent young people, the need for clearer processes around stop-and-search and how neighbourhood policing can build trust through visibility, respect and long-term relationships. We also discussed the barriers that young people face to making complaints, and the importance of ensuring that such processes are accessible and supportive. Through workshops and discussions, we worked together to shape practical recommendations for improving the relationship between the police and young people, from having more consistent neighbourhood policing teams to greater use of social media and community-based initiatives.

Events like that show the value of bringing young people and decision makers together, not only to highlight challenges but to create solutions. I thank the policing bodies and NICCY for ensuring that young people's voices are central to the process.

Caleb Hazley: On 8 October, Youth Assembly Members attended the Stormont Cyber Café event in the Long Gallery at Parliament Buildings, which was hosted by Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) in partnership with the NSPCC and Ofcom. That youth-led dialogue brought together policymakers, practitioners and young people to explore the realities of online safety.

The event was led by Be Cyber Safe NI, which is a youth advisory group committed to amplifying the voices of children and young people in shaping policy and practice. Through discussions and roundtable sessions, we explored key issues around digital well-being, online risks and how young people's lived experiences can inform meaningful change in online safety practices.

Kerrie Finnegan: As part of the Department of Education's TransformED strategy, we took part in a consultation on the future of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) GCSE, AS and A-level examinations. The consultation is exploring how Northern Ireland's qualifications can remain fair, relevant and fit for purpose. During the session, we explored key proposals, including whether to reduce the overall content in courses, cut down the number of assessments and phase out controlled assessments that add to the workload for students and teachers.

We debated the benefits and disadvantages of the current system and discussed whether the new system would affect the levels of anxiety experienced by young people during their final years of school, sixth form and college. Issues around grading were also raised, with debate on whether to move to the 9-1 system that is used in England to make qualifications more easily understood by universities and employers. The discussion showed how passionate young people are about education reform, and how important it is that their experience of exams and assessment pressures shape the future of qualifications in Northern Ireland.

Weronika McNulty: We recently took part in a legislative scrutiny event with the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to discuss the Dilapidation Bill. The Bill is designed to modernise laws that are over 100 years old, giving councils stronger powers to deal with dangerous or badly maintained land and buildings. Its aim is to make towns and cities look better, protect public health and safety, save heritage buildings, and support local businesses and tourism.

During the session, the Youth Assembly explored key aspects of the Bill, including the different types of notices that councils could issue, ranging from maintenance notices for small repairs to emergency action where a site is in immediate danger. We discussed whether fines of £500 were fair and effective and whether councils should have discretion in acting on dilapidated sites or a duty to always step in. We reflected on how derelict spaces can impact on health, safety and antisocial behaviour while also recognising the potential for young people to play a role in improving their local

environment. We thank the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for listening to our perspectives and ensuring that young people's voices are included in the debate on the Bill.

It is worth noting that that was the final piece of work with an Assembly Committee for the 2023-25 mandate. Over the past two years, we have worked with eight Statutory and Standing Committees on issues as diverse as pension reform, school uniforms, justice, banking, child poverty and careers education. We put on record our thanks to the Assembly Committees, which now routinely come to us for a youth perspective on legislation and inquiries. We hope that the new Youth Assembly Members will continue the close working relationship that we have developed with Committees and carry on that important work.

Mr Speaker: I thank all of you for your updates. You have had a busy few months since we last met in February. I also thank you for being so concise in rounding up the past few months. I wish that, on Monday, Members will be as concise when they speak, but we will see what happens.

Committee Updates

Education

Sophie Griffin: In May 2024, members of the Youth Assembly's Education Committee convened to engage in a series of capacity-building workshops and collaborative activities. Following those sessions, we selected our thematic focus: a curriculum that is fit for the 21st century, with particular emphasis on the learning for life and work (LLW) curriculum. Over the subsequent months, we undertook a comprehensive review of relevant literature, including academic research, policy frameworks and evaluative studies in order to further our understanding of the LLW curriculum and its implementation.

In August 2024, we hosted a stakeholder day and took evidence from representatives of the Department of Education, CCEA and the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe). Further meetings were held later in the year with stakeholders from Queen's University Belfast, the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI) and teaching staff from Strangford College.

In order to capture the perspectives of young people directly affected by the LLW curriculum, we developed a survey in 2025, which was distributed to post-primary schools and youth organisations across Northern Ireland. It explored young people's experiences of LLW, including the delivery methods, content areas covered and perceived gaps in the curriculum. A total of 1,467 responses were received. Although young people said that they recognised the value and intent of LLW, they expressed significant dissatisfaction with its current structure and delivery.

Based on that extensive engagement and consultation, we call for urgent reform of the LLW curriculum and make six recommendations: make LLW practical and useful; modernise and expand the curriculum; train and support teachers who want to teach LLW; make learning interactive and engaging; treat LLW with the respect that it deserves; and ensure that the youth voice is heard on curriculum matters.

Our recommendations aim to ensure that LLW becomes a more meaningful, engaging and practically relevant subject that better prepares young people for life beyond formal education. Our final report was presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education on 25 June 2025. It is also available on our website and in our legacy report.

Rights and Equality Committee

Paige Brennan-Collins: Between May 2024 and early 2025, the Youth Assembly Rights and Equality Committee undertook a comprehensive investigation into the rights of young people across Northern Ireland. Following a series of initial capacity-building workshops, we refined our topic to focus specifically on the experiences of young women in schools. We engaged with a variety of stakeholders from local schools, the Executive Office, officials from the office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Education Authority and Assembly researchers, exploring key issues such as sexism in education; relationships and sexuality education (RSE); school uniform policies; and pupil safety.

Those consultations highlighted the importance of rights-based approaches, the need for inclusive policy reform and the role of schools in challenging harmful societal norms. We also consulted directly with the young people through a large-scale survey distributed to post-primary schools and youth organisations. The survey received 1,137 responses, and the findings highlighted widespread concerns regarding gender inequality, period dignity and inconsistencies regarding RSE delivery.

Based on the evidence, we made eight recommendations: tackle gender norms and stereotypes from an early age; review and reform uniform policies; improve reporting systems for harassment and discrimination; address issues in a universal and inclusive way; equip pupils to navigate online misogyny and media influences; foster a culture of respect, inclusion and accountability; introduce sexism policies in all schools; and promote the youth voice. The final report was presented to junior Minister Reilly on 27 June 2025 and to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for the Executive Office on 2 July 2025. It is also available on our website and in our legacy report.

Health Committee

Lila Hamadi: In May 2024 the Youth Assembly Health Committee convened for a dedicated planning day to identify the priority issues affecting children and young people in Northern Ireland. Using the areas of concern highlighted in the Big Youth Survey and refined through a series of workshop- and discussion-based activities, we resolved to focus our inquiry on mental health provision in schools. That decision was informed by the persistent stigma surrounding mental health amongst young people and observed variability in the support services available.

To further understanding of the topic, we hosted a stakeholder day at Parliament Buildings with a variety of contributors, including the mental health champion for Northern Ireland and the head of the pupil support team from the Department of Education. That was followed by a meeting with senior officials from the Education and Training Inspectorate and a discussion with the Minister of Health. Finally, we organised a mental health stakeholder day to provide the opportunity for young people to share their experiences and perspectives. A total of 47 young people aged from 12 to 18 participated from a range of organisations, including Angel Eyes, Belfast YMCA, NICCY, Start360, Members of the UK Youth Parliament and the Children's Law Centre. The event provided the opportunity for a wide range of young people to share their experiences and perspectives, offering a direct insight into the lived experiences of young people regarding mental health. The event featured interactive workshops designed to facilitate open dialogue and learning. Based on this extensive engagement and consultation, the Youth Assembly Health Committee highlighted nine recommendations for improving the provision of mental health in schools.

2.30 pm

The first is to develop programmes in schools to help with stigma around mental health. The second is to provide designated spaces in schools, indoor and outdoor, to create a more open environment to normalise talking about mental health. The third is to prioritise effective counselling services in schools, with shorter waiting lists and the availability of self-referrals for all schools. The fourth is to invest in better training for Learning for Life and Work teachers and those teachers in pastoral or wellbeing teams. The fifth recommendation is to make mental health a statutory topic in the curriculum. The young people want to make that compulsory and feel that it should be taught every year from primary school. The sixth is to provide more whole-school activities for mental health that involve local communities. The seventh recommendation is to create pupil peer support groups in all schools, involving training and ongoing support for those who volunteer in that role. The eighth is to facilitate an ongoing youth voice in schools and government on this issue. Finally, the ninth recommendation is to ensure effective collaboration between the Department of Health and the Department of Education.

The final report was presented to the Minister of Health on 27 June 2025 and to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health on 3 July 2025. It is also available on our website and in our legacy report. That concludes our Committee reports and updates for the 2023 to 2025 mandate.

I would like to finish by saying that the story of this Youth Assembly, including details of all the events, meetings and Committee work that we undertook, can be read in our legacy report, which has been launched today. The Youth Assembly team will write to the Business Office to request that the report be presented, and a copy forwarded to the Assembly Library. All MLAs will receive copies next week.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Lila, and thanks to Sophie and Paige for your comprehensive updates on your Committee work. I look forward to reading your legacy report, and I was struck by what you said about the need for Education and Health to work together. That is something that I have been saying for a very long time, and there is certainly a lot more work to be done.

Reflections and Hopes for the Future

Mr Speaker: I am going to open the Floor to anybody who wishes to speak, and we hope that you will continue in the vein of being succinct and concise.

Bláthnaid Girvan: I have loved being a Member of the Youth Assembly team over the past two years, and it has been such an incredible experience. I hope that the new Youth Assembly Members will enjoy their time as much as I have enjoyed mine. If I could give them a piece of advice, it would be: if you are passionate about something, use every opportunity to voice your passion. For example, I am very passionate about raising awareness of young carers and the issues that they face, and, just like today, I have loved talking about that and used every chance that I have got to do so to decision makers, Committees and my fellow Members.

Shea McCarthy: When I was thinking of what to say today, my mind immediately cast to the first plenary session in December 2023. From what began as a daunting morning filled with fear of the unknown, I could never have anticipated how much I would enjoy my time in the Youth Assembly and the opportunities that it has provided. I recall waking up around 7.00 am filled with much nerves, greeted by my late granny, who was up and already had the tea and toast ready. That became a custom for most early mornings of the plenary sessions. With this being the first event since her passing, I felt that it was important to recognise the effort that she put in for me on the Youth Assembly, as well as my granda, who is up there somewhere and who sat in this seat in the Chamber for 18 years. You appreciate these things at the time but so much afterwards.

I want to give one piece of advice to the new Youth Assembly Members who are in the Public Gallery today. Get involved. When you get that weekly email, sign yourself up to as many events as you possibly can. Having the opportunity to have your say and to meet Ministers, Committees and other notable names does indeed make a difference that you will never forget.

My highlight over the past two years was giving a TV interview to RTÉ and BBC around votes at 16, something that I support and will continue to advocate for.

Finally, I thank the Youth Assembly staff, Lucy, Claire, Ren, Sophie and Millie, for the dedication and hard work that they have given us over the two years.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Shea. Give my regards to your grandfather. We had many a row in here.

Yvaine Parsons: I want to thank everyone: the people who were involved with the Youth Assembly, who are here all the time, and the people who are not. I thank everyone. I just throw that out there.

During my time with the Youth Assembly, I got to experience many, many, many things. I got to make new friends with similar interests, which, surprisingly, is not something that you get to experience every day. We got to meet people with similar interests and those without, and we got to debate about that and make progress towards common goals. I enjoyed debating topics that will definitely affect me and my education, and I loved sharing my opinions and responding to the allegations of others. I loved the fun days and planned activities. One activity of note, if you do not know what I am referring to, was the World Bank icebreaker exercise: in other words, the shape war.

I hope for several things in the future. I hope that the incoming Members will have just as much fun and as varied an experience as I have had and that the new Youth Assembly will continue to make progress towards the ultimate goal of making young people's lives much better. I also hope that the new Members will be able to speak out, make their voices heard and make many more changes towards the common goal of improving life today and life in the future.

Mia Murray: The Youth Assembly has been a major part of my life for the past two years. From the day that I got my acceptance email to the first, second, third, fourth and, now, fifth and final plenary sitting, it has been a whirlwind of excitement, disappointment, hard work and, honestly, some of the best opportunities that I have ever had.

To the new Youth Assembly Members, I say this: enjoy the fun and soak up every opportunity, conversation and moment, because it will be over before you realise. For me, it felt like a blink of evidence sessions; meetings with politicians, Ministers and legends of the political space; countless selfies, including sprinting down the Great Hall to grab a selfie with someone very important for the socials; briefings on what felt like a million Bills; and dreaded feedback forms. There were late and early buses, taxis and sleepy journeys down the road from Belfast. I do not know how many days I missed from school, yet every moment of catching up was worth it. I will miss everyone, and I thank Lucy, Millie, Sophie, Claire, Ren and Pearse, who is not here, who made all that possible over the past two years.

I wish the best of luck to the new Youth Assembly Members, who are sitting in the Public Gallery. Even if you have only half the fun and excitement that I have had, you will have memories to last you a lifetime. Embrace it.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mia. I hope that all you young ones up there are listening to these voices of experience.

Harry Robb: I start by saying a massive thank you to all the staff who have made the past two years possible. One of my favourite moments had to be at the Balmoral show, when I took everybody for a tour of the grounds to see what the craic was. Another was meeting you all and sharing our views on different things.

There is one piece of advice that I will give to all the new YAMs up there in the Gallery: say yes to things that scare you, because that is where your amazing stories will come from. I wish you all the best for the future. God bless.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, all the way from Cullybackey.

Ryan Kearney: It feels surreal to be standing here today, at our final plenary sitting, where, two years ago, I stood for the first time. Reflecting on my time here, I feel that it has been an amazing journey, full of amazing opportunities and experiences. I am so grateful to have had this experience and to have made so many friends among you all.

When I first stood here two years ago, I spoke about mental health. It is disappointing that, while I have seen significant personal growth in myself, there has been little change in the mental health sector. It is now harder for people to access appointments with professionals than it was two years ago. There is an increased demand. Schools do not have the resources to do more, and the overall lack of funding in this area is leading us down a dark path. My message to all new Youth Assembly Members is that I urge you to continue tackling many of the issues we have raised and campaigned on throughout our term, and good luck with yours. Thank you.

Georgia Watson: When the first plenary took place, this place intimidated me to the core. I had only ever been to Stormont once in my life, and now I was speaking in the Chamber. Since then, my confidence has improved immensely. The Youth Assembly has been the most incredible and interesting insight into the world of politics. Slowly, the MLAs have become more and more just like ordinary people who enjoy a wee chat, and even a picture in the photo booth, for example, John Blair. In the future, I would like to promote environmental action and help endangered species. My time in the Youth Assembly has taught me that determination and patience are the driving forces behind advancement. It is clear that every person in the Youth Assembly cares deeply about the issues that we face today, and I am so grateful to have met a group of such bold and dedicated people. To you guys and to all the new Youth Assembly Members, I say: do not stop being brave, determined, voicing your opinions and having fun. I feel now that I can genuinely change this world for the better. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Georgia. I found it intimidating when I first came in here, and I was 33.

Victoria Mulholland: I just want to say that the Youth Assembly has been an amazing opportunity, not only to explore different points of view from a diverse group of young people from across Northern Ireland, but also to make your voice heard. The Youth Assembly has made a tremendous effort to ensure that everyone's voice matters, which is why it has been a delight to serve as a Youth Assembly

Member. I hope that the new Youth Assembly Members will enjoy the Youth Assembly as much as I have. Thank you.

Victoria Da Cruz Marinho: The Youth Assembly brought many great things to me over the past years. I made friends who are now my first choices in life, and I loved the feeling of excitement knowing that I would see them again in only three months. I will miss the, "How long until the next Youth Assembly?" in the group chat and, "Can we do this in the Youth Assembly as a TikTok trend?". Getting to hear views, both the same and different from mine, yet being able to be so understood, was reassuring that I was not alone in my opinion. The Youth Assembly has been great for building friendships, sharing your voice, gaining life skills, and also not forgetting the amazing one-of-a-kind food that was provided for us. My advice to the new Youth Assembly Members is to just go for it. Do not have any regrets, put yourself down, or doubt yourself or your ability. Everyone has to start somewhere. Thank you.

Ciaran Creber: The last two years have easily been the best two years of my life. It has been an honour to serve and represent the constituency of South Antrim during the second mandate of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. I hope that Members of the third mandate can continue the legacy that we have left behind and continue to create a better Northern Ireland for the next generation. Thank you.

Catherine Fogarty: Over the past two years, I have had a lot of fun and have been given great opportunities throughout to express myself. I have made great friendships and met MLAs and other important people, whilst also gaining knowledge and confidence in situations that I would never have put myself in before. Those two years, although short, have made a massive impact not only on my life but on others, too. I want to thank Lucy and the team for the memories and for everything that the Youth Assembly have done for us.

To the new Youth Assembly Members, I say: do not be scared to have your voice heard. The whole purpose is to have the voices of young people your age. Take opportunities and have fun. Thank you.

Ross MacAskill: I have a few words for the outgoing YAMs and the incoming YAMs. For the outgoing YAMs, I wish you all the luck for everything that you do in life. I wish that you reach goals that you never thought you would and I hope that you do everything you want to do with your life. To the incoming YAMs, I hope that you do more than we did. While we did lots, I wish that you go above and beyond what we did, and you truly make a change in whatever you go for. Thank you.

Harry Johnston: How many 15-year-olds can say that they have debated in their regional Parliament? That is just one of the several great and unexpected experiences that I have had during my time at the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. I have been given many fantastic opportunities, from meeting the then American ambassador to being part of the group that presented its findings to the Assembly's Education Committee. So much has happened that I would have previously struggled to imagine. Thank you to all the Youth Assembly staff and everyone who worked hard behind the scenes. They have been crucial in making the Youth Assembly work.

2.45 pm

With all that in mind, I welcome the new Members to their role. You will soon have many phenomenal experiences, and please make the most of them. Do not be afraid to speak up. The Assembly staff are very supportive and non-judgemental. You will be great.

Mia Green: The Youth Assembly has helped me to grow as a young person. It has also given me the opportunity to gain skills and learn about the world of politics. I am sure that I will see most of you in this room in 10 years. If I had to give one piece of advice to the new group of young people, it would be this: be brave, put yourself out there and talk to the MLAs. My time at the Youth Assembly has been an amazing experience, and I cannot wait to see what everyone does next.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I am pretty sure that you will not see me in 10 years, but there is a fair chance of some of the rest of you appearing here.

Taisija Sestakova: When I joined the Youth Assembly, I had no idea about what politics was, but I had a passion and an interest. Even standing up in my place in the Chamber felt like the scariest thing in the world. However, over the past two years, I have become more confident, taken part in so many opportunities and, most importantly, spoken out about my views.

To all the new Youth Assembly Members who are listening, please speak out. I wish that I had been more confident at the beginning of the mandate. You might feel as though the Members around you have more political knowledge, better public-speaking skills or better connections, but you are all in the same boat. You may feel as though you are not fit for the job of advocating for whatever it is that you are passionate about, but who is? You are here today. You took the initiative and signed up for your role, which means that something inside you is pushing you to make young voices heard. Use that inner feeling as a lever for your actions. Do not shy away. Think of how many great things would never have happened if people had shied away. As Michael Jackson once said:

“If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself, and then make a change.”

Cara Ní Cheallaigh: Dia daoibh. Cara Ní Cheallaigh is ainm dom. Bhí mo thréimhse i dTionól na nÓg fíorspeisialta dom agus beidh sí ar m'intinn go deo. Bhual mé le cairde úra iontacha. D'fhoghlaim mé a lán faoin chomhoibriú, faoin cheannaireacht agus faoi mhuinín a bheith agam as mo ghuth féin. Mhathaigh mé gur chuidigh mé, fiú ar bhealach beag, chun athrú dearfach a dhéanamh agus chun guth na n-Óg a chur chun tosaigh. D'oscail an taithí seo mo shúile do bhealaí gairme i gcearta an duine agus sa chothromaíocht. Réimse nach raibh mé ag smaoineamh faoi roimhe. Mhúscail sí speis ionam le bheith ag obair ar son éagsúlacht an duine agus ar son an cheartais. Táim fíorbhúioch as an deis seo, as na cairde atá agamanois, agus as an inspioráid a fuair mé ar an turas seo. Guím gach rath ar an chéad tréimhse eile do Thionól na nÓg. Bainigí sult as gach nójiméad, glacaigí páirt go gníomhach agus ná bíodh eagla oraibh bhur nglór a úsáid. Tá sin an-tábhachtach mar gur sibhse a bheas ag déanamh difríocht don todhchaí. Go raibh míle maith agaibh agus míle buíochas.

[Translation: Hello all. My name is Cara Ní Cheallaigh. My time with the Youth Assembly was incredibly special to me and I will remember it forever. I met new, amazing friends. I learned about cooperation, leadership and having confidence in my own voice. I feel that I have helped, be that in a small way, to make a positive change and to have brought the voice of youth to the fore. This experience has opened my eyes to career paths in human rights and in equality, fields that I had never previously thought about. It has awoken an interest in me to work for diversity and for justice. I am so grateful for the opportunity, for the friends that I now have and for the inspiration that this journey has instilled within me. I wish the next generation of the Youth Assembly every success. Enjoy every moment, actively take part and never be afraid to use your voice. This is so important because it is you who will be changing the future. Thank you very much.]

Caleb Hazley: I will try to keep this short. This mandate was greatly impactful and very useful for me, while also allowing me to make a positive change in my area and the country. The Youth Assembly made everything that we did very enjoyable and manageable for us who, at the beginning, did not have many public-speaking skills. One thing that I will say to all the new incoming YAMs is this: put your name down for every opportunity that you can get, because the more you give to the Youth Assembly, the more you will get out of it. The more often you practise the skills with people here, the better and more confident you will get at those.

Nadia Mackiewicz: I will be very honest with you: I joined the Youth Assembly when I was 14 because I was really bored, but I find myself not being very bored these days. I have really enjoyed my time at the Youth Assembly and have had so many opportunities. One of my core memories is of my mummy, the Veterans Commissioner and I chasing down the Speaker to get a photo of him at VE Day. It was a fantastic time.

It was a great way to start my volunteering journey. I had never done anything like that before I started, and now I have done events in London, and have loved my time in the Youth Assembly. I thank the current Youth Assembly Members. I have made lifelong friends here. I specifically thank Lucy. I know that you sometimes hate me, but, genuinely, you have been so amazing during the two years that I have been in the mandate, and we could not have done it without you.

I will say this to the current Youth Assembly Members: make friends, do not be shy and remember that no idea is stupid. Anything that you say can change young people's lives. Hopefully, this is not the last

time that I will be in the Chamber; I plan on being a politician in the future. Sorry if I am getting a bit emotional, but please enjoy your time, speak your mind and remember that this entire thing is for the future of young people.

Brooke Ewing: My time in the Youth Assembly has filled me with passion and determination. The Youth Assembly has taught me to speak publicly and work with others but, most importantly, to be confident in myself. I want to take this opportunity to thank the Youth Assembly team. Lucy, Sophie and Millie, thank you for all the hard work that you do for us and that you will do for the next cohort. We know that we are not an easy bunch to work with. I also thank our previous Youth Assembly team members Claire, Ren and Pearse. Importantly, I wish good luck to the new YAMs. I know that each and every one of you is full of passion and determination, and I cannot wait to see the work that you do, the friends that you make along the way and the lasting impact that you will have on our generation.

To the outgoing YAMs in the Chamber, I wish you all good luck. I have seen your hard work and commitment over the past two years, and I know that you will go far. I hope that you will not forget the memories and the lessons that we have learned along the way, and I hope to see some of you in the Chamber in a few years' time. You will be fantastic. I am proud of the work that we have done, and I cannot wait to see what comes next.

Charlie McFarland: I started in the Youth Assembly by saying that we must end the homework. *[Laughter.]* It has not ended, but I will continue my fight like I have done for the past two years. However, we do not really matter anymore. It is the ladies and gentlemen in the audience who actually matter. I want you to continue the fight to end the abomination that we know as homework, *[Laughter]* and, remember: you are in Stormont, so the least that you could do is wear a suit.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr McFarland. I had a one-man campaign on that issue about 50 years ago, and it reflected in my GCSE results, but, nonetheless.

Donal Mullan: I also thank Lucy and the Youth Assembly staff for the opportunities and for the kindness and support that they have provided over the past two years. It has been a great two years, and I have learnt so much about policies and the important changes that they can make to people's lives. I have also learnt a lot about the great people who are all in this room.

Moving forward, I would like to use this experience to improve the lives of others in this country, and I hope that the next cohort will influence change as well.

Aiden Mac Dougall: I thank all the staff who have helped us on our journey, and I wish the new YAMs the best of luck.

Leon Cyriac: I remember walking through the doors of Stormont and sitting in the Assembly Chamber for the first time as a Youth Assembly Member on 2 December 2023, which is nearly two years ago now. It is hard to believe. Time goes so fast. I would like to say a huge thank you to everyone who has made my time on the Youth Assembly an amazing experience, especially Lucy and Claire, who has been here for most of the two years, and the rest of the Youth Assembly team.

I would also like to thank the rest of the Youth Assembly Members, who were kind and friendly to me and made this experience as amazing as it was. I will miss you all. To the new Youth Assembly Members: I wish you the best of luck for your two-year mandate. I hope that you will all enjoy it. Thank you and farewell, Youth Assembly.

Harrison Kerr: As our mandate comes to an end, I am very proud of what we have achieved together over the past two years; the discussions that we have led, the voices that we have amplified, and the ideas that we have turned into action that will affect young people for decades to come. It has been a privilege to work alongside so many passionate young people who care deeply about bettering and saving our society. To the amazing Youth Assembly team: thank you for everything; the support, laughs and guidance, and for believing in us every step of the way. You have made this experience something truly special, and we will always be grateful for it. Finally, to the next Youth Assembly: hopefully, you can take what we have started and make it even stronger and be even better. The future is yours now. I wish you all the best. Thank you.

Rory Brown: I would quickly like to say that the Youth Assembly is unlike any other opportunity that I have ever experienced. It is unlike any other opportunity not just in Northern Ireland but in the world. It is world-leading in what it does. I hope that the new Members coming in will find it just as significant an experience as I have. I hope that they outdo me, make more of an impact than I did and throw themselves at everything that comes across in the weekly Friday emails. Lastly, I would like to thank the incoming Youth Assembly Members for being here, the Youth Assembly staff and, of course, my fellow Members. Thank you all for this.

Lorcan McCusker: I have very much enjoyed everyone's commitment to the Youth Assembly and talking through the complex problems that we face, and solutions to them, in the Youth Assembly. I very much enjoyed the plenaries and talking to the politicians. I enjoyed being very active in Northern Ireland's political life. I enjoyed very much the food that was provided and the craic with the Youth Assembly team and Members. I hope that, in the future, the incoming YAMs will have a great time, as we have had, and continue to make a difference.

Mr Speaker: Good man, Lorcan. I am glad that you recognise that the issues are complex. Very often, the adults do not.

Fionn McCoy: As I stand here today, I have a mixture of emotions. I am sad that, in a few hours' time, I will leave Stormont for the final time as a Youth Assembly Member. I look forward, however, to new opportunities, none of which would have been possible without the Youth Assembly.

We would all need a sleeping bag if I were to stand here and list all my highlights of the past two years in the Youth Assembly. There were a few standout moments: meeting the Health Committee to discuss the Tobacco and Vapes Bill; attending the Public Accounts Committee to report on child poverty; and, again, meeting the Health Committee and Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt, to present the Youth Assembly Health Committee report into mental health provision in schools. I would like to thank all the politicians and departmental staff who engaged with us during our time at the Youth Assembly. We simply could not have done it without you. It is so heartening to be listened to and for our work to be acted on. I ask all politicians to work with the next Youth Assembly, and beyond.

Today, I am also reflecting on how much the Youth Assembly has changed me for the better. I have gained incredibly useful skills that only an organisation like the Youth Assembly could give you. I think that I speak on behalf of the whole Youth Assembly when I say that the Youth Assembly team has been amazing. You answered our messages, emails and tangible questions, and greeted us with a smile, even when you might not have felt that way. We owe a massive thank you to Pearse, Lorraine, Sophie, Ren, Millie, Claire and, of course, Lucy for all that you have done for us.

Finally, I will speak to the next Youth Assembly Members. Being a Youth Assembly Member is a great opportunity. Grab it with open arms. You may get the impression from listening to us today that we are a group of academics who have studied political philosophy for over 20 years. I can assure you that that is not true. Do not leave here with the urge to go home, put on the TV and watch all 'Question Time' episodes that were broadcast in the past 10 years. Do not underestimate your power: you know more than you think. I look forward to sitting on the sidelines and watching the undoubtedly great work that you will do. If you ever need anything, please do not hesitate to reach out.

3.00 pm

Alexandra Bowman: I am truly honoured to have spent the past two years with the Youth Assembly. My confidence has grown, and I have made many new friends. Thank you to everyone who has helped the Youth Assembly over this mandate: you made it an amazing opportunity for everyone involved. I have developed so many skills that I will carry with me for life, and for that I am very grateful. Together, we made a tangible difference.

Standing here today, I am sad to leave, but I will leave the new Youth Assembly Members with some advice: take every opportunity to speak out and get involved. If you do, you, too, will create the memories and bonds like those created in this Youth Assembly. You can be the one to make a difference. Good luck and thank you.

Molly Adams: When I signed up for the Youth Assembly two years ago, I was under the impression that it was a short few-week-long educational workshop. Needless to say, I was very wrong. Over the

past two years, I have been given so many wonderful opportunities through my role as a YAM, and I am eternally grateful for every single one of them.

As a young woman, I am a dedicated feminist, and I care deeply about the issue of misogyny in Northern Ireland. The Youth Assembly gave me a platform to voice my opinions and to learn from others through meeting the women's caucus and attending Youth Assembly plenary sittings and Microsoft Teams meetings. Being not just allowed but invited to share my views on issues that I am passionate about was more valuable than words can ever express.

I thank the people who work hard to make the Youth Assembly possible, and say to the new Youth Assembly Members that it is an experience that they will never forget.

Willow Sachno: I would like to thank those members of staff who made all this possible: the Youth Assembly staff, past and present, the Stormont staff and the caterers. They all helped to make us feel welcome over the past two years. The logistics of having 90 teenagers in the seat of Government must have been a headache at times, but I think that I speak for us all when I say how much it has been appreciated.

Being in the Youth Assembly for the past two years has played an important part in shaping me as a young adult. I will take into the years ahead the lessons that I have learned, and I hope that the new Youth Assembly Members do the same.

Erin Magee: I want to thank everyone who has guided us on our journey over the past two years. I am grateful for the opportunity, which I embraced more than I ever thought I would.

The biggest piece of advice that I would give to the new Members is to just speak out, and do not be afraid to put yourselves forward for things, as it will grow your confidence and ensure that your experience is as fulfilling as it can be. Thanks again to everyone and to all the staff, particularly Lucy and Claire, who worked so closely with us these past two years to give us countless opportunities during our mandate.

Matthew Moore: When I walked through these doors two years ago, I had no clue what I was doing and thought that maybe I should not have come. I want to thank all the Youth Assembly staff who helped me and pushed me to do things that I am now happy to have done. I also thank all the Members of the Youth Assembly, who have always made it worthwhile coming here. I will miss seeing a lot of you, but I have a feeling that I will see you in the Chamber again. Of course, I thank all the MLAs and Ministers who gave us the opportunity to speak to them and have our voices heard. To those MLAs and Ministers who were, perhaps, a bit more hesitant to meet us, I say: make sure to give the next Youth Assembly Members that opportunity.

To the new YAMs I say that any laws that are made here will affect our future. Always make sure to make your voice heard so that MLAs know your opinions and make sure that the future will be a good one.

Darragh Kerr: Standing here at our final plenary is bittersweet. On the one hand, I am proud of our accomplishments, and, on the other, I cannot believe that this is our final day together. Time really does fly.

Despite that, I look forward to the future of the Youth Assembly with great optimism, and I know that the legacy and hard work will continue with the new Members. It has been a privilege to have been handed a vast array of opportunities and experiences to advocate for youth voices and to talk directly to decision makers. I am taking away many skills and much knowledge from my tenure. Going forward, I am committed to advocating for widening youth participation in politics.

Embrace this opportunity and do not be afraid to speak up, as your voice is important and deserves to be heard.

Daniel Gracey: First, I thank every young person who has contributed to the Youth Assembly for consistently helping the group make relevant and important changes to Northern Ireland.

I hope that the new Youth Assembly Members will focus on voicing what affects their lives. Two years ago, at the first plenary sitting, I shared with everybody how my mum is affected by inequality relating to disabled people and how she has overcome many challenges that come with commonly not having

the same opportunities as able-bodied people. Thankfully, that has been touched on by the Youth Assembly, even if it was lightly. I encourage every new Youth Assembly Member to speak at every opportunity on what affects their lives.

Charlotte Strange: I thank the Youth Assembly for an amazing two years full of memories. Some highlights were our Committee days and the NI Women's Caucus event, as meeting female MLAs definitely inspired me to have a future in politics. I am grateful for the countless opportunities that I have been given to use my voice to raise issues that are worth advocating, and I have loved making so many new friends from across the country. I hope that the new Members will seize the opportunity and enjoy every second.

Daniel McGucken: I say this to you all: we did it. That is two years of this incredible experience. There have been so many days when we have gone to events and Committee meetings, and this is our fifth and final plenary sitting. I say this to the ones up above in the Galleries: make sure that you be yourself, put your views out there and make a real impact.

Mr Speaker: We need someone up there to speak for the farmers, Daniel, don't we?

Paige Brennan-Collins: My time at the Youth Assembly has been a one-of-a-kind experience. By taking this opportunity, I have gained many new skills and met many amazing people. The Youth Assembly has helped me grow as a person, has opened my eyes to the world of politics and leadership and has led me down many new paths that fuel my new-found passion for politics.

My one piece of advice to the new Youth Assembly Members is to engage: talk to new people, sign up for events and do not be afraid to speak out. That is what you are here for, and I promise you that your voice will be heard.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank the Youth Assembly team and all those who have engaged with us. Without you, I would not have had the confidence or the skill to stand here and give this speech. Good luck with the new mandate, and I look forward to seeing what you will do next.

James Maginn: Well, what a whirlwind. For better or worse, I do not think that many of us quite knew what we were signing up for two years ago when we signed up for the Youth Assembly. Our thanks, of course, go to every MLA and Minister who has engaged with us over the two-year mandate, as well as every unelected official and member of the Civil Service: your constant dedication to engaging with young people and hearing their views shows your dedication to investing in the future of people in Northern Ireland, and we encourage you to engage with the next mandate.

While trying to avoid the cliché of picking a best moment, I feel truly honoured to have worked on the Rights and Equality Committee and on our report on young women's rights in schools. It was a brutal eye-opener on the challenges faced by young women in schools. I also had the profound honour of presenting our report to the Committee for the Executive Office. As much as it was a really brutal eyeopener, it has also helped me understand the issues faced by young women in our society.

A special thanks also goes to the current and former Youth Assembly team members, as well as the wider team here at Stormont. Your work with the Youth Assembly shows your dedication to investing in the future of young people in Northern Ireland, as well as in me as a person.

Weronika McNulty: It is hard to believe that it has been over two years since our Youth Assembly journey began, but, of course, time flies when you are having fun. Reflecting on my time as a Youth Assembly Member, I have to say that it has been a truly one-of-a-kind experience and has changed me as a person. Thanks to all the staff, everyone who has helped us along the way and all my fellow YAMs, I have developed so many new skills, made new friends and created memories that will last forever.

For all the new YAMs here today, I encourage you to have fun and make the most of your time as a Youth Assembly Member because it will go far too quickly. Make sure that you always use your voice and share your opinion, because when enough enthusiastic young people do that, we can really make a difference. Thank you.

Vanessa Chojak: Being in the Youth Assembly has made me grow as an individual in many ways. It has taught me to be confident and to speak out when the opportunity arises. I have met loads of new friends who I know will be lifelong, and I am grateful for that. Thank you to all the amazing people who

run the Youth Assembly, who have allowed me to stand here today being grateful for my journey. Everything that I have learned will stick with me for life. It has been an amazing two years. For the new Youth Assembly Members, just be yourself and make the most of this incredible opportunity.

Lila Hamadi: I hope that I can read my handwriting, but it should be fine. I became a Member of the Youth Assembly when I was 15, and, as I finish today, I am 18, and I have felt a bit like the mummy of the group at times. The Youth Assembly has been a part of my life from childhood and now into young adulthood. I do not know whether Stephanie is in the Chamber, or maybe she has already started the party outside. On the day that the US Ambassador asked me to introduce her to the group, Stephanie told me that she knew that I could do it, and it was the moment that she saw a change in my personality and my confidence grew.

The past two years of the mandate have been busy, but, more importantly, they have been fun. I would like to say that I have a particular favourite or special moment, but it is impossible to choose. When writing my speech, I realised that it is not just about what we have done, it more about who we have done it with. Lucy and Claire were with us from the start, and I now think of them as some of the most influential women in my life, along with Ren, Sophie and Millie who joined along the way. I hope that the new YAMs have a similar experience and come away with the same lifelong friendships, which can carry them through into their adulthood. Thank you for everything and good luck.

Kerrie Finnegan: I am very grateful for my time in the Youth Assembly. It has increased my confidence and public-speaking skills. It was incredible for my voice to be heard, and for me to give my views on laws, key issues and the politics that affect young people in Northern Ireland. It has been life-changing to have had the opportunity to make an impact on the Assembly, and some of my favourite contributions involved exploring the mental health of young people, the Vaping and Tobacco Bill and meeting Naomi Long. The skills, lessons and experiences that I have acquired here are things that I will carry forever.

To the new Youth Assembly Members, I want you to know that no matter how confident you are, or what personal struggles you may be dealing with, every single one of you can be here and speak passionately to improve the lives of young people.

The Speaker: If anyone else wants to speak, will they stand up, and then I will know where you all are. Does anyone else want to speak? Ellie will be our last Member to speak. Does anyone else want to speak other than Ellie? I do not want to close the session without everyone having had a chance to speak.

Ellie Clarke: I have really enjoyed my time with the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. I am thankful for the opportunities that I have been afforded to make a difference in our communities. I have especially enjoyed working with the Rights and Equality Committee, and I am sure that its members will agree that researching and presenting on the rights of young female students was rewarding work. It is a particular interest of mine that I am passionate about, hence, my advice to the new YAMs is that this experience is what you make of it. You are here for two years, either way, so you might as well pursue something that you are interested in and try new things while you can.

I thank Lucy and the team, past and present, for the past two years. I thank my fellow Members for all the good times and the friends I have made. Good luck wherever you go next, and I am sure that you will be great. Thank you.

The Speaker: Thank you so much for bringing your reflections to us; it was very good.

Speaker's Closing Remarks

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes today's plenary proceedings. In closing, I commend all of you for your professionalism and passion, which is consistently demonstrated by you all as Youth Assembly Members, and today has been no exception. Assembly Members have spoken highly of the Youth Assembly, noting the valuable insights and perspectives that you have brought to their work. Each of you has earned a reputation for your curiosity, enthusiasm, maturity and ability to engage respectfully with differing views while remaining focused on working together for the future. I thank all of the Assembly team who played a part in supporting the Youth Assembly's work. I acknowledge the vital role that is played by your parents, teachers and communities in encouraging your involvement.

3.15 pm

I will also say something about public speaking before I conclude. I have seen an immense difference in confidence in you all today, compared with your earlier attendances at the Youth Assembly. Whatever you do in life, particularly when it comes to public speaking, the one thing that you need is to have a degree of confidence. Sometimes, even if you do not know what you are talking about, you can pull the wool over people's eyes if you say it confidently. *[Laughter.]* It is much better, however, to learn a wee bit about what you intend to say beforehand. Having the ability to deliver your remarks confidently is something that will always stand to you.

Taking part in this forum will have built your confidence so much and it will be a huge asset to you going forward. My youngest daughter was very quiet until she took drama lessons. Her confidence increased so much just by doing drama at GCSE. It is all about the ability to get up in front of a crowd of people and not freeze. You may feel as though you do not know what to say or do; just do it. Just talk as if there were only one person in the room, or as you would to your friends, your teacher, your family or whomever it happens to be. Do not allow a crowd to inhibit you or make you afraid. I have done a lot of television and radio interviews in my time, but you are talking to one person. You need to get that focus in your head that your words may be heard by hundreds of thousands of people, but it

is the same as if you were talking to one person. If you can do that and deliver what you have to say confidently, it will make all the difference. People may not think that I am a very good public speaker, but at least I have a wee bit of confidence. I encourage all of you to take that bit of advice from me. I am pretty seasoned and have been around for nearly 30 years in public office. As you go forward, I encourage you to speak out, speak confidently and not be afraid to express your point of view, whatever that happens to be.

All the best to everybody in the class of 2025 — the Youth Assembly of 2025. Thank you so much for your endeavours and efforts, and for the work that you have put in. Well done to each and every one of you. I wish you well in whatever you do in life, be it political or non-political. There is a world of opportunity waiting for you out there. Go out and embrace it and take it on. Do not let people's criticism get you down; rise above it, stay strong and make a great job of whatever you have the opportunity to do. Thank you.

Adjourned at 3.19 pm.