



**YOUTH
ASSEMBLY**
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

OFFICIAL REPORT

**Youth Assembly Mandate Three 2025-27
1st Sitting**

At 2:30 pm on Saturday 24 January 2026
Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast.



Members of the Youth Assembly

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Isabella Cooper	Ted Cummings
Isabella Coughlan	Tiffany-Jade Tagro-Loughran
Jack Magill	Tomila Staugaite
Jacob Bunting	Tony Calvin
James Larsen	Zoë Gaines

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Plenary Session

Saturday 24 January 2026

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

Speaker's Welcome

Mr Speaker: Welcome to the first plenary sitting of the third Youth Assembly, here in the Assembly Chamber of Parliament Buildings. I am delighted to be here today, and I congratulate all of you on becoming Members of the Youth Assembly. It is great to see you take your seats for my first plenary meeting with you and to see the Chamber so well filled. The Assembly Commission and Members of the Assembly will be keen to engage with you in the months ahead to get your views on the issues that will affect you, other young people who did not make it onto the Youth Assembly, and others who have an interest.

I will introduce the two people next to me. Lesley Hogg is the Assembly's Chief Executive, and Lucy McClelland is the Youth Assembly manager. My role as Speaker of the Assembly is to chair the sittings and make sure that everything runs smoothly. That is not always easy, but, most times, we overcome.

Let us move on to what is ahead of us today. Today is the first of many opportunities that you will have to make your voices heard. Today is about you shaping the work that you will undertake in this mandate. During today's proceedings, once you take your Pledge of Membership and ratify the code of conduct, you will have the chance to debate the top issues from the Big Youth Survey and then to vote on your three priorities, which will form the basis of your Committees.

You have heard from the young people of Northern Ireland through the Big Youth Survey, and I hope that you all have had an opportunity to read the survey report, which contains a summary of the views of young people from all over Northern Ireland. I am delighted that 1,700 young people completed the survey. That is a very high number. Well done for promoting the survey among your peers. The top issues, which you will debate today, are: health; education; addiction; rights and equality; racism; artificial intelligence; jobs; environment; immigration; economy; and agriculture.

I will try to hear from all of you who want to speak today. Do not worry if you have not prepared a speech. I do not prepare many speeches. I have to read more in this role, but, when I was an ordinary MLA, I liked to speak from the heart. If you just want to make a brief point or even just say that you agree with someone else, that is a speech, and I will be glad to hear from you.

When other people are speaking, listen to what they have to say. That is about showing each other respect. I vehemently disagree with many Members in the Chamber, but they need to be given their place to speak. If you disagree, you get up and express your point of view. You can be as strong and as powerful as you like in expressing that point of view; you just do not get personal about the other individual. As they say in sporting terms, play the ball and not the person. That is what we encourage you to do in the Chamber. Stick to the issues as opposed to the individuals who are making the case.

While the discussions might involve serious subjects, I hope that you will enjoy today's proceedings. If you are good at humour, or even if you are not that good at it, sometimes a little

humour and a little banter help to make for a better atmosphere for everybody. So, do not be afraid to use a bit of humour if you want to and help to build relationships between all sides. That helps to get business done, even when it is challenging.

I hope that you make the most of today and, most of all, that you enjoy yourselves. If you need any help at all today, please let one of the team know and we will be happy to assist you.

Pledge of Membership

Mr Speaker: This pledge was taken by Members in the first and second mandates, and now it is your turn.

Moved —

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

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

All Members: Aye.

Resolved:

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

Mr Speaker: Congratulations on officially becoming Members of the Youth Assembly.

Confirmation of the Code of Conduct

Mr Speaker: We now move to the Code of Conduct. Members have already discussed and agreed the Code of Conduct that will guide their actions as Youth Assembly Members.

Moved —

That Members of the Youth Assembly confirm that they will abide by the Code of Conduct, as previously agreed through discussion.

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

All Members: Aye.

Resolved:

That Members of the Youth Assembly confirm that they will abide by the Code of Conduct, as previously agreed through discussion.

Mr Speaker: The Code of Conduct is confirmed and is now in effect.

Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly

Mr Speaker: We will proceed to the main part of our plenary, which is the discussion of issues.

Through the Big Youth Survey, you and other young people identified 11 topics for discussion and debate at today's plenary meeting. I will open the Floor for around 40 minutes. Speakers should keep their remarks brief to allow as many contributions as possible. Members should not talk over each other, and they should respect the views of colleagues.

If you wish to speak, you should rise in your place: that is what normally happens in the Chamber. If, physically, you cannot rise, you can raise your hand, and I will, of course, accept that as well. When one of you is called to speak, everyone else should take their seats and listen to the contribution. When that person has finished speaking, you should rise again in your place or raise your hand so that we know that you want to speak. When you are called to speak, please remember to wait for the light on your mic, then state your name; that helps everyone to know each other. This time, I will probably say, "The guy in the white shirt" or "The girl with the blue top" or whatever, because it will take us a while to get to know you all.

The Floor is open and we are clear to proceed. Who is going to be the first Member to speak?

Kian Hawes: Is cúis mhór bróid dom bheith ag labhairt anseo inniu. [*Translation: It gives me great pride to be here speaking today.*] Irish is a growing and flourishing language, with more and more people learning it each year. This year alone, Queen's University has seen a 227% increase in the number of people looking to learn the language, yet for far too long Irish has been underfunded, with funding today being lower than it was 25 years ago. Twenty of Foras na Gaeilge's community projects are facing significant cutbacks, and Irish-medium schools face serious challenges, with many dealing with issues such as poor accommodation and a lack of post-primary options. I believe that that can change and that we can help to campaign and advocate for fairer funding for Irish if we vote for rights and equality as one of our priorities.

The Irish language is for everyone, and it is time that we treated it with the respect that it deserves, with fair funding and opportunities. After all, cearta teanga, cearta daonna. [*Translation: language rights are human rights.*]

Mr Speaker: I encourage people to give their name at the outset, and maybe the constituency that they represent.

Isabella Coughlan: I represent West Tyrone. It may not be a tonic of arsenic or a leaf of deadly nightshade — in fact, it appears on the average dinner plate — yet it is the stealthiest and most deadly of poisons: a food allergy. At the age of eight, I suffered a life-threatening anaphylactic allergic reaction, leading to an eventual diagnosis of a severe nut allergy. Since that fateful day, my daily routine has undergone many drastic changes, placing additional burden on not only myself but family members and friends.

However, I can state with confidence that I am not alone in those struggles. Approximately 2% of Northern Ireland's population is diagnosed with a food allergy. Although that may not seem substantial, it equates to a shockingly high estimate of 38,000 individuals.

An allergy is a serious condition that is not given the attention of which it is in dire need. Effectively, an allergy is someone's personal poison, and, annually, across the United Kingdom, allergies result in 20 to 30 fatalities from anaphylactic shock. I remain steadfast in my belief that the 38,000 afflicted citizens of our nation deserve better.

As someone who spends weekends and holidays in the Republic of Ireland, I must admit to finding its manner of coping with allergies much superior to that of Northern Ireland. Upon entering any

food-providing business, you will notice on its menu the 14 food allergens numbered and listed beside any dish to which they correspond. That serves as an unerring instruction to consumers on food content, and eliminates the confusion that I and countless others experience daily. In the Republic of Ireland, that is stipulated in law, and it is my fervent wish that that be emulated here.

The fact is simple: the measures taken to protect the health of allergy sufferers in the place that they call home are not stringent enough. It is not a choice. It is not an option. It is a matter of life and death.

Logan Scott-McKinley: I represent Mid Ulster. Like me, you will have recently gone into a shop and noticed that prices have gone up, that your parents may be more stressed about bills and that the price of school lunches has skyrocketed. Some of us may be able to afford those changes, but one in five of us may not.

As young people, we must consider the cost of living and the economy of Northern Ireland. The cost of living is an issue of incredible importance, as it affects all of us and directly impacts on our quality of life. Some 23% of Northern Ireland's young people live in relative poverty and, according to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 20% live in absolute poverty. Those are issues that young people cannot avoid.

As Members of the Youth Assembly, it is our responsibility to ensure that the voice of young people is heard on certain key issues that are causing the rising cost of living, such as food costs, energy bills and housing prices. We need our voices heard today so that, tomorrow, policy enables us to access affordable student accommodation, reasonable rents and an achievable dream of owning our own home. To protect our tomorrows, we must invest in infrastructure and housing, improve energy efficiency and fix the problems with our sewerage system. As young people, we can together create a more economically fair and equal society. To address the cost of living, we must focus on the economy so that we can all afford tomorrow.

Dáire McConnell: I represent Belfast North. Before I properly start, I thank Kian Hawes for making his point. As a fellow Irish speaker, I genuinely agree, and I will be voting for rights and equality.

My constituency of Belfast North has some of the most deprived areas in the entire North, and, day to day, I see people struggling to meet bills and put food on the table. It is not good enough. Some 10% of people have over 50% of the wealth. I do not think that that is fair. I believe that economy should be our focus, and that we need to create a system and a place where people can come, work and live an enjoyable life and not be sitting saying, "I can't pay the bills this month".

It is not easy, but do you know what? I feel that we have the ability to change for good, so that is why I will be voting for economy as well.

Tomila Staugaite: I represent Newry and Armagh. The economy affects everyone, even young people, because it shows how expensive everyday life is and what our futures might look like. The price of everything keeps rising, families feel stressed and basic things like housing, transport and living alone seem harder to reach. A strong economy supports jobs, schools, healthcare and communities whilst a weak one can lead to poverty and poor mental health.

We need our economy to be more accessible to everyone. If it gets easier for only the rich and the average, the poor will get left behind. If the economy works for all, it means that people can afford basic human necessities, that more businesses will succeed and that kids and families will not need to worry about money, needing a safe place to live or whether they can afford to eat. The economy needs to be fair and open so that more people can get good jobs, a good education, and live normally and succeed in their communities. That matters because decisions about the economy today will directly affect the opportunities that we will have in the future and in our lives.

2.45 pm

Matthew Wilson: I agree with the economy point, but part of the economy is, obviously, jobs. Job creation and employment is the foundation of stable life. Fulfilling jobs are often linked to mental and physical well-being. Part of the economy should be about focusing on getting jobs.

In a recent article, the vice chancellor of Queen's University Belfast urged investment for young people for economic gain. That is because 30% of students who are trained in NI go abroad to Great Britain and stuff like that. We are paying to have people trained and for them to gain expertise, and they just go off somewhere else. Basically, we need those people to stay in our country and use their skills to our advantage. Most kids our age do not like to think of jobs. There is a bit of a shy away from it, but it is very important. It is our future. We have to get employed if we want to keep living. We need to incentivise graduates to stay and work in our wee country.

Raphael MacMillan Sharkey: Rights and equality is the most important priority. Many people feel unrepresented, as they are unable to access the most basic human rights. Later this week, I will speak about addressing inequality in school uniforms. Some girls are forced to wear skirts at school. Equality is very important to me, as a child of a two-mum family. Inequality still exists.

On another matter, I live on the shores of Lough Neagh and have seen the sickening decline in the ecosystem. The consequences are far-reaching and long-lasting. It is something that I am very passionate about. It needs to be dealt with.

Also, I am the son of two teachers. I have heard many opinions from the perspective of pupils, parents and teachers, so I know that there is a lot of scope for improvement and change for the better in our education system.

To finish off, I encourage everyone to at least vote rights and equality to help us to make a positive difference.

Odhrán Carlin: I represent West Belfast. Addiction should be our top priority. It can take many forms, but one that is rising among young people our age is vaping. It is being represented as safer, but, really, it is not. It increases the risk of heart attacks and lung disease. Even worse, we do not know what is contained in some of the vapes. Vapes are just the modern version of cigarettes.

Eimear Turkington: Statistically, Northern Ireland is one of the most dangerous places for women in Europe. Some 98% of women have reported experiencing gender-based violence in their life, with half experiencing it before the age of 11. Many girls, including me, have been in an uncomfortable or dangerous situation due to their gender. It needs to stop. I would like you to vote for rights and equality, so that the Youth Assembly has the opportunity to address this issue.

Cillían McGlinchey: I represent West Tyrone. Rights and equality are the foundation of any fair society. They decide who is heard, who is protected and who gets the chance to succeed. When people are treated unequally, division grows and trust breaks down. Equality does not mean that everyone is the same; it means that everyone is treated with the same dignity and respect, no matter who they are or where they come from. Rights protect the vulnerable and hold power to account. If we want a peaceful and just future, we must stand up for rights and demand equality for all, not just in words but through our actions.

Jacob Bunting: People who live in Northern Ireland are under-aware of what is happening to the environment. The amount of pollution and waste dumping is causing death to wildlife and people who are affected by it. I have seen the state that Lough Neagh is in. We should have our voices heard so that we can give people a safe and flourishing Northern Ireland to live in. I will vote for the environment.

Charlie Cairns: Artificial intelligence is a plague on our society — especially deepfakes. Images of women and children make up the vast majority of all deepfakes, and a large number of them are explicit. The Royal School Armagh had a recent issue with students having explicit deepfake images created and shared. Many letters have been sent home about that. Better restrictions need to be placed on AI. Elon Musk, the creator of Grok, has said that human-modifying images are now to be paid-only, and, in certain countries, they will be banned altogether. However, VPNs and a bank account make that completely obsolete. We need to completely ban human-modifying imaging, and better charges need to be brought against people who allow it. That will create more accountability online and in society generally for people walking down the street.

Zoë Gaines: I am here to speak on healthcare. Healthcare is not accessible for all people. People are denied healthcare or have restricted access to it due to their race, gender, sexuality, skin colour, religious belief, disability or income. They are treated horribly in hospitals and mental health facilities. In healthcare environments, especially hospitals, nurses do not treat patients fairly and, in many cases, discriminate against them on the basis of how many children they have. That happens mostly to women. In the mental healthcare space— child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) — it takes at least six months to a year to be assessed before you can even be seen by a counsellor. To be seen by a counsellor, it takes around three to five years, by which time most people have aged out of the system. We need more accessibility for people. We know our bodies best, and we need to be trusted.

Scarlett Uprichard: I am here today to talk about three critical areas that will shape Northern Ireland's future for young people like us: the economy, immigration and mental health.

I chose the economy because I want our generation to have access to skilled, well-paid jobs here at home. Having a strong, fair economy means that we can build our lives locally and help our communities grow.

I chose to focus on illegal immigration specifically because, while those who come here through proper channels bring valuable skills and diverse cultures and strengthen our society, illegal immigration can create real challenges. It can put unfair pressure on public services, such as schools and healthcare, that we all rely on, and it undermines the efforts of people who followed the rules to build a life here. In the UK, illegal immigration has a complex impacts. 2024 saw 36,816 small boat arrivals, which was up by 25%, and migrant fatalities rose to 78, with journeys being exploited by criminals. Between July 2024 and June 2025, enforcement visits were up by 48% to 10,031 and arrests were up by 51% to 7,130. While foreign nationals are under-represented in prisons, 66% support deportations amid concerns over public services, housing and cohesion. Net migration fell to 430,000 but will drive 90% of population growth to 2036.

I chose mental health because many young people face significant pressures with learning, relationships and planning for what comes next. We need to ensure that high-quality, easy-to-access support is available for every young person who needs it. It is OK to reach out and ask for help. Many young people believe that harming themselves and suicide are the answer. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Your pain is real, but hurting yourself will not heal it.

Those issues are linked. A fair economy supports good services; illegal immigration helps us to grow sustainably; and looking after our well-being means that we can all contribute to making Northern Ireland a great place to live.

Saul Wilton: In Northern Ireland, the Disability Discrimination Act became law in 1995. Despite that, however, the estimated 460,000 disabled people in Northern Ireland, including me, are denied opportunities and access to some forms of transport, some buildings some employment due to their not meeting their needs. That is particularly prevalent for the estimated 42,000 people, including my brother, who live with learning disabilities. Another is Katie Mitchell, a 20-year-old who was removed by police by her arms and legs from a shop in Bangor due to the staff not being appropriately trained to handle her needs. Disabled people should be treated the same. We should be able to enter shops via steps, and we should be able to access opportunities that may not be

available right now. I know that it is not possible to make everything accessible, but I urge simple and small adaptations to be made. There should be more access and support for those with learning disabilities. Support should be provided to businesses and organisations in order to create a more fair and equal society for every citizen in this nation.

Lawrence Asar: In this society, we have many problems, most of which are related to teenagers. We are too old to be a kid but too young to be an adult. We are expected to know who we are, but we are still figuring out life. I will talk today about the problems and struggles that no one really talks about with being a teenager. In the society that we live in, we have to hold in our emotions and feelings, and even our true selves, just so that we do not get judged while we keep discovering ourselves. We mourn our past selves, wishing that we could stop growing up and go back to the way it was all those years ago, so, to get away from this world, we resort to comfort eating and energy drinks. Some even resort to vaping. It feels as though, when you need to be respected like an adult, you are treated like an immature child, and, when you need to be supported like a child, you are told to tough it out, like an adult. We cry in private because we need to look good and strong, with no weaknesses, but we keep getting hit with bullies who say that we are this and that because of the colour of our skin. We cannot handle that while teachers breathe down our necks, giving us work after work, homework after homework, for some stupid letter so that we can show that we can do something with our lives. Our lives are set up like a line of dominoes, designed to be toppled over by fate and circumstances. Young people deserve more support and freedom. We need to act now.

Daniel O’Kane: In Northern Ireland, 26% to 29% of working-age individuals are economically inactive. That is over a quarter of our nation. That is higher than the United Kingdom average, with over 625,000 people being economically inactive as a whole through all ages. That, with job disparity, leads to some serious economic issues. About 2,529 jobs were created by foreign investment in 2025, with only three being outside of Belfast and only one in the city of Derry. Derry has the highest poverty rate in Northern Ireland: 25% of its population live in poverty, with 50% of all children living in deprived areas and a 25% poverty rate for all children. We must provide economic opportunities across Northern Ireland as a whole, providing economic productivity and development for all.

Cormac McCaughey: I am from West Belfast. I propose that the Youth Assembly tackle the problems of health, and rights and equality in Northern Ireland. Let us face it: our NHS is criminally underfunded and underappreciated by the wider community. I say that with the whole of 2020 and the pandemic as my witness. With mile-long waiting lists and shallow resources, we have perhaps the worst health service in the whole of the UK. That is most evident in the sheer lack of mental health facilities offered to the public, young and old, which causes, for example, the generational trauma inflicted by the Troubles to remain entirely unaddressed, which, I am sure, has a direct correlation with the rates of homelessness, addiction and prejudice that plague our areas. Let us address that. Let us break down the barrier between our communities. My dream — no, my hope — is for a healthy, open and progressive Belfast. I am sure that if we, our families, our friends and our colleagues work in unity to solve the problems of health, rights and equality, we can make that a reality.

3.00 pm

Landon Woodfield: For several years now, I have believed that the environment should be of the utmost importance not just to Northern Ireland but the entire world. I have heard a few people mention it already, but Lough Neagh, for example, provides around 40% of all Northern Ireland’s drinking water, as well as an ecosystem of wildlife. However, for a multitude of reasons, one of which is climate change, algae is blossoming in Lough Neagh as a result of higher water temperatures, causing it to thrive. Significant time and effort will be required, but I know that we

can work together to restore Lough Neagh to the biodiverse powerhouse which, I know, we all love.

Peadar Dunlop: Good afternoon, everyone. I believe that education should be the main focus of our mandate. My opinion is that while health and other areas are very important, none of those issues is as immediate as education for young people. Without a good education, many of the other issues are less relevant or directly impacted. A good education is the foundation of good health, employment and quality of life. As well as that, Northern Ireland's education system is outdated and not reflective of modern-day needs, and is in need of reform. Other issues, such as mental and physical health and jobs, are important, but I believe that education is more important to young people currently. I hope that you will take my opinion on board. Thank you for listening to me.

Sean Og Lynn: I have chosen to speak about the environment because it is one of the biggest problems facing the world today. While industrialised societies in many countries have improved comfort and life expectancy, that progress has come at a serious cost to the natural world and to humanity itself. Industrialisation has led to pollution, deforestation and the destruction of ecosystems. Forests are cleared for expansion, oceans are filled with waste and many bodies of water, such as Lough Neagh, have turned green. The air that we breathe is increasingly contaminated by emissions. Those are not accidental outcomes but the results of a system that is built on constant growth and consumption.

As technology advances, nature is increasingly controlled and exploited, rather than respected. At the same time, humans have become disconnected from their own nature, separated from the land and from self-sufficiency and meaningful interaction with the natural world. That disconnection has contributed to environmental destruction, psychological deterioration in the modern age and a loss of balance between humans and their nature. If that continues, future generations will inherit a planet with fewer resources and harsher conditions. Protecting the environment requires rethinking what we define as progress and how we choose to live alongside nature. We must begin to prioritise the balance between humans and nature over the efficiency of our laziness.

Sarah Agnew: Education is meant to prepare us for the future. However, many young people in Northern Ireland feel that they are expected to succeed in a system that is underfunded and overstretched. The education budget is not sufficient, and we see that every day in our classrooms. Classes are overcrowded, while teachers are overwhelmed and basic supplies run low. When there are too many pupils in one room, learning becomes harder and support is limited. That is not because teachers do not care, but because the system does not give them what they need in order to support us properly. Funding issues go beyond textbooks and classrooms, however. Young people are dealing with huge academic pressure, increasing stress and not enough mental-health support in schools. Waiting for weeks or even months to speak to someone is not OK. We also see inequality between schools, where some have access to opportunities that others can only imagine. While young people are constantly told that we are the future, we need investment that reflects that. Proper funding for education is not a luxury, but a necessity. When education is underfunded, young people pay the price. That is why I believe that education should be one of our key focuses over the next two years.

Max Bell: I would like to talk about artificial intelligence because it is going to be an increasingly troublesome thing for my generation. By the time that I get out of school, there is a chance that it will have completely changed the world of work. It has already replaced a lot of scriptwriters and artists. Even this week, I have seen many ads on television using AI. It has the potential to take a lot of people's jobs in many different areas, so I would like to talk about that issue in my time as a Member. It is estimated that, by the time that we reach 2030, 30% of jobs will be lost to AI if it

keeps going at the current pace, and that is if it does not progress further. I say now that we should pull the plug on it.

Lucie Frame: The issue that I feel should be a priority is health, whether mental or physical. That is personal to me on a number of levels, as I have watched my sister with a medical condition struggle since she was three years old, with endless waiting lists and cancelled appointments. My sister is now 12, and we still have not got all the answers. I would love to raise awareness of inadequate healthcare and support provision for children and young people and help to support families like mine.

Jennifer Soutar: I represent Upper Bann. I believe that rights and equality should be a priority for the Youth Assembly's mandate because, as shown in the final survey report sent out, many of the youth said that it is the foundation of a fair society and key to young people's future opportunities. On a personal level, the issue is quite close to my heart as I have seen first-hand the marginalisation of minorities in my school. As an only child in an atheist household, I have been raised to show respect for other people's cultures, belief systems and political views, no matter how I perceive them. However, I am very aware of the fact that others may not feel the same way and will discriminate against views that they perceive as wrong or different. I hope that, by having one of our Committees as rights-and-equality-focused, we can start to effect change in the normalisation of discrimination and spread awareness that everyone deserves equal opportunity, dignity and the ability to participate.

Anna-Rose McAreavey: I would like to focus on health, particularly the future of our healthcare system. The NHS is under increasing pressure, with staff shortages, long waiting lists and growing demand. Those challenges cannot be solved without addressing the workforce crisis at the heart of the system. If we want a strong and sustainable NHS, we must encourage more young people to see healthcare as a realistic and valued career choice. Supporting the next generation of healthcare professionals is essential to protecting the healthcare system that we all rely on. In conclusion, strengthening our healthcare system requires long-term thinking, practical support and a commitment to investing in young people. I believe that healthcare is a sector that we really need to focus on this year.

Evan McGurk: I represent Mid Ulster. The problem that I face in this society, in the context of the fact that two fifths of Dungannon is non-national, is attitudes to immigration. I feel that the media is discussing it as an issue where people come over on boats and are living in migrant hotels, but I feel that the story of this country's most well-known immigrant, Paddington Bear, reminds us of the reality behind most people's migration stories. He only came to this country with a suitcase and a request for safety, and he worked. He built up a work ethic to reach a target to bring his aunt to this country from his destroyed home in Peru. I feel that his story highlights compassion and the determination of newcomers to contribute meaningfully to society, and it reminds us that immigration policy is not about borders but about people and the values that we choose to uphold. I feel that immigration is one of the three topics that we should vote for.

Olivia Marks: I want to speak about an issue that affects all young people: education. Education needs many improvements, but one thing that I would like to touch on is bullying. Bullying is far too common. I am sure that we all know about it, yet not enough is done to stop it. Unfortunately, I know many people who have experienced bullying, and they did not receive the support that they needed and deserved.

We need better anti-bullying regimes and more done to stop bullying. We need support for pupils who have suffered from bullying, and students need better support from schools to deal with stress, anxiety and other external factors. Schools need to put less stress and pressure on students and start seeing them as human beings with lives and feelings, not just students whose

sole purpose is to do schoolwork. If we create better support systems in education, pupils will be happier and healthier and will be able to do better mentally, physically and academically.

Ethan Brennan-Collins: As a young person, I believe that mental health should be a priority, because it is a serious issue in Northern Ireland.

It is shocking that people have to be put onto ridiculously long waiting lists to receive a diagnosis for mental health conditions. The most recent Coram report shows that 1,900 children and adolescents in Northern Ireland health and social care trusts were referred for an assessment and that 1,026 of those patients waited over nine weeks for their first assessment.

As someone who personally had to go through that process, I know how hard it was to have felt a certain way and not been able to receive additional help or support until I received a diagnosis. First, my parents had to wait until I was seven before I could be put on a waiting list, where I remained for four years before they could begin assessing me, and it took another three years to finally receive a diagnosis. During that time, I struggled in many ways. My schoolwork suffered, and my relationships suffered. I do not want people to feel the way that I felt and deal with what I dealt with. Therefore, I want us to come together to help better those services for the people who are struggling like I have struggled.

People need to be more educated, the NHS needs better funding and, yes, those waiting lists need to be shortened, so join me and vote for health.

Mr Speaker: We have about 13 minutes left, so I will prioritise, as far as I can, Members who have not spoken yet.

Andrew McClean: I am from North Antrim. AI is rapidly changing our world. Today, it is filtering its way into almost everything that we do, be that our search engines, our satnav systems or shopping online. You cannot deny the impact that AI is having on society.

It is important to embrace that technology rather than step back. An Open University statistic says that over half of the businesses in Northern Ireland that were asked claim that they do not feel confident using AI in their fields. In an ever-changing sector, it is vital to make artificial intelligence a top issue for the Youth Assembly to tackle over the next two years.

Caolán Smyth: Hello, everybody. I think that mental health and, more specifically, the impact of social media on mental health is the most important issue.

Social media was made to be addictive and to take advantage of your brain. You could be just one scroll away from seeing a video that says, "Life is unfair because of this and that", and you may respond to that by saying, "That aspect of life is unfair". However, before you know it, your entire "For You" page is filled with dangerous, depressing and addictive content, and, once you have fallen into that hole, it is not easy to climb out of it.

However, if we dedicate the necessary effort to helping with that issue, it will make us feel happier, make us more hard-working and motivated, reduce pressure on the NHS to deal with those issues, reduce the suicide rate and, overall, will be a huge upgrade to our society and our enjoyment of living as a whole.

Neala Owens: I would like to see education as one of the top three issues for the Youth Assembly, as it is an area that impacts all young people.

The quality of education can impact a young person's life chances, and good education can transform a young person's life. In the Youth Assembly, we should campaign for education that is suitable for all, as too many children and young people with additional needs struggle to find an

appropriate school place or, in some circumstances, any school place at all. As of September 2025, six children with special educational needs did not have a school place at the start of term.

In order to provide good education, we have to look after and appreciate our teachers and make sure that they are being paid well for such an important job. In our education system, we need to move with the times and make young people comfortable and confident in their school uniform, and we need to look to the future to make sure that our subjects and exams are relevant to this generation.

There are lots of issues to work on to make education better in Northern Ireland, and that is why I believe that education should be one of our top priorities for this year's mandate.

Phoebe Martin-Connor: I believe that, for us as young people in the education system, education is the most important thing that we should focus on.

School is already difficult enough for many students, including those who are neurotypical. For neurodivergent students, including me, school can be much harder. Neurodivergent children include those with autism, ADHD or other visible or hidden disabilities. Many neurodivergent students struggle to attend school, to keep up with information or even to feel safe enough to show up. As an Assembly, we should focus on supporting students who find school challenging because of their disabilities.

3.15 pm

Girls often struggle more when they are neurodivergent. Around 80% of women receive a late diagnosis of autism or ADHD. I was diagnosed late myself. I was diagnosed with autism in my first year of high school, and, in my third year, I was diagnosed with ADHD. My struggles were not noticed due to masking. If schools were more supportive and more aware, students would not feel the need to hide who they are just to fit in. Schools should fit the students, not the other way round.

Niamh Barnes: Rights and equality are important for a number of reasons, including for a fairer society that works for everyone and does not discriminate against any group. We are taught at a young age to be kind and to share and that everyone deserves respect. Without those values, who are we as a society?

We risk a lot when rights are denied. When people do not have the same opportunities, communities suffer and individuals are more at risk of poverty and injustice. Rights are a simple construct, yet they are being denied. They are important for our whole society.

Ted Cummings: Northern Ireland's economy faces slow growth and stagnation, and everyone suffers. Sure, there are other problems, such as the environment and health, but those problems all require money to fix them. That is money that Northern Ireland simply does not have.

In addition, bright young minds are being funnelled out of the country as we do not have the jobs to support them. We need to focus on the economy and job creation now so that we can fix our other problems in the future.

Asha Catherwood: I represent South Antrim. I want to share my thoughts on addiction. We all know how tough life can get sometimes. When stress and anger build up, it feels like there is no way to let it go. Many young people believe that turning to alcohol, drugs, vaping or smoking can help them to feel better, even if it is just for a little while. I have seen how easy it is for people to fall into that trap because it feels like it is the only way to escape the pressure or pain.

I have learnt that addiction does not fix anything. It takes away your control and your happiness, and it can leave you feeling even more alone. It is like a heavy weight that keeps pulling you down,

making it harder to see the good things in life or the people who care about you. It is OK to ask for help, whether it is talking to a friend, a family member or someone who understands. Reaching out can make a huge difference.

There are many ways to handle stress and anger: ways that will not hurt you or those around you. Young people's lives matter. Our future is worth living for. All young people deserve to live free from addiction with hope and strength to face whatever comes our way. Let us support each other and build a community where we can all feel safe and understood.

Tiffany-Jade Tagro-Loughran: I represent Mid Ulster. Racism may not be something that everyone here struggles with, but I know that I am not just speaking for myself when I say that it is a massive and growing problem in Northern Ireland. In recent years, racism has increased drastically, with 2,048 race crimes committed in 2025 alone, as well as hate crimes against people of colour.

It is something that I personally struggle with. I have had things thrown at my house, racist slurs shouted at me as I walked down the street and been verbally assaulted just trying to leave my house. My peers in school also struggle with it. It is disgusting how normalised racism is these days, and whether it is getting the "n" word shouted at you or, "Oh, I'm so Indian. Listen to my accent", it does not matter. It needs to stop, and we as a country are not doing enough to stop it.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Chloe McKenna: I represent West Tyrone. Addiction is a serious issue in Northern Ireland today, whether it is addiction to vapes, drink or drugs. The effect that those are having on our young people today is serious. Young people use those to deal with anxiety and depression, and that is a problem. There should be more organisations to help young people to deal with that. On that note, I hope that everyone considers voting for the issue of addiction.

Ben O'Donnell: I represent the Foyle constituency. Given the Big Youth Survey and the key issues that we must focus on, the mental health crisis among young people in Northern Ireland is a critical issue that demands our urgent attention. We are seeing rising rates of anxiety, depression and other mental health challenges. Those are usually triggered by the pressures of modern life and the lingering impacts of societal divisions. Focusing on mental health and well-being is not just about addressing immediate suffering; it is about building a foundation for a healthier and more resilient generation. Equally important is the ongoing work on rights and equality for all. Ensuring that every young person, regardless of their background, is seen, valued and protected is a vital part of achieving a just society.

By prioritising those two interconnected areas, the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly can make a profound and lasting impact. Championing policies that support rights and equality and helping to resolve the mental health crisis will not only benefit individuals but contribute to a more cohesive, compassionate and equitable future for our entire community. Let us commit to making those vital issues central to our agenda.

Ellie Simpson: I am representing south and east Belfast. I would like us to focus on rights and equality, and the main topic we should focus on is sectarianism. There are unspoken borders that divide Catholic and Protestant people. I know, at age 14, that there are certain areas where I should not be or else I will endanger my health and safety. Even people in Belfast know that there are certain areas where you should not go if you are Catholic or Protestant or else you are putting yourself in danger — you could be beaten up, called names or possibly killed. People my age or even younger have derogatory slang such as, "Kill all Taigs" or "Kill all Huns". It has become too normalised, and no one does anything about it. When stuff happens, it gets swept under the rug, and it does not get spoken about on the news.

Áine Donnelly: I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Students spend at least 12 years in school, yet they have so few chances to have their voices heard about what affects them most and

make a difference. We are all proud to be part of the Youth Assembly, so why not use your time here to make a difference that will affect every child, young person and teen across the country?

When young people in Northern Ireland were asked what they cared about, education ranked very highly, with a focus on outdated rules, more help for students with special educational needs and increased stress due to extensive homework and testing. You have a chance to help to change that. History is handing you the mic. Use it to make a real difference.

Emily Murray: I represent the constituency of Foyle. Health is one of the most important issues that the Youth Assembly should cover during its mandate. Bad mental health can lead to depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. That can stem from bullying, whether online or offline; an overload of schoolwork; exams; or pressure to succeed. Some 12.6% of young people in Northern Ireland experience disorders such as depression or anxiety. In 2024, there were 290 reported suicides in Northern Ireland. Despite health being so important, waiting times are unbelievable, with people having to wait weeks or even months just to be seen for poor-quality support.

We should work on health because I know that there are young people in our society from the ages of 15 to 18 who cry on their birthdays because of what they have been through, what they are going through and what they have persevered with, and because, when they were younger, they truly believed that they would not make it to that age. I believe that, for our peers and ourselves, we ought to seek positive innovation in healthcare and the availability of support.

Ethan Tully: I am thrilled to be working with you all as YAMS over the rest of our mandate. I would like to start by telling you about a good friend of mine. Over the summer holidays last year, he was diagnosed with an oversized Baker's cyst, which is a collection of fluid around the knee that damages the surrounding muscles and tendons. It resulted in not only a large amount of physical pain for him but some mental struggles, as he was forced to quit most of the sporting activities that he was involved in, which led to his becoming somewhat isolated from his friends. He was originally told that it would take two and a half months to get his problem sorted. After a visit to the Royal, he learned that, even though what he has is severe, most children with that problem have to wait roughly a year to be seen, and most adults have to wait about two and a half years.

The Big Youth Survey not only demonstrated that a large number of young people are worried about health, as I am, but highlighted long waiting times and quality of care as one of the main concerns.

Furthermore, I have had bad experiences with GPs and hospitals. Last May, I needed a concussion check after a sporting accident. My GP is a mere two-minute drive from my school, but I had to go to Antrim Area Hospital A&E, where we waited for five hours for what was a five-minute process. We could have saved ourselves and hospital staff so much time and effort if our GP had been able to see me.

Whether for mental health or physical health, every person needs timely care at some point in their life, so, my friends, what I would like you to consider today is how much more we can do to support our health system so that it is there when we need it most.

Priority Issues for the Youth Assembly: Vote

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, folks, but the time for speaking has elapsed. I apologise in particular to those who had prepared for today and did not have the chance to speak. We were able to get in 43 Members. Next time, hopefully, those who did not get to speak today will have the opportunity to make their maiden speech; congratulations to all those who did so.

It is now time for you to vote to decide the issues that will form the basis of the establishment of the Youth Assembly's Committees. The three issues with the highest number of votes will set the priorities of the Youth Assembly's Committees.

Youth Assembly Members voted.

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

The votes were cast as follows:

- | | |
|------------------------|----|
| 1. Health | 55 |
| 2. Rights and Equality | 48 |
| 3. Education | 42 |

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

Mr Speaker: Congratulations. You have conducted a good-natured debate and have now made your decisions. Those three issues will provide the direction for the establishment of the Committees of the Youth Assembly.

Adjournment

Mr Speaker: That concludes the proceedings of today's plenary sitting. Thank you all for coming today. I offer you my congratulations on exercising your mandate in this new Youth Assembly. I also thank all those who have made today possible and those who supported Members in being here. I look forward to seeing the progress of the three Committees in the coming months.

I ask Members to remain in their seats following the Adjournment.

Adjourned at 3.39 pm.