



OFFICIAL REPORT

Youth Assembly Mandate Three 2025-27

2nd Sitting At 2:00 pm on Saturday 19 September 2026
Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast.

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Plenary Session

Saturday 19 September 2026

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

Deputy Speaker's Welcome

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, thank you all. Please take your seats. Good afternoon, everyone, and a warm welcome to the second plenary sitting of the third Youth Assembly in the Assembly Chamber of Parliament Buildings. I am very pleased that the Speaker has again given special permission for the Youth Assembly to gather in the Assembly Chamber today. It is a privilege for me, as Deputy Speaker, to be asked to preside over today's event.

I would like to introduce the two people sitting next to me at the Table. They are the Clerks. On my right is Clerk Assistant Lisa McElherron, and on my left is Youth Assembly manager, Lucy McClelland. My role, as Deputy Speaker, is to chair the sitting to make sure that everything runs smoothly. I am sure that you will help me in that regard.

Let us move on to what is ahead of us today. During today's proceedings, once you have updated us on the activities that you have been involved in since the plenary sitting in January, you will have the chance to debate the proposed social media plan for under-16s. I know that you are always keen to hold a debate in the Assembly Chamber, and that is an issue that you have suggested for debate. I know that you are passionate about that issue. A lot of preparation has gone into the debate, so I hope that you will take the opportunity to make your comments heard today.

I want to try to hear from everyone who wants to speak. Do not worry if you do not have a speech prepared. If you just want to make a brief point or even say that you agree with someone else's point, I will be glad to hear from you during our debate. When other people are speaking, please listen to their views. That is about showing each other respect.

While the discussions today might involve serious subjects, I hope that you will enjoy today's proceedings. Even in the Assembly, major issues can be dealt with with good humour, banter and strong personal relationships between all sides. That helps get business done, even when it is challenging.

I hope that you will make the most of today, and, most of all, I hope that you will enjoy yourselves. If you need any help at all today, please let one of the team know, and we will assist you in any way we can. I will now be seated, and we can then move through our agenda.

Members' Updates

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

Raphael MacMillan Sharkey: One of the most significant areas of our work this year has been working directly to the Assembly Committees as they scrutinised legislation affecting young people.

In January, we provided evidence to the Committee for Education on the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill, which proposed giving all pupils the right to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. We supported the Bill and highlighted the importance of giving young people greater choice, comfort and equality in school uniform policies.

As that issue continued to be considered by the Assembly, we carried out further research with young people across Northern Ireland. More than 260 young people responded to our pulse survey, which found overwhelming support for giving all pupils the right to wear trousers and other appropriate leg coverings. We presented that evidence to the Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill earlier this week, supporting both clauses of the Bill and highlighting the need for consistent implementation across all schools.

In February, we attended the Committee for Education's stakeholder event on the ongoing curriculum review, during which we contributed directly to discussions on the future of education alongside representatives from the Department of Education, schools, universities and other organisations.

In March, we presented our views to the Committee for Infrastructure on proposals to introduce graduated driver licensing. While we supported the aim of improving road safety, we recommended that the Department carefully consider the impact on young people, particularly around cost, rural travel, accessibility and the need for updated consultation and impact assessment.

In June, we provided evidence to the Committee for Finance on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill. We supported the Bill, including proposals to legally recognise non-religious belief ceremonies, raise the minimum age of marriage to 18, strengthen protections against forced marriage and ensure greater equality in marriage law.

We have also engaged with two private Member's Bills that are being considered by the Committee for Education. We supported the Irish-medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill and welcomed the requirement for a workforce plan while recommending that it should be supported by additional investment in staffing, resources and infrastructure. We also supported the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill, recognising the impact of food insecurity on young people. We recommended direct payments to families and encouraged consideration of broader eligibility and support during all school closure periods.

Through this work, we have played an active role in Assembly scrutiny, ensuring that the voices and experiences of young people are heard and reflected in discussions on legislation that affects our lives.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Raphael, for that update. To update us on other events that you have been involved in, I call Áine Donnelly.

Áine Donnelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Alongside our work with Assembly Committees, we have taken part in a wide range of events and engagement opportunities since our first plenary meeting in January.

In February, we attended the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus conference, where we discussed how to improve the participation of women and girls in political and public life. We also attended a meeting of the all-party group on youth participation, where we shared our experiences of engaging with Assembly Committees, MLAs, Ministers and Departments and highlighted the importance of ensuring that young people's views are acted upon.

Later in February, we participated in the INSPIRE NOW! 2.0 conference at Queen's University Belfast and our internal planning day, where we considered the findings of the Big Youth Survey and selected the priority issues that would shape the work of our Education, Health and Rights and Equality Committees throughout the year.

In March, we took part in a number of events as part of Welcome to Your Vote Week, which is an annual campaign focused on encouraging young people to engage with democracy and understand the importance of voting.

In May, we attended the Balmoral show, which is Northern Ireland's largest agri-food and rural affairs event. We took part in a question-and-answer session with the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Edwin Poots MLA, and met the deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly MLA, to discuss the priorities of the Youth Assembly's Education, Health and Rights and Equality Committees.

In June, we met officials from the Labour Relations Agency to learn more about workplace rights and employment relations.

In July, we welcomed a delegation from the American Council of Young Political Leaders to Parliament Buildings. That gave us the opportunity to discuss the experiences, opportunities and challenges facing young people in Northern Ireland and exchange perspectives with young leaders from another country. We

also supported a charity collection at Tesco to raise money and awareness for the Assembly charity of the year, Macmillan Cancer Support.

Finally, in August, we participated in a workshop on the UK Government's Future of Childhood and Adolescence project. We shared our views on the opportunities and challenges facing children and young people growing up in Northern Ireland and contributed to discussions about the future of childhood in the United Kingdom.

Through all those events, we have continued to represent the voices of young people, engage with decision makers and develop our understanding of the issues affecting communities across Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Dáire McConnell to update us on your work with the Youth and Policing Partnership Forum.

Dáire McConnell: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Youth Assembly has had the opportunity to work with other youth organisations on the Youth and Policing Partnership Forum. That is an initiative led by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) that brings together young people with representatives from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Northern Ireland Policing Board and the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. The forum provides a space for young people to discuss policing issues, share their experiences and help to shape how policing engages with young people and communities.

We have participated in a number of youth and police partnership forum meetings, including sessions hosted by the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Policing Board. At those events, we discussed a range of issues, including neighbourhood policing, stop-and-search powers, the police complaints procedure and ways in which to strengthen trust and communication between young people and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. In June, we attended the Police Service of Northern Ireland's youth reference, engagement and listening (REaL) event at Ulster University, which gave us the opportunity to discuss policing services directly with senior police officers and contribute our views on how young people can help to shape the PSNI's children and young people strategy. Through those opportunities, we have engaged directly with policing and justice stakeholders, contributed to important policy discussions and ensured that the views of young people are considered in the development of services and the strategies that affect them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): To update us on the work with Departments, I call Chloe McKenna.

Chloe McKenna: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Youth Assembly works with Departments, where possible. This year, we have worked with the Department of Education on a number of issues. We participated in a consultation on the proposed Attendance Matters strategy, sharing our views on the factors that influence school attendance and how young people can be better supported to engage in education. Later that month, we met Lucy Crehan, the deputy chair of the curriculum task force, to discuss the new capabilities framework and the skills, knowledge and attributes that young people believe are important for success in education, employment and everyday life. Those opportunities allowed us to contribute directly to the development of education policy and ensure that young people's voices were heard by decision makers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): To provide an update on Youth Assembly training opportunities, I call Emily Murray.

Emily Murray: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Developing our skills, confidence and knowledge has been an important part of our work as we have taken on our roles as Youth Assembly Members. In December, we took part in a politics crash course that was delivered by the Northern Ireland Assembly's Education Service, where we learned about the role of the Assembly and Committees, elections and the legislative process. In January, we received public speaking training from Tony of People Playbook, which helped us to develop confidence and our communication skills. We received practical advice on how to speak clearly and effectively in debates, presentations and evidence sessions.

In February, we revisited the Youth Assembly's code of conduct, reflecting on the standards of respect, inclusion and positive participation that guide our work. We also participated in an online children's rights training session delivered by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, which helped to strengthen our understanding of children's rights and how they can be used to inform policy and decision-making. In June, we took part in a media training and team-building day, which was led by broadcast journalist Lindsey Armstrong. The media training focused on communicating key messages,

engaging with the media and building confidence in interviews. Following the training, we took part in team-building activities at Dundonald International Ice Bowl.

Most recently, we took part in training that was delivered by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which further developed our understanding of human rights and their relevance to issues affecting children and young people. This morning, we had training on how Assembly debates work, how to prepare speeches, and how to deliver them effectively, which we hope will be useful in just a few minutes' time. Those opportunities have helped us to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills needed to represent young people effectively and contribute to the work of the Youth Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Our final three Members to speak during this part of the proceedings will give updates on Youth Assembly Committee work. I call Olivia Marks from the Education Committee.

Olivia Marks: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will provide an update on the work of the Youth Assembly's Education Committee. Following the results of the Big Youth Survey, we selected the cost of education as our priority issue. Although education is intended to be free, we recognise that many young people and their families continue to face significant costs associated with attending school, which can affect participation, well-being and educational opportunities. To help to inform our work, we met Alex Tennant, the interim CEO of NICCY; Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick from Ulster University; and Becca Bor from the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network. Those discussions explored the cost of education, its links to child poverty and the impact that financial pressures can have on young people's ability to participate fully in school life. Following those evidence sessions, we considered how best to hear directly from young people about their experiences. We agreed to develop a short, anonymous survey to gather views on education-related costs in a way that was accessible and non-stigmatising.

That survey was distributed to Youth Assembly Members today and will help to shape the next phase of our work. By engaging with experts and young people, we are building a stronger understanding of how education costs affect young people's lives and identifying ways to bring those issues to the attention of decision makers.

2.15 pm

Logan Scott-McKinley: I will provide an update on the work of the Youth Assembly Health Committee.

We selected social media addiction and its impact on young people's health and well-being as our priority issue. Recognising the growing influence of social media and the proposed introduction of social media bans, we wanted to better understand its effects on mental health, well-being and everyday behaviour.

To support that work, we met online safety specialist Wayne Denner and academic researcher Dr Deborah Webster. The sessions explored whether social media should be considered an addiction, the risks associated with harmful online behaviours and the importance of digital literacy and online safety education.

In May, we attended the Volunteer Now online safety workshop, which formed part of a wider UK Government consultation on online safety. That gave us the opportunity to engage with Kanishka Narayan MP, Minister for AI, with a responsibility in online safety, and contribute directly to discussions on social media addiction, harmful online content, age verification and our vision for safer online platforms.

Most recently, we reflected on the evidence gathered so far and agreed to refine our focus, exploring not only whether harmful social media use should be considered an addiction but the extent to which it represents a health issue for young people.

Through engagement with experts and policymakers, we are building a strong evidence base to ensure that young people's experiences remain central to discussions on health, well-being and online safety.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call the last Member to speak in this section, Jennifer Soutar.

Jennifer Soutar: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will provide an update on the work of the Youth Assembly Rights and Equality Committee.

We explored a number of potential topics before, ultimately, selecting violence against women and girls from a boys' perspective as our area of focus. We wanted to better understand the factors that influence attitudes towards women and girls and explore how young men can play a positive role in tackling the issue. As part of that work, we reviewed the Executive's ending violence against women and girls strategy and considered the impact of social media, peer influences and education on young people's attitudes and behaviours.

To deepen our understanding, we met Tahnee McCorry, chief executive of White Ribbon Northern Ireland, and Dr Alan McKinstry from Queen's University Belfast. Those sessions explored issues including online misogyny, gender stereotypes, social norms, allyship and the importance of early intervention and education. Through those discussions, we gained a greater understanding of the complexity of the issue and the importance of including boys and young men as part of the solution. We are now considering how our research can make a meaningful contribution to that important conversation while ensuring that a wide range of young people's views and experiences are represented.

All three Youth Assembly Committees will continue their work and will report to Assembly Committees and Ministers next June.

That concludes the Youth Assembly updates since our last plenary in January.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Jennifer. Thank you to all of you for your work and detailed updates. You have all been busy with your Committee work, your work with Assembly Committees and your events and training, so I thank you again for that. Keep up the good work, please. We are always delighted to hear about it.

Social Media Ban

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): We proceed to the main part of the plenary. The debate that you have selected is on the proposed social media ban. I will open the Floor for about 60 minutes. Members should keep their remarks brief to allow as many contributors as possible. Members should not talk over each other and should respect the views of colleagues at all times. If you wish to speak, you should rise in your place. That is what normally happens in the Assembly Chamber, and it means that we have an easy way of seeing that you want to speak. However, if it is easier for some of you, you can raise your hand to let us know that you want to speak; that is OK as well. Also, when someone is called to speak, everyone else should take their seat and listen to the contribution. When that person has finished speaking, you should rise in your place or raise your hand again, so that we know that you still want to speak. When you are called to speak, please remember to wait for the light on your mic and then state your name before you speak, because that helps everyone get to know each other and helps our colleagues in Hansard to produce an accurate Official Report of today's proceedings.

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

Moved —

"That this Youth Assembly believes that stronger regulation of social media is a better solution than a ban for under-16s."

Isabella Coughlan: Trust — this is an issue of trust. If we can trust our young people to speak in the Assembly Chamber today, we should be able to trust them to use social media responsibly. As I look around, I see a group of young people who have certainly not experienced the ruination so often attributed to social media. We want to have our voices heard, and we know that you want to listen. Therefore, let us empower young people to use social media responsibly as a stage for their voices to resound across Northern Ireland. Do not deafen us with a ban.

I know that I speak not only for myself when I say that I could not have availed myself of the opportunity that is the Youth Assembly without having been made aware of it through social media. Regulation? Absolutely. It is the duty of our society to ensure protection for the most vulnerable and that social media usage for all is pertinent, positive and progressive. The question remains not whether young people are ready for social media but whether social media is ready for young people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for starting the debate.

Saul Wilton: Young people are smart, and that is exactly what the Australian Government found out when they introduced restrictions on social media accounts for under-16s. Months later, research from 'The Guardian', however, discovered that since the ban had begun, 85% of young people still used social media

regularly. Therefore, would it not be better to equip young people with the skills to use social media safely and responsibly through legislation?

Dáire McConnell: Léigh mise rún na díospóireachta agus tuigim an pointe a rinne Isabella, ach chítear rud difriúil dom. Ceist spéisiúil atá ann. Is the banning of social media a restriction of human rights? Tar éis go leor taighde le Google — sílim gur chuartaigh mé ar Google trí huaire é — thug Google dom an sliocht seo ó Airteagal 10 de Human Rights Act 1998, áit a leagtar amach:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.”

Sílim go bhfuil sin ríthábhachtach, mar go gcuireann sé cosc soiléir ar údarais phoiblí do shaoirse cainte a bhaint díot. Agus sin go díreach a dhéanfadh cosc ar na meáin shóisialta. Sin an fáth nach féidir liom, agus coinsias glan agam, tacú le cosc ar bith — cosc ar bith, ar chor ar bith — ar na meáin shóisialta. Níl mé ag rá gur rud maith iad na meáin shóisialta. Ní chreidfinn sin choíche. Ach, mar a dúirt duine de mo laochra pearsanta féin James Connolly in 1905:

“Without the freedom of the press and the right of public meeting there is no citizenship; there are only the relations of subject and rulers, of slaves and slave-drivers.”

Sílim go bhfuil an méid sin thar a bheith tábhachtach, mar 121 bhliain ó shin thuig siad cheana féin an imní a bhí ann go mbainfí cearta an duine uathu. Agus sin an fáth, cé go bhfuil drogall orm faoi, go dtabharfaidh mé mo thacaíocht go ciúin do shrianta agus molaim do mo Chomh-Chomhataí an rud céanna a dhéanamh.

[Translation: I read the motion for debate, and I understand Isobella's point, but I see things differently. It is an interesting question. Is the banning of social media a restriction of human rights? After extensive research on Google, I think that I looked it up on Google three times — Google provided this excerpt from Article 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998, which states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.”

I believe that is crucial, as it clearly prohibits public authorities from depriving you of your freedom of speech. And that is precisely what a ban on social media would do. That is why I cannot, in good conscience, support any ban — any ban whatsoever — on social media. I am not saying that social media is a good thing; I would never believe that. However, as one of my personal heroes, James Connolly, said in 1905:

“Without the freedom of the press and the right of public meeting there is no citizenship; there are only the relations of subject and rulers, of slaves and slave-drivers.”

I think that is extremely important, because 121 years ago, they already understood the concern regarding the potential loss of human rights. And that is why, although I am reluctant to do so, I will quietly support restrictions and urge my fellow Members to do likewise.]

Isaac Mercer: I am from Lagan Valley. Let us face it: social media has plenty of downsides. It can expose young people to cyberbullying, grooming, sleep disruption and harmful content. However, the immense opportunities and benefits that that wonderful modern technology holds cannot be overstated. Young people across the world now have the means to connect with friends, access information and express themselves in a way never before possible. An outright ban deprives our youth of such opportunities, whereas stringent regulation targets the direct source of the problems and demands accountability from social media firms. Finally, having stronger regulation rather than a ban would send a loud and clear message to the youth of the United Kingdom that their views and input are valued and listened to. That is of great importance, as young people grow more and more disillusioned with those in power.

Odhrán Carlin: I am here today to talk about social media and why we should never ban it. Andy Burnham's British Government believe that there should be a total ban such as that in Australia, but it has not worked. I will get started on my points. A ban is really unrealistic. As Dáire said, it is a human rights issue. We have a right to access social media, as it relates to freedom of speech. Many children who are not able to make friends will end up making friends online, and those could be lifelong friendships. However, there is a need for improvement. Adults are able to impersonate children and lure them into many things that we will not speak about. So, we need better parental controls and even more age checks to stop that, but we should

never ban social media. Hopefully, Mr Burnham will see the letter that we have sent and take it to heart when he thinks about the issue.

Ethan Wilson: One year ago today, I was sitting in a hospital with anorexia as a result of seeing harmful social media content. As we speak and have this debate today, over 20,000 young people are suffering from poor mental health and eating disorders (EDs). Studies have found that young people who spend more than two hours a day on social media are 50% more likely to acquire an ED, and such cases among very young teenagers are becoming increasingly common. Something needs to change. However, I have concerns that, if a ban is imposed, the many young people who will still get past it, as the UK Government have admitted, and will subsequently be exposed to harmful social media content will be afraid to speak up, because they violated the regulations. It takes great courage to speak up about an eating disorder, but we cannot make those who slip through suffer in silence. That is why I will vote in favour of the motion today.

Caolán Smyth: I do not support the motion. Although the regulations will potentially have some positive effects, they do not go far enough. Studies tell us that social media has profound negative effects on young people, completely outweighing any positive ones. That shows us that the problem is social media itself. Just as you cannot heal a wound by putting a sticking plaster on it, you cannot fix the problems caused by social media by putting regulations on them. The only way to solve this type of problem is to remove the root cause. Yes, people may find ways to circumnavigate the ban, just as they would the regulations. However, that is not a valid reason not to take action. With time, the ban will become more solidified and effective.

2.30 pm

Neala Owens: Stronger regulation of social media is a better solution than a ban for under-16s. Critical to that is that young people should have a greater say in decisions about social media restrictions that affect them. Politicians, regulators and the social media companies have had their say, but the group that the legislation impacts on the most has not been consulted. I find that extremely frustrating. Young people are expected to accept the legislation and its consequences without their opinions and concerns being heard. I wholeheartedly believe that young people should be trusted to have a voice on social media usage. If I were asked my thoughts on the social media ban, I would say that social media companies should be held to account. It is their algorithms and settings that have been the source of the harms, and they have not been held accountable. Stronger regulation would place the responsibility with social media companies. The ban, however, makes me feel that young people are being punished for the companies' mistakes. As a result of the ban, we will lose contact with our friends, access to our sources of information and, for some people, contact with a support network. The Government should be willing to listen to young people and receive insights from those who have first-hand experience of growing up in a world revolving around social media. We are the first generation that does not know a world without social media, so we understand it thoroughly compared with older lawmakers. Our perspective should therefore be taken into consideration. A ban is a step too far. Stricter regulation would be best.

Charlie Cairns: We can all agree that social media platforms are not the safest place for a child to be, but, for some, their school is not safe and their home is not safe. Walking down the street can also be not safe. Where do we draw the line on safety? I propose an alternative to the ban: a social media platform aimed at teens and kids that is a safe space where they can be themselves online. There would be no private messaging, and people would be able to post photos and videos but only if their face was not visible. All of that would be manually reviewed by a human moderation team. Likes would be replaced by positive reactions. There would be daily challenges, interactive games and places for emergency resources to be accessed. Some here may be doubtful that such an app could ever exist, but it did: it was an app that I grew up on called PopJam, and it closed down three years ago in 2023. Adults have failed our generation. They shut down our third spaces and remedy that by silencing the only voice that we have: social media.

Kian Ruddy: The topic of the social media ban brings us to many negative places. If you look at the data, you see that the ban is supported mostly by adults but not by the people affected. The companies do not want it, and the children do not want it, so why do the adults pick it for us? Has anyone consulted young people? Have we seen any consultations taking place? The proposed law risks taking away protected social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. If we take them away, kids will go to different places on the internet, some of which are unprotected and none of which help them. That is not a risk that we want to take.

Furthermore, the UK-wide policy does not take account of all the geographical situations on this island. Anyone on the border can use an EU SIM and bypass the ban easily. A ban did not work in Australia, and, in France, a ban was shut down by the courts. A ban here would destroy the human rights that we were promised when we were born. Under article 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we have the explicit right to freedom of expression and to seek information, both of which can be achieved

by using the internet. A ban aims to protect children, but it does not protect us if we lose all our rights. If you think that a ban helps us, you are very wrong.

I could go on and on about the issues relating to this item of business, but I will not. Instead, I leave Members with this thought: we are not a Youth Assembly that follows a Westminster ban blindly. We need to make our own decisions, and we need to help our children.

Ben O'Donnell: Social media can cause meaningful harm to young people. We see harmful content, online abuse, addictive algorithms and pressure affecting young people's lives. Doing nothing is not an option, but I believe that the answer is better regulation, not an outright ban. A ban may sound simple, but social media is how many young people communicate with friends, access educational content, find communities and express themselves. We should not remove that space simply because platforms have failed to make it safe; instead, we should make the platforms take responsibility. We need stronger age assurance, tougher action against harmful content, greater control over addictive features and meaningful penalties for companies that fail to protect young people. The question should not be, "How do we keep people off social media?", but, "How do we make social media safer for young people?". We have an opportunity to regulate the platforms that profit from our attention, rather than simply restricting the young people who use them. Thank you.

Logan Scott-McKinley: What will the spring social media ban actually achieve? Will it keep young people away from dangerous online spaces? That is unlikely, considering that 80% of under-16s in Australia continue to use social media, when it is banned there. I am aware that the ban comes with good intentions. Almost everyone can agree that social media in its current state causes issues that need to be addressed. The UK does not need a blanket ban directed at young people, but rather proper regulation being enforced on social media apps to prevent the negative effects that have been impacting on our young people.

I wholeheartedly agree with the view of the United Nations that a social media ban:

"is no substitute for making platforms safe in the first place".

Young people need there to be legislation that forces social media companies to properly moderate their platforms and implement e-safety practices. While well-intentioned, the ban is misdirected. The Prime Minister should not force regulation on young people but on social media companies. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Lucie Frame: I am for the motion for stronger regulation. I am not saying that I am against the social media ban because social media is good; I am against the ban because social media is not the problem. I want the Youth Assembly to think about this: is social media the problem, or is the problem mobile phones full stop? Imagine a group of eight-year-old girls who are in a fight because of a TikTok incident. Why are they on TikTok, and why do they have a phone? As long as a phone is provided to young children, a problem is provided.

That also proves that the social media ban would be easy to bypass. Evidence from Australia suggests that its ban reduced under-16 account ownership, but a substantial number of young people retained accounts. Therefore, such a ban would be insufficient to solve the issue. I hope that the Prime Minister takes that into account. Thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): It is really good to see so many people rising. I think that you are trying to test how quick I am and what my reactions are like, and you are doing very well at that, by the way. I will make every effort to ensure that all of you get in, so do please keep indicating.

Tomila Staugaite: Allowing a social media ban will not help. You may ask, "Why?". It is because many people will find easier ways to go against the ban. As has been said, look at the social media ban in Australia: it has not worked effectively. A report done by the 'British Medical Journal' earlier this year showed that 85% of children aged 12 to 15 still use social media daily. That is because the age verification is easy to bypass, and the ban has not affected most of them due to the fact that they lie about their ages on social media, and that will most likely be the case for us.

Decisions on the use social media should be made by parents, not the Government. Even with a ban in place, we will find a way to bypass it. It is better to regulate social media and ensure that children are seeing content that is age-appropriate. Many children are already used to being on social media. A direct ban on social media could damage their mental health, as some people rely on social media to get comfort, and it

allows them to freely express themselves and create friendships that help them to grow. Instead, parental controls should be required for users who are under 16. That will ensure that parents can monitor their child's activities on social media and add their own restrictions.

Emily Murray: A ban on social media is necessary. Regulation is simply not enough. In the UK, children from the age of five all the way up to 15 spend an average of five hours a day on social media, and there are too many routes to get around regulations. Someone could say that they are 29 when they are only 14.

Those five hours that are spent on social media could include watching a live stream. When I was in primary school, I was taken off social media in P6 because a live stream was going around of a man who held a gun underneath his chin before pulling the trigger. Thankfully, I did not see that, but some of my peers did. Children should not see that.

Those five hours spent on social media could involve getting a message from an adult who tells you how mature you act or look. Children should not receive those messages. Those five hours can be detrimental to our youth's mental health because they rely on social media too much. Those five hours strip our youth of their independence and ability to think for themselves. I hope that the PM hears all of our opinions and takes heed of what we have to say.

Peadar Dunlop: Good afternoon, everyone. I completely agree with the Youth Assembly's opinion on social media. When I look at people whom I know, my friends and my family, I see that I do not know one person who has not benefited even a little bit from social media, whether by making friends online, contacting existing friends or simply using the likes of TikTok or YouTube for entertainment or research. Supporters of a ban claim things such as, "You can contact your friends by email or by calling them." While they are right, those methods can be inconvenient and do not promote timely responses. A text message is far more convenient. I oppose a social media ban for other reasons, such as, for example, the ease of access to information that is relevant to teens, such as world news and social events.

If we were to have a ban, we would not be the first nation to implement one. Australia instituted a ban in December 2025. Whilst the ban saw initial success, with roughly 4.7 million underage accounts being taken down, it quickly proved to be ineffective. The Molly Rose Foundation estimates that 53% to 80% of Australian teens who are under 16 still have access to social media. That means that, despite the ban, up to four fifths of teens in Australia still have access to social media.

A ban merely pays lip service to resolving the problem. Banning social media is the easy option, and it is ineffective. Regulation will require hard work and investment, but it is much more likely to result in safer social media for young people.

Scarlett Upritchard: The social media ban for under-16s is not a solution; it is a barrier to connection. It risks isolating young people from vital support networks and educational resources and taking away our voices and the digital literacy skills that we need to thrive in the modern world. Rather than protecting young people, it pushes usage underground and away from safeguards and responsible guidance. We should empower families and platforms, not impose blanket restrictions that fail to address the root causes of harm.

Áine Donnelly: Schools, on average, are spending £16,000 on Yondr pouches; people sit for hours in accident and emergency waiting rooms. The UK Government could spend millions on a social media ban; people are sleeping in hospital corridors. Stormont spent a quarter of a million pounds on phone restrictions in schools; relying on an NHS waiting list can mean a death sentence.

Our NHS is falling apart, but our Government seem to care more about what we do on our phones. I am not oblivious. The new mobile phone rules are to protect child welfare, but banning social media will only cause young people to turn to more dangerous and poorly moderated applications, which will make it easier for young people to experience cyberbullying or come across dangerous media. Young people deserve a say in the matter. I say that we need to look at what the public needs and not just at what will make your Government look good.

2.45 pm

Andrew McClean: I have one question for you all. If social media is to be regulated rather than banned, who do you trust to regulate it — social media companies, governments, anyone? Who do you think is responsible for moulding young people's minds and our future?

Landon Woodfield: I am a firm believer that social media is a disease of modern life. Ofcom reported that 95% of 13- to 15-year-olds use social media. The World Health Organization found that problematic social

media use, such as the viewing of harmful, pornographic or grotesque content, has increased among adolescents from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022. I am afraid to say that that statistic is only going to rise exponentially by the day. Social media is the blanket that covers acts of violence, and a ban would remove the issue entirely. It is that and more that makes me believe that a ban should be compulsory.

Evan McGurk: The use of social media has always carried risks, including cyberbullying, sexting and violence against women and girls, which is an issue that our Rights and Equality Committee, which includes me, have been working on. All of that is linked closely to a subject that most Members, as well as their parents and school staff, have done their homework on right from primary school through the Keeping Safe programme that is run by the NSPCC.

Some Members may be asking themselves, "Why is he talking about this?". The reason is that the main elements of this subject are to do with internet safety. That is forgotten about when secondary-school children get new phones, because other subjects seem more important. I include the Northern Ireland Assembly in that, because the last time that, informed by the NSPCC, it addressed internet safety for children was February 2013.

The Assembly's work on internet safety for young people in Northern Ireland should be on rules and regulations rather than a complete ban on social media use for under-16s. Social media is an important way of improving intelligence and communication. There should be more of a focus on independence and safety rather than a ban that risks a move to unregulated platforms, which would involve online safety risks and increased crime.

Lawrence Asar: I will be honest: social media is not the best thing that we, as mankind, have created, but people are living in the past. Back in the 1700s, there were people who thought that novels would hurt your brain. In the 1960s, there were people who thought that reading 'Batman' was unintelligent and whatnot. It is the same with social media. Social media is a great way to learn and to communicate. You can talk to your friends, send them videos and relate to one other. In my case, I have grown very good bonds. It is also good for learning. On TikTok, there is an entire section on STEM — the science stuff — that is very good for learning. Stuff like that leads me to believe that social media should not be banned. Even though social media has horrendous disadvantages and there are some very bad things on it, we should use regulation to make it work better for young people.

Matthew Doherty: I agree very much with the points that Isaac and Logan made. The main reason that I am for social media not being banned is education. I admit that I would not have passed my GCSEs without using social media, especially TikTok. Other resources, such as the Corbettmaths channel on YouTube, were also vital to my passing my GCSEs and returning to sixth form. I can only speak highly of social media with regard to education. It has been incredible for me to be able to come back to school, and I thank social media every day for that. The solution to the question of a social media ban would be for platforms to be responsible for making their platforms safer, less addictive and more regulated.

In conclusion, a ban on social media would be ineffective and is counter-intuitive as it would strip away a vital tool for young people. Young people should not be punished for being sociable just because they are doing so on the internet.

Raphael MacMillan Sharkey: First, I will take this opportunity to thank Millie for all her hard work and the enthusiasm that she has shown over the past year. I am sure that I speak for all of us when I wish her the very best in her future endeavours.

The World Health Organization raises significant concerns about the potential impacts on young people from using social media. Young social media users have reported lower mental and social well-being. Research has shown there to be more instances of substance use in teens who use social media, and the NSPCC reports that there are higher risks of self-harm. That trend has far-reaching and long-lasting consequences for health, social well-being and overall quality of life, including career prospects, and could, ultimately, reduce life expectancy. The Royal Society for Public Health has documented many risks for adolescents using social media. Alongside those that I mentioned, teens are likely to report poor sleep and less sleep; body image issues; and fear of missing out (FOMO), causing anxiety and distress. They are also at risk of cyberbullying, grooming and witnessing inappropriate content.

When the ban on social media for under-16s in Australia came into effect last December, there was an initial spate of account purges, where millions of accounts were deleted or restricted. However, the BBC has reported that young people have largely managed to bypass those restrictions, and Australia's internet regulator, alongside independent groups such as the Molly Rose Foundation, which my colleagues have

referenced, has said that 60% to 80% of 12-to-15-year-olds continue to access social media apps. Despite the fact that data from Childline, which is run by NSPCC, shows that social media was mentioned thousands of times by children and young people who accessed the helpline, that organisation does not support a blanket ban on social media for under-16s. It states that harm caused is not inherent to accessing social media but is a product of how the platforms are designed and monitored. It believes that a ban will shift accountability from tech companies on to families, who are generally ill-equipped to deal with the range of risks and negative impacts of social media. Similar concerns have been raised by organisations such as South West Grid for Learning, Children in Scotland and the Children's Society.

Given that, in their droves, organisations that support children on a day-to-day basis strongly oppose the ban on social media for under-16s and that the data from Australia suggests that the ban there has generally been unsuccessful, it is clear that a blanket ban is not the best course of action.

My message to Andy Burnham is that, instead of a ban, social media and tech companies should take more accountability and have more safety measures. That should be regulated by an external body in order to maintain high standards of safeguarding and promote well-being while using social media so that young people can benefit from connection, support and self-expression and find the information that can be accessed on social media, when it is used in a safe and positive way.

Sarah Agnew: I disagree with the motion. If regulations were enough, why do 73% of 11-to-17-year-olds still encounter harmful content online in a four-week period? Social media platforms are constantly changing, making it difficult for regulations to keep up. A total ban would give young people a clear boundary and reduce exposure to harmful content and online pressure.

We should not wait until another young person is seriously affected before we act. Our children deserve to grow up without social media controlling their life.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Before I call the next Member, I will wish him a happy birthday. Jacob, I understand that it is appropriate to say, "Many happy returns" to you today, so, on behalf of all of us at the Table, I wish you a very happy birthday, and I hope that you enjoy the rest of your day as much as this part of it.

Jacob Bunting: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will vote for the use of regulation rather than a ban on our use of social media. Social connections on social media thrive between young people who feel that it gives them a voice in a way that speaking in person does not. As shown in countries such as Australia, a ban simply does not work, because people just find ways around it.

Regulation of social media can stop inappropriate content and cyberbullying but does not take away young people's voices and stop thriving groups connecting.

Ethan Tully: Five and a half hours: as previously stated, a report from the UK Parliament suggests that, despite being in school for at least seven hours a day, the average teenager spends over five and a half hours on social media each day. In fact, if we, as the Youth Assembly, were to add up all the time that we spent on social media in a year, we would collectively be doomscrolling for 7,000 days.

So, we can all agree that action definitely needs to be taken, but, speaking personally, I believe that stronger regulation is better than an outright ban.

First, a total ban on anything often leads to more dangerous behaviour. There is a risk that teenagers will use completely unregulated and dangerous social media sites, exposing them to a range of other harms. Secondly, not all social media is bad. It can help socially isolated people to connect. A total ban is like cutting off your nose to spite your face. Finally, Musk and Zuckerberg have developed highly effective algorithms to drive content to users. Under a stronger regulatory framework, they could create better software to prevent harmful exposure.

To summarise, whilst a ban would fix everything that is bad about social media, it would also destroy every benefit, and it could result in other dangers for young people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Before we run out of time, I remind Members who wish to speak to indicate that. We still have time, and I will make time if more Members indicate.

Chloe McKenna: I do not think that a ban is necessary. I am not fully against a ban, but I do not think that fully taking away social media is a solution.

A ban might be difficult to enforce because young people may enter false information about their age, use someone else's account or move to less regulated platforms. Evidence from Australia suggests that its ban reduced account ownership among under-16s, but a substantial number of young people retained accounts.

Social media has many benefits, such as helping people to maintain bonds and friendships, to express themselves and to find support. We should not rip that away from young people; we should create stronger regulations.

Katelyn Elliott: I agree with the point that Charlie made earlier, but I also believe that there should be legislation for stronger regulation. I would say that all the adults in the room have made at least one mistake on social media, whether it was a post from 10 years ago or a comment to a friend that went wrong, so why take away social media from our youngest and most vulnerable? When they turn 16 and get on social media, they will not know how to deal with the consequences, especially if people try to approach them for whatever reason. I believe that, instead, we should give them a safer platform and include classes in the curriculum to teach them how to behave safely on social media so that they know how to act, what to do and how to use social media for their own benefit.

3.00 pm

Nathan Murray: I believe that social media should not be banned. Instead, it should be more strongly regulated. While social media can expose young people to inappropriate content, cyberbullying and online dangers, banning it completely would remove many useful opportunities. For example, YouTube is an important learning resource, and it provides educational videos that can help us to understand difficult topics, complete homework and revise for exams.

Social media also allows us to communicate, share ideas and stay connected with family and friends. Instead of banning those platforms, we should introduce stronger age restrictions, better content moderation and greater protection for children online.

Social media companies should be held responsible for keeping their users safe. That would reduce risks while still allowing people to benefit from the educational and social advantages that social media provides.

Marcus McKillop: I am sure that I am not the only Youth Assembly Member who sat GCSEs in May and June. Following on from what Matthew said, without the use of educational videos on apps such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, I would not have passed my maths or religious studies (RS) exams, and I am sure that many others will agree with me. Why are we removing valuable resources that so many people use and will continue to use in the years ahead?

Imogen Neill: Social media can expose children to serious risks, such as grooming, cyberbullying and more. The World Health Organization has found that problematic social media use among adolescents increased from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022. So, why not just ban social media? Banning it does not remove the risks; it simply moves them elsewhere.

If we are genuinely concerned about young people's safety online, we need to make the internet a safer place as a whole, and not just ban certain apps. Instead, we should introduce much stronger regulations. Safety does not have to mean exclusion. Do not ban the user; fix the problem.

Alice Taylor: I am in favour of having stricter regulations instead of a full ban. I do not think that a ban for under-16s is the right choice. In fact, the people who should be banned are the adults. Snapchat used to be a fun platform for people aged 13 to 18 to chat, but, due to adults, it has become a place where young children are exposed to horrible, creepy messages. It is the same with TikTok. The harmful content that we are trying to protect children from would not exist without adults on apps, with teens being the target audience.

Dáire McConnell: I will make one quick point in English to save time. People are using a ban on social media as a means to restrict people's rights. When authoritarian Governments attack people's rights every day, how can a country that prides itself on democracy say that young people should not have a voice on those platforms?

I understand the need for child safety. I have worked with kids younger than me, and I care for their safety. I also care for their freedom of expression, but I am genuinely worried. I have personal experience of studying GCSE history. We learned about German history and about people's rights being restricted. What happened then is that an authoritarian Government came in. This is no different from that. Restricting people's rights is restricting their right to speak. Restricting people's rights to speak is restricting their right to free assembly. Restricting free assembly is restricting people's democratic rights. That is a fact.

Do not vote for the motion because, if you vote for it, you are accepting the fact that we can be silenced. We will not be silenced. We are the future. They will listen to us speak. Let us use our voice and vote against the motion. Let us make sure that everyone has a right to speak.

Ellie Simpson: I am against the social media ban. So far, I have not heard anyone mention how greatly social media benefits neurodivergent kids' ability to express themselves freely and communicate better. A lot of neurodivergent kids struggle with many things that come with eye contact and emotional regulation in person. Although there are downsides to social media, it makes it a lot easier for them to be able to talk to people and express themselves, and even express how they feel, because a lot of them struggle with stuff like confrontation and even reaching out to other people if they are upset or annoyed. Social media allows them a platform where they can have other people reach out to them and give them advice without them being afraid of being judged in person or subjected to any kind of discrimination.

Raphael MacMillan Sharkey: I have already spoken, but I would just like to say something quickly about one of the reasons that we will need regulation on social media. When I was in primary school, I knew children as young as five years old who were on social media. They could be looking at anything that they wanted to on social media, which could be damaging to their mental health. Maybe even those five-year-old children could bypass that ban. There are people in my class who say that their parents will let them use their driver's licence or passport to access social media or allow them to go onto their profile to do the things that they want to do on social media. The ban will be ineffective in the vast majority of cases; 60% to 80%, as previously mentioned. Go raibh maith agat. *[Translation: Thank you.]*

Odhrán Carlin: I want to add to what Dáire said about the ban being "authoritarian". It is also dystopian that our right to social media is being taken away. It should not happen. Many people will lose contact with friends online, because they do not just make friends online locally but internationally. We do not want to tear those friendships apart as a result of some people's actions. We need regulations that will stop those people while also allowing the people who need social media to use it; for example, people who get help with their GCSEs online. We must regulate, not ban.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I am looking around in particular to see whether there is anyone who wants to speak who has not spoken yet. I remind you of what I said earlier about making a quick point, whether it be simply to agree or disagree with something that has been said, and encourage you, if you want to do so, to get in now before we close. Your point can be as brief as you like or, within reason, as long as you like.

Kian Ruddy: I know that I have spoken already, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I heard a point of view that I really liked, and I want to expand on it from another view. It relates to banning adults. We have seen that in multiple different ways. When it comes to YouTube, we have YouTube Kids and the normal YouTube. There is the gaming platform Roblox, which has Roblox Select and the normal one. Why do we not do that with all social media apps but remove more bypasses like using an adult's ID, drawing on a moustache or any of the other ways that people are getting round it? We just need to ensure that it is not being bypassed and that we have other ways in which for kids to have social media without the risks that are involved. We do not want to take away their speech or social media: we just want stricter restrictions and to help children. Why not vote against the ban and push for better regulations that will help children more?

Lawrence Asar: There is no lightness without darkness. That is normally how I explain to people why I believe in God. It is the same with social media: there is always lightness but there is also darkness. You cannot have light without the dark. You cannot have the good things, the benefits and the learning without the bad, dark stuff.

Charlie Cairns: When I spoke before, I discussed human moderation when it comes to specific posts. I believe that human moderation needs to be part of the regulations. Raphael brought up that people may be using parents' IDs to be able to bypass the systems. That is why I believe that there should be human moderation. AI moderation can easily bypass that. I have played Roblox in the past. About two months ago, I did a face check, and the platform thought that I was 19- to 21-years-old. We do not need AI face checks allowed in our regulations.

Poppy Graham: I believe that the Government know that it is not going to work for our generation; we are going to be able to get past it, but it is for the younger ones. Instead of having it cut off for us, it should be that children born in 2019 and after should not be allowed to go on it. You cannot have people who have been used to it go cold turkey, but, for children who have never been on social media before because they are five years old, that can be done.

Emily Murray: I would like to add to the point that has just been made. The social media ban is for under-16s. I agree that we need stronger regulations, but I think that it is a ban for the younger ones that is desperately needed. I grew up knocking on doors on the street and out playing. My younger brother, who is seven years old, lives his life on his PlayStation. He talks to his friends on it. He has friends across the road from our house, and he lives on his PlayStation in our dining room.

I think that social media has no benefits for children. There are children aged five to 15. What use does social media have for a five-year-old? We got into social media when we were maybe 10 or 11 and when we could use social media for our GCSEs and for our friends. At that young an age, we cannot use it. We do not need to use it, so I think that a ban, especially for children under the age of 10, is needed, with stronger regulations needed on social media, maybe gradually releasing it the older that we get.

Scarlett Uprichard: I would like to add to the point that I made earlier. To Members who are under the age of 16 and are saying that they are for the social media ban, why do you have social media? Why are you sitting in this Chamber with social media and saying that people who are under 16 should not have it? To those — no one in particular — who are saying that children five years old and above have social media, who gave them access to it? Why do we keep blaming things on helpless children who are influenced by those around them who are older than them? It is not the children's fault, so why do we keep blaming it on them?

Tomila Staugaite: Mr Deputy Speaker, sorry for speaking again, but I would like to add to the point that Emily has just made. My 10-year-old cousin lives on social media. All he does is scroll on his phone. Scroll, scroll, scroll. He does not read. He does his homework just as he is going to bed. He cannot even make a basic sentence. Every single second of the day, he makes silly remarks about what he has found on YouTube Shorts that are brain-rotting things. All he does all day is play Roblox and go on social media, seeing things that he should not see and then acting inappropriately just as he has seen on social media. If there were to be a ban, it should be, as the European Union is thinking about, a ban for under-13s.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I have decided that it is enough that Members speak twice. I am looking to see whether anyone who has not spoken wants to speak. I do not think that we are going to have any more. Believe me, you will have your opportunities in the future, and I hope that I will be here to see and hear those contributions. We will move on.

3.15 pm

Question put.

The Youth Assembly divided: Ayes 51; Noes 10; Abstentions 3

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

"That this Youth Assembly believes stronger regulation of social media is a better solution than a ban for under-16s."

Adjournment

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, that concludes today's plenary sitting. I understand that your next step will be to write to the Prime Minister to share your views on the proposed social media ban. I wish all of you well as you take forward that important work.

Throughout today's debate, you have demonstrated thoughtful consideration, respectful engagement and a strong commitment to representing the views of young people across Northern Ireland. I truly commend you for that. All of you should be proud of the contribution that you have made today. The quality of the debate has been excellent, and I look forward to seeing your continued work throughout this Youth Assembly mandate.

I thank all of you again for coming today. I also thank all those in the Youth Assembly team and the dedicated staff and volunteers involved who have made today possible. I also thank the family members in the Public Gallery who have supported Members of the Youth Assembly to be here and participate fully in the programme.

Before we close, I want to say that it is an absolute pleasure for me, as a Deputy Speaker, to get to meet you and hear the quality of the debate. I know that I speak on behalf of the Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers when I say that we are fully behind the work that you are doing with the Youth Assembly team, other Assembly officials and Departments. Please keep up the hard work.

Following the Adjournment of the sitting, please remain in your seats.

Adjourned at 3.22 pm.