



Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**'Our Voices: Speaking Truth to Power':
Northern Ireland Youth Forum**

17 February 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr George Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Ms Blair Anderson	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Ms Natalie Corbett	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Mr Adam Crothers	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Mr Jack Dalzell	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Ms Lauren McAreavey	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Mr Oisín-Tomás Ó Raghallaigh	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Mr Chris Quinn	Northern Ireland Youth Forum

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): You are all very welcome to the Committee. We would, of course, much prefer to see you in person in Parliament Buildings. Unfortunately, we are all speaking to you from our kitchens and dining rooms right across the North, but we are delighted to have you along. I have been part of the political champions group, which has met many of you on a regular basis and has heard first-hand the presentation that you are about to give. It is an excellent opportunity, and you are to be commended as a group of young people for stepping up and taking a leadership role in the community and asking the key questions about COVID and its impact on young people right across Northern Ireland.

Without giving spoilers, you have had such a big response, which gives real validity to the presentation that you are about to give. We are always very lucky that many of these Committee meetings are watched by lots of key people, including quite a number of people from the media world. I ask them to pay special attention to the information that you are about to present because it is such a coherent snapshot of what young people are thinking about coronavirus and the response from the Executive.

Normally, Chris, you do the liaison. Are you going to take the lead for this event, or will somebody else do that?

Mr Chris Quinn (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): I will just say a very quick hello and then hand over to the young people. As you know, Colin, that is how we do things in the Youth Forum; we like young people to take the lead. We are very much here in the background to support that. I thank you very much for having us along today and for your continued support through your role as a youth champion. I have no doubt that you will be blown away by the young people. I just want to say a quick word of thanks to them.

Interestingly, this group has never met in person, which is really a sign of the times. We realised that only in the last couple of weeks when we were evaluating. These young people have been working through COVID-19. I remember that last St Patrick's Day was probably when things kicked off and we started going into lockdown. This group of young people has been consistent and has been meeting constantly online, supported by Natalie and Lauren and other members of the Youth Forum staff. I pay a massive tribute to these young people because they are going through so much right now and have given so much time to develop and present the research to you.

That is all that I want to say for now. I just want to say a massive thank you to everyone who is involved. I will hand over to O-T, who will lead you through our presentation.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK, fire on ahead.

Mr Oisín-Tomás Ó Raghallaigh (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): Hello, everyone. Hopefully, you can hear me. I am going to keep going and presume that you can hear me. I am the vice chairperson of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF), which has been lobbying, advocating, fighting for and promoting the voices of young people since its inception in 1979. I am also a member of the NIYF Our Voices subgroup, which has worked on three pieces of youth-led regional research into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people.

I am going to present a very brief outline of our key findings before passing over to the other Our Voices members to speak personally on some of our key themes and asks. For a thorough breakdown of our research, I encourage you all to read the Our Voices report, which we published. We created the surveys in recognition of the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a range of impacts on young people, and we needed to find out what the arising needs of young people were. We had 4,000 responses across the three surveys, and the data that we are presenting is from our most recent, updated survey, which was held in November. It had 2,500 responses. The surveys have allowed us to highlight the top issues identified by young people and their diverse range of views, opinions and thoughts. That information has empowered us to create platforms for young people to have their voices heard by decision makers and adult employers and, importantly, to hold them to account. That has included two live-streamed events with a cross-party group of NIYF political champions, which have had 5,800 views on social media.

What did we find out? Some of our headline statistics include the fact that 89% of respondents feel that the voices of young people have not been heard throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We presented a similar statistic to the Children's Commissioner in August 2020 from one of our previous surveys, and she responded by saying that she was surprised that the number was not higher. Seventy four per cent of respondents also highlighted that they felt that their mental health had deteriorated during the pandemic, and 55% said that they did not fully understand the restrictions, rules and regulations. That, obviously, can have a serious impact on safety. Finally, 45% of respondents highlighted that they did not feel safe in their learning environment and workplace. That was not exclusive to learning.

Via the survey, we have been able to identify the top four issues for young people. At joint first, with 67%, were mental health and well-being, and concerns around education, learning at home and exams. Isolation and loneliness was at 61%, and boredom came in at 51%. It is clear to see how those issues interact and intersect to have a seriously negative impact on young people in these challenging times. It is concerning that the majority of young people also identified that their mental health had got worse over the pandemic, and only 29% of respondents felt hopeful about the future. That is a very sad state for some of our young people to be in. Furthermore, 52% also feel that they are not coping well with not seeing friends and family during the pandemic. That is very understandable. We had an open box for comments or questions in our surveys. One young person between the age of 15 and 17 wanted the Government to answer this:

"What are you going to do to improve the treatment of children with mental health conditions in Northern Ireland when the CAMHS system can't even afford to take everyone who needs their help when they need it?"

That is a powerful question for a teenager to have to ask, but it is probably a concern for many young people. Funding was clearly inadequate to meet the need before the pandemic, so how do we ensure that any additional need for support services will be met as the pandemic continues and eventually ends?

When asked to describe how they were feeling in one word, young people's responses were really concerning, with significant signs of distress. The three most common words chosen by young people were "anxious", "annoyed" and "frustrated". That speaks for itself.

As I said, concerns about education, learning from home and exams was a joint top issue for young people, with 67% identifying it as an issue. It was a diverse category, and issues relating to education included remote learning, the inequality of resources and connectivity, inconsistent teaching experiences, greater exam stress and confusion. A number of young people also felt unsafe in their school when the schools reopened. It would be remiss of me not to mention the fact that some young people are waiting anxiously for more information on the alternative arrangements for assessments this summer and how that will work. Again, in the open section of the survey, one young person between the age of 11 and 14 said that they wanted the Government to let people in secondary school ask questions in order to help them to understand what is going to happen in school. Clearly, that young person was a little confused about their school and the impact of COVID-19. I and a lot of others in the Youth Forum are sure that more meaningful consultation with young people about the educational issues that affect their life and long-term prospects would really help.

With regard to the thoughts of young people, 52% of survey respondents asked questions about lockdown, information, health, vaccines and testing. A staggering 10% of survey respondents also selected food, feeling unsafe at home, housing rights and homelessness as the top issues facing them. That statistic is really sad and highlights that the most vulnerable young people have been deeply affected by the pandemic. Those matters are complex and multifaceted, but one of the issues is that existing support mechanisms have become disrupted due to the pandemic, and that puts young people at risk. We have to do better. No young person in NI should struggle with basic human needs. It is not acceptable, and we can do better.

Finally, youth voice and participation are the bread and butter of the Youth Forum. We are all about empowering young people to have their voice heard. When surveyed, over 80% of respondents felt that the voice of young people has not been heard during the COVID-19 pandemic and 74% also felt that they did not have faith and confidence in leadership from government. We did not specify whether "government" meant the NI Executive or Westminster, so we do not know which they meant. There was just a general feeling amongst young people about the governance over COVID-19.

Another concerning statistic is that 58% of those surveyed did not fully understand the messages from people in power. That links to something that we have talked about before at NIYF, which is the creation of a single, accessible and youth-friendly information source for updates on the COVID-19 pandemic. We cannot blame young people for not understanding complex health messages; instead, we have to work to make them clearer. We know that misinformation and confusion can cost lives.

We have a quote from a young person between the age of 15 and 17 who wanted to ask the Government about youth voice and participation:

"Do you ever really think of the impact of your decisions that you make have on young people? I would ask this because as a young person it feels as if politicians do not take into consideration that they might be affecting young people."

Clearly, that young person feels that their needs are not being taken into account by decision makers and is expressing frustration about that.

That completes my portion of the presentation. Thank you very much for listening and for extending an invitation for us to present to you today. I will now pass over to other Our Voices members to speak more personally on some of the key themes and recommendations from our research. Jack is first, and he will discuss education.

Mr Jack Dalzell (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): Hi, I am Jack. I am 14, and I am from the Ards and North Down Borough Council area. I have been involved with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum for two years, and I am part of the Ards and North Down youth council. Last March, I joined the Our Voices group and have been involved in all three surveys. I am in year 10 in school and am picking my GCSEs this year. Usually, in school, we have a careers week where parents come and talk to our

careers teacher and teachers of the subjects that we would like to continue. This year, it will all be online and we will not be able to have as much communication with our teachers to ask about our choices.

On top of that, our teachers expect us to produce the same amount and quality of work as we would if we were still in school. Throughout the pandemic, education has remained a top issue for young people. In the survey, 45% of respondents voiced that they felt unsafe in their workspace or educational environment, and 35% of questions asked by respondents were on education. Key issues for young people were on exams and inequalities, such as young people not having appropriate resources for homeschooling, the digital divide, the varying level of interaction and engagement from schools to parents and students and the pressures that parents and carers are under to homeschoo.

Young people expressed anxiety about the inconsistencies of the grading system. Some felt that it would be unfair to repeat the year if they have done well in the exams or teacher gradings. However, other young people felt that repeating the year would be beneficial for their learning, especially if they did not have a positive learning experience or support during the pandemic. Young people felt that a choice should be given to parents and students on whether they would like to continue to the next year or repeat the year that they are in.

Young people who are at university are having an extremely different experience than expected. Issues raised by students include private rental accommodation and the expectation to pay rent when they return home. It was welcome that students received a £500 one-off payment. However, that is alleviating worries only temporarily.

What are our key asks? We ask the Committee for the Executive Office to support our request to meet the Education Committee and the Minister of Education in order to present those key issues for students across Northern Ireland and to speak to relevant organisations.

Young people who attend university often have part-time jobs in the hospitality sector and have zero-hour contracts. Students are struggling financially. What, specifically, is the Executive Office Committee going to do to support students financially in the long term? The Our Voices group had two meetings scheduled to meet the Minister for the Economy. However, they were cancelled at the last minute by the Minister. Could the Executive Office Committee create a platform for students to have their voice heard?

I will now pass to Blair.

Ms Blair Anderson (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): Hi. I am Blair. I am 26, and I am from Ballymena. I was extremely nervous coming here today because I am getting the opportunity to present in an arena that gives us the chance for change that will affect our next generation. I also know the impact that this could have down the line for engaging and working with groups and, hopefully, seeing a change, as young people's voices are being included. We will be able to take this back to other young people and may see the wider effect that it could have.

I am one of the two peer mentors in NIYF, and I have been involved for over two years. I came from participating on Amplify Youth to becoming a peer mentor. I play a big part in advocating for change. I sit on the central housing forum, the welfare reform working group and the digital inclusion group, to name a few.

COVID-19 greatly impacted on me over the year. It has placed a hold on me moving on with my career. It has placed pressures on me that I never thought that I would experience. It has caused me stress and challenged me as a parent. Uncertainty and fear have set in on how I plan and put things in place, how I advise my child and what I should base my choices for her high school on, knowing that that will affect the rest of her childhood and, overall, impact on her adult life. Not knowing how or from where I gain information regarding her homeschooling and schooling in general makes me feel like I am failing her as a parent, as it is my job to help, support and advise her on the best process, which even I do not know how to do. It has greatly impacted on how I want to plan and envision my next year.

In our research, we gathered nearly 4,000 individual responses from young people throughout the region. Whilst things have emerged from our findings, such as issues with mental health, education and youth voice, it is important to note that those are not the only issues that are impacting on young people right now.

An estimated 10% reported that their issues are food, feeling unsafe in their home, housing rights and homelessness. Our survey's age range was between 11 and 25 years, meaning that young people as young as 11 years old could be experiencing those things. We should bear in mind that they have always been here; however, they have now been heightened massively given the impact that COVID-19 has had on many families, young people and people in general.

The harsh reality is that many of our young people are experiencing difficult circumstances and have nowhere to turn. Accessing a food bank can happen only three times. You must be referred for that, which young people cannot benefit from by themselves. Young people have told us that they do not feel safe in their own home, are experiencing homelessness or are worried about their housing rights.

Given my own experiences, I know at first hand the impact that it has on overall mental health, well-being and daily living when services are not able to provide the best service possible. COVID has now created a greater impact with greater need. Not having a safe space or feeling safe in your own home creates challenges and challenges aspects of a young person's life. It all starts at home. If young people feel safe and secure, loved and wanted, fed and warm, they often thrive and do not need to avail themselves of any aspects of the system. Unfortunately, when that is not the case, too often young people struggle to deal with those emotions and can end up needing extra support that is not available. Often, we think that the young people who are facing those issues are over the age of 18, but the reality is that they are as young as 11 and possibly younger. Young people are entitled to those things, which are our basic human rights that. Young people in Northern Ireland are living in poverty right now, are frightened for the future and are extremely vulnerable.

What are our key asks? The Trussell Trust recently reported that food banks in Northern Ireland have seen an increase in the number of families and young people seeking support, with an increase of 142% in the number of people that the food banks are feeding. Article 6 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states:

"States Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life."

It also states:

"States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child."

Can we get a commitment from the Executive Office Committee to ensure that it is doing everything that is in its power to make sure that young people's basic human rights are met and upheld and that policies are viewed through the lens of the impact of COVID-19? It is vital that young people have a choice at all decision-making levels. Will the Executive Office Committee review how the NI Assembly ensures that the voices of young people are listened to on the issues that affect their life? Thank you.

Mr Ó Raghdhaigh: Hi, everyone, again. I am Oisín-Tomás Ó Raghdhaigh, and I am the vice chair of NIYF. I have also gone through many programmes with the forum; it is amazing. Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity. I am also a student at Queen's University Belfast. I am going to talk a little further about mental health and isolation.

Before the pandemic, mental health was consistently identified as a key issue that young people struggle with. Indeed, in February 2020, NIYF organised a summit that brought together politicians, young people, adults, youth workers and more to highlight mental health and well-being and how it affects children and young people. We heard the experience of a youth worker who had to try to support a young person in crisis who had been sent away from A&E with little more than a Lifeline card. We heard the powerful words of a family member who lost a young person to suicide. We heard about the experiences of people who failed to get adequate support via the statutory mental health services, whether that was the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) or the adult mental health services. That was, of course, if they were lucky enough to get the support in spite of the long waiting lists. We are not in any way disparaging mental health professionals, who do amazing work to support people; rather, we are saying that, on many occasions, demand simply overpowers capacity and that more has to be done.

We know that mental health was a key issue before the pandemic, and now we have to add on all the issues from COVID-19 that can have an impact on mental health and well-being. Whatever your position in life, the majority of us have experienced some form of worry and stress, whether it is about the physical danger of COVID-19, financial losses, educational issues, social isolation or the disruption

of services to support well-being and more. The pandemic has exacerbated mental health issues. As mentioned, when survey respondents were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health, 76% said that it has got worse or much worse. Those young people deserve the support that they need.

In 2016, it was estimated that 45,000 children and young people in NI either have or previously had a mental-health problem, and that was before the pandemic. I am very afraid for the most vulnerable young people; they need support, and they need it now. Figures that were obtained by 'The Irish News' and published on 15 February showed that, as of December 2020, 1,310 children and adolescents were on health trust waiting lists for mental health support. Each one of those numbers represents a young person who was struggling and had the confidence to ask for support. Now they are on a waiting list. The longest waits reported in that article were 282 days for a case in the Western Trust and 238 days for a case in the Belfast Trust. I do not know in what world that would be OK, I really do not. Those are the longest figures and might not be representative of everyone's experience, but, again, they involve young people who needed support. In one case, a young person had to wait 282 days for help. It is truly absurd that young people have waited that long for the help that they need and deserve. It is not good enough.

Where do we go from here? First, it is clear that we need increased funding for mental health services, both child and adolescent mental health services and adult mental health services. Many similar issues are covered in both services, and we encourage the Committee to do anything that it can to help to make that a reality.

We also welcome the announcement of a £300 million funding boost to help to tackle COVID-19 and the encouragement of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who stated:

"I would urge the Executive to use this additional £300 million to help those most in need in NI."

We ask the Committee for the Executive Office to consider lobbying the Health Minister on that funding boost. We ask the Committee to please encourage him to put in a bid so that some of that money can be used to support the voluntary and statutory sector in delivering vital mental health and well-being services. We know that the professionals have the skills to support young people, and they need the funding to make that happen. I have seen first-hand how the great work of volunteer organisations and those in the statutory sector can make a big difference in young people's life, but funding is necessary. We need to be able to meet the demand.

Schools are also a big issue. The interim mental health champion, Siobhán O'Neill, recently presented to the Education Committee on the possibility of mental health assessments for all pupils ahead of their return to school. We support that, and I think that it is a great idea. We cannot go straight back to business as usual. Young people need additional support, and we need to be able to see whether certain young people need extra support. We cannot just throw them back into the classroom without knowing that they may have needs that they did not have before the pandemic.

I also want to mention the Elephant in the Room campaign, which is a youth-led mental health campaign by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and Belfast Youth Forum. We are happy to say that the campaign has had a lot of engagement with decision makers. I think that that is a great thing, and we thank them for it. One of the key asks from that campaign includes the creation of a compulsory, meaningful and long-term mental health and well-being curriculum for all schools in NI. That would help to raise awareness of mental health, tackle stigma and ensure that young people have access to high-quality, consistent mental health information that has the potential to save lives. In addition, if a programme like that were implemented correctly, it could help young people to develop positive coping mechanisms and resilience to use in times of distress. Mental health should not be something that we ignore until it is at crisis point.

Another key ask from the campaign is increased provision of mental health and well-being training for all teachers so that they have the knowledge to recognise signs of poor mental health in young people and to ensure that a comprehensive mental health curriculum can be delivered effectively. Those measures were essential before COVID-19, and I think that the impact of COVID-19 on young people's mental health shows how even more necessary they are now. We ask the Committee for the Executive Office to commit to lobbying the Education Minister on implementing the measures above, and I encourage the Committee for the Executive Office to check out the Elephant in the Room campaign report. It is a little older now, but a lot of stuff in it still has not been done and is still very relevant. We would very much like to put that information out there.

I acknowledge some of the great steps forward that have happened. The Department of Health mental health action plan is a great step forward, and the appointment of an interim mental health champion for Northern Ireland is great. However, we are here today to say that more has to be done. The waiting list figures that were published on 15 February were really shocking, and I worry for those children now, I really do.

Thank you so much for listening. I will now pass over to Adam.

Mr Adam Crothers (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): Thank you very much for giving us and the Youth Forum an opportunity to speak today. My name is Adam, I am 18, I am from Bangor, and, like O-T, I am a student at Queen's University. I am in first year. I am living at home at the moment, and I have a part-time job to help to fund my degree. I am involved as a member of the Youth Forum, the Ards and North Down youth council and the Our Voices group, which is here today. I previously had the opportunity to participate in Youth Forum discussions with the Education Committee and the Education Minister, which I am very thankful for.

As with most people, COVID has negatively impacted me, mainly through my university experience. Socially, COVID has limited the opportunities that I have had to meet new people and enjoy the traditional university first year experience. I chose to stay at home, and many students whom I know have done the same. From my experience, being a university student has been a lonely one. Although Queen's has done a great job in offering online events for students to network and make new friends, the experience is not the same. COVID has reduced the university experience to a laptop. Academically, COVID has limited the teaching methods available to all students, which has hindered the learning experience. Although COVID has brought unprecedented challenges, it has given unprecedented opportunities. I would never have imagined speaking to the Education Committee or this Committee today. I thank the Executive and those in Government for the successful steps that they have already taken to combat the pandemic.

The NI Youth Forum has had the opportunity to speak to decision-makers at Stormont, such as the Education Committee and the Education Minister. Those meetings have been invaluable. More successes can be made if young people are more involved in the decision-making processes. Although COVID has affected all ages, young people will inherit the economic — the UK economy faced an almost double-digit recession in 2020 — and social consequences of the pandemic most severely. Therefore, the lack of youth voice has been one of the key issues for young people throughout the pandemic. There have been excellent opportunities for youth participation in government, as was previously mentioned. However, we often have not been able to promote the voice of young people to the extent that we need to. For example, a meeting between the NI Youth Forum and the Economy Minister was postponed twice and now appears to be in limbo. Instances such as those have happened previously.

The Youth Forum proposed a youth press conference with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in a format similar to those that happen in countries such as Norway, but that has fallen by the wayside. That youth press conference has been lobbied for by the Youth Forum since the start of the pandemic, with letters from NIYF political champions also requesting it. Those efforts were met with no acknowledgement; instead, a subsequent Cool FM youth press briefing was carried out in December with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Although we are thankful that that happened, the briefing had a small run time and a limited number of young people. The Northern Ireland Youth Forum is calling for a youth conference with the wider youth population in partnership with relevant organisations to ensure that the most vulnerable youth voices, such as those in poverty and those who are really struggling, can be heard. It is important to us that we engage with as many young people as possible.

Although the announcement of the Youth Assembly in June 2020 was welcome, youth voice is essential for cooperation and the rights of young people. As was previously mentioned, the pandemic will perennially impact young people. As is outlined under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in article 12, young people have a right to have their voices heard about decisions that impact their lives. Ultimately, COVID offers unprecedented opportunities for cooperation; it has led to further opportunity for reflection on how we live our lives and offers the chance for change. That change can be achieved with sustained future consultation between young people and government.

What are our key asks? Can we have a commitment today from the Executive Office Committee to ensure that a youth press conference is rescheduled as a matter of urgency, in line with the UNCRC article 12 so that young people have a right to have a say about decisions that affect their lives?

Additionally, 74% of our survey respondents have expressed that they do not have faith and confidence in leadership in government. How is the Executive Office Committee meaningfully engaging with young people now to seek their views, thoughts and opinions about the important decisions that impact their lives? That will benefit not only young people but those in government so that the decisions that they make are followed by young people.

Thank you very much for giving the Northern Ireland Youth Forum the opportunity to speak to those gathered here today. Thank you for listening. I hope that the cooperation between young people and government that I have illustrated today will continue.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much. Thank you very much for that presentation. One of the things that I liked most about it was that it was what it should be; it turned things upside down. Normally, in presentations, people come in, and then the Committee asks the questions. I love the fact that you have left us with a whole list of questions, and that is the way it should be. Young people are often overlooked and their voices are not heard. Between you all, Oisín, Adam, Jack, Blair and Lauren, you have provided clear, articulate and informed voices as individuals and for the 4,000 voices that you represent. We need to listen to you as though 4,000 people were in front of us asking these questions. That is the validity of the work you have carried out.

When we hear terms like "anxious", "annoyed" and "frustrated" as being the key words that express how people are feeling, if that is not a call to action for the Executive and political representatives, then I do not know what we are here to do. We must respond to these issues.

I have been keeping a note of your very specific questions, as have the Clerks. You have asked, "Will the Executive Office ask the Education Minister or ask the Economy Minister" to do such-and-such a thing. We will write to those Ministers and say that, having listened to your presentation, we now have a series of questions and that we want answers to them.

I know that a meeting was planned between the political champions group and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister from last July and that it did not take place. Somehow, it fell by the wayside. Let me just update members. Last week, I met the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and they have given an assurance that they will come along and meet. I will work with Chris off-line after this, to ensure that that meeting takes place. Maybe some of you will be there as well.

I lay this down as a challenge: I will be shocked and disappointed if we cannot have a youth press conference, because it needs to be sorted. There are many views that young people have. They want to be able to ask legitimate questions, and it should be just in the way that a normal press conference happens. Again, I set down a challenge, which is that you do not submit your questions beforehand to journalists. Journalists do not submit questions beforehand, so that they are cleared and the answers prepared. The young people who take part in this press conference should be able to ask the questions that they want, like regular journalists, and get the answers.

I will ask just one question, and then pass on to my colleagues in the Committee. You have asked us how we can encourage young people and ensure that their voices are heard. Do you have an idea of how that can be done best? What are your thoughts on how the voices of young people can be heard, and what would be the best way for us to hear what young people think? I am sure that you are full of ideas. Does anybody want to say something on how your voices can be heard in the future? Oisín, do you want to take that, or pass it out to somebody?

Mr Ó Raghdhaigh: Adam wanted to take that question. However, I just want to say that there should be meaningful consultation, and we mentioned it in the survey. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. You may give a press conference, and that is that; but we want meaningful, continuous consultation to ensure that young people have a say on every issue that affects their lives. It is that simple. Meaningful consultation can take different forms.

Another thing that we have talked about, which is sort of related to this, is the idea of youth-friendly information about COVID. At a meeting with the Minister of State for NI, we said, "We think there should be youth-friendly information. We want an information source for young people to go to, so that they can know what is happening with COVID." He said, "That is a great idea. Maybe you should do that." Of course, we cannot do that, necessarily, as it would mean that we would be interpreting regulations, and there are issues with that. However, we would love to have a partnership with the Executive so that when they release new regulations, we could create a clear, concise document for young people. We hear that a lot: young people just do not understand the regulations, as their

wording is confusing. However, we can simplify that in a way that is suitable for all age groups that could, perhaps, save lives.

I am going to let Adam jump in here, because I know that I went off-topic there a little bit. Adam, do you want to jump in on that?

Mr Crothers: Yes, please. I agree with all O-T's points, but I will emphasise the Youth Assembly, as it is a great way to have meaningful and sustained cooperation. It was announced in June 2020, and, obviously, with the pandemic, the ways and means to create the Assembly have been severely hindered and limited. Nevertheless, it is a great way to sustain cooperation. We should not have to survey 4,000 young people to find out how they are feeling. People should be coming to people to say, "This is how I am feeling. Can you put that to the Youth Assembly?", and that is how it goes to Government. The Youth Assembly is an amazing way to sustain cooperation. I hope that that can be put into effect in future once COVID dies down a bit. Chris wants to come in as well.

Mr Quinn: Yes. Thanks, Adam. This morning, I met the Speaker of the Assembly and other people involved in youth participation about the establishment of the Youth Assembly. It has been a long road. We have been lobbying for 13 years, but the hope is that something will be set up by spring/summer time. Colin, I will go back to your question about the youth voice. For me, and sorry for being a bit of a negative wizard, but whilst I welcome the idea of a youth press conference, I do feel that it needs to be more than that. The authentic youth voice needs to have a more sustained and ongoing approach.

With COVID-19 the landscape changes daily, weekly or every time you turn on the radio or watch the news. Day after day things such as exams and the 11-plus are changing. Therefore, I will argue for something more sustained and for more engagements like this. There has been great success through the political youth champions group where young people sit down regularly with MLAs. My ask is whether that engagement will be sustained and ongoing. Adam, thank you for bringing me in there.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Engagement can pick up a lot of different things, and that is important. Sorry, for picking one point, but it jumped straight into my head. Adam mentioned that, because of COVID, his university experience has been condensed into a laptop. Everyone who has been to university understands the university experience, but, now, for a lot of young people, it will simply be opening a laptop every day or hearing that 10% of people are concerned about food or their safety. We need to highlight those things and push them out there. It has taken you to come here today to raise those issues.

I see that a number of members want to ask questions. First, I will go to the Deputy Chair, Doug Beattie. The easiest way is to direct the questions to Oisín, and if he does not want to answer them, he can appoint someone to do so. That will help with the flow because we are not in the same room.

Mr Beattie: I really enjoyed the presentation; it was fascinating, incredibly informative and thought-provoking. There is an awful lot that I want to take away from it. There are questions that I need to ask myself and challenges that I need to put to people I work with. At the same time, if I am honest with you, and if I respect you, I cannot patronise you. I have to challenge you as well. I want to try to do that and unpick some of the issues that you raise.

Sitting here today, yesterday and tomorrow, I feel anxious, annoyed and frustrated. All the issues in your survey, such as mental health, isolation and loneliness, boredom, education, learning and home exams, affect everyone; they affect society. When I talk to parents who are homeschooling, it is clear that they are anxious, annoyed and frustrated, so they are experiencing that also. When you say that 74% have no faith or confidence in Government leadership, I can tell you that it is greater than that in the adult population. Likewise, when you say that 58% do not fully understand messages from the people in power, that is a huge issue.

My first question, if somebody wants to take it on, is this: how do you measure your concerns in youth groupings against the everyday concerns that you will have when you move into an adult environment as you get older?

Mr Ó Raghdhaigh: I will ask Chris to answer that.

Mr Quinn: Sure, O-T. If anyone else wants to come in, just give me a signal. Your points are valid, Doug. This affects everyone, regardless of age; it does not discriminate. We cannot argue about that.

Given our role, we have been acutely aware of how the pandemic is affecting young people. One recent statistic is that 18- to 25-year-old single males and females are among the most vulnerable to becoming homeless or having relationships breakdown or changes in domestic circumstances. The increase in homelessness, and in the number of young people in temporary accommodation, in that age band during the pandemic is in the order of 500%, which is startling.

O-T quoted some statistics about mental ill health. In my personal and professional life, I am a big advocate for how that affects everyone. We are told that one in four people is affected. However, what we are seeing in our practice, Doug, is more and more young people presenting in crisis. The way in which COVID has pushed us behind a screen means that getting people to avail of support is very difficult, particularly for young people who lack connection to support networks, who do not know where to go for help, or who feel embarrassed asking for help. I take on board your point that this affects everyone, young and old alike. My granny was 90 this year and she is afraid to leave her home. She did not come to our house for Christmas dinner. There is no doubt that it is affecting all of us, but our research shows that young people are acutely affected. Those homelessness statistics are one indicator.

I do not know whether anyone else wants to come in.

Mr Beattie: May I jump in? It will help if other people come in on this important question. Your answer was good one. Is it that young people do not have coping mechanisms? Do we need to build in coping mechanisms at a younger age? We talked about getting teachers to act as mental health risk managers, so to speak, but the question is whether they have the capacity to do that. Is this about educating people to give them coping mechanisms? Is that a fair analysis?

Mr Ó Raghallaigh: That is a really big part of it. That is one of the things that we asked for in NIYF's Elephant in the Room campaign. One of the reasons why young people have found it so difficult is that they are going through a developmental process and have not developed coping mechanisms as much as an adult would have. There is very little direct support to develop those in the current institutions. It is about getting through your GCSEs and A levels and all those things, but — through no fault of our teachers — we do not focus on how to build resilience or how to tell young people what to do in a crisis or how to cope with the challenges that we face. Young people have not had that education, and they face a giant challenge with less support.

One of the demands in the Elephant in the Room campaign was to have a comprehensive mental health curriculum highlighting information so that, whatever your age, you can develop positive coping mechanisms suitable for your age group. However, we do not have such provision in schools. If we train teachers, and commit money to doing so, that will help young people. It is a major issue. Adam would like to jump in, so I will pass to him. It is a good point and one worth talking about.

Adults are struggling too. At our mental health event, adults told us, "I am on a waiting list and cannot get support." We need to commit more funding to mental health and well-being services. I was shocked when I read the waiting list statistics. I wanted to put them to people to say that we needed more funding. It is not just a case of committing to mental health services; it needs a comprehensive approach, and that is what we are asking for. That is a good point. I will pass to Adam, as he wanted to jump in on that.

Mr Crothers: I completely agree with your point that mental health is an issue that affects everyone. I work at Tesco, and, from speaking to customers, it is the middle-aged and the elderly who are affected. You hear their stories and you feel for them, because, as a young person, you are also going through the same thing.

There is a lack of faith in government among adults and young people. However, if we set up cooperation between young people and government now, when those young people develop into adults they will think, "I was listened to now, so I will be listened to in the future." It is about tackling the issues that young people face so that when they become adults, they will say, "This Government listened to me; I feel confident in them and have faith in them".

The same applies to mental health. If you tackle a young person's mental health problems now, then, as they grow up, they will be more resilient and will have the skills to combat everyday life as an adult.

Mr Beattie: That was a good answer. Adam, I commend you on your sense of empathy with everybody and the way that you described that real-life experience. That was a good answer, and it tells me exactly the point that you are making here. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you, panel, for those answers. If we can bring Pat Sheehan into the spotlight, we will give him an opportunity to ask a question. Oisín, if you could direct it to who you feel would be best placed to answer it.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you all for your presentation. I am also on the Education Committee. O-T, you mentioned that Professor Siobhan O'Neill gave evidence to the Committee a couple of weeks ago, and what she said chimes with what is in your survey: that a large number of young people have been significantly affected by the pandemic and that their emotional and psychological well-being are suffering.

I have been arguing that the Education Minister needs to put in place a coherent, coordinated and integrated strategy to deal with the problems and difficulties that our young people face. Some will fall behind in their learning due to difficulties with remote learning. There are issues with physical exercise, which can help. There needs to be a cross-departmental approach, with Education taking the lead, but with Health and Communities also involved. We need to incorporate the skills and expertise in the community and voluntary sectors and involve sporting bodies such as the IFA, GAA, Ulster Rugby and so on. It is not something to be developed over five years; it needs to be done now.

If 74% of young people are saying that their mental health has deteriorated since the beginning of the pandemic, that is urgent. We face an unprecedented crisis that demands an unprecedented response. You will be aware that there is now an extra £300 million available for COVID response that we initially thought might have to go back to the British Treasury. At this morning's Education Committee meeting, we agreed to write to the Education Minister to ask him to make an ambitious bid for some of that funding.

Do you agree with taking an integrated strategy approach? If you do, is there anything in particular that you would like to see in it?

Mr Ó Raghdhaigh: I will pass over to Chris for that, but, yes, it is a big issue. We do a lot of cross-departmental work. It is not just a case of funding CAMHS in order to have proper mental health education in schools. We should involve the really talented people in the statutory and volunteer services who do great work. It is about taking a holistic approach. We agree with that. The Elephant in the Room (EITR) campaign engaged with Siobhán O'Neill. Every time that we talk about it, people are in agreement. Very few people say that they do not think that there should be a mental health curriculum in schools to support young people or that there should not be a more holistic approach taken to mental health. People always agree, but very little then happens. If COVID-19 does not put us into action, I do not think that it will ever happen. People need action now. Considering the challenges that we are facing, I hope that it is now time to say, "We have agreed on it. We have talked about it a lot. Let us get it done." I will hand over to Chris, because he does a lot of cross-departmental work.

Mr Quinn: Thank you, O-T, and thanks, Pat, for the question. There is a lot in that question. There are a few chunks that I will try to address. Again, young people, please come in and pull me back if I am talking too much.

I agree that we need to take some sort of radical approach to mental ill health. A lot of the statutory agencies are telling us that they are predicting a mental health tsunami come the third quarter of next year. We are in the middle of a recession and a pandemic. It is unprecedented in the lifetime of any of us, I assume. I did not live through the world wars, so I do not know whether it was anything like this, but this has taken a massive toll on society. Mental health was a huge issue even prior to COVID-19. Last January, we had an emergency meeting, because people were finding things so hard, and that was pre-COVID. We talked about how the mental health strategy was not cutting it and about the need to look at it again. As a member of society, a parent, a youth worker and a third-sector leader, I am very worried. What is going on with our young people's mental and physical health makes me really sad.

The Education Committee is a great vehicle for having some of the tough conversations. My opinion is that children and young people should have the option to repeat this year. We start school too early in this society. If you look at how other places do things, you see that, at the other end of school life, young people have an opportunity for a transition year. I look at my own children and wonder what

literacy and numeracy skills they are losing out on before going on to the next level of their educational life. We need to have an urgent conversation with the Minister of Education about what we can do to address the issue radically.

You asked about cross-departmental working. I have been involved in conversations through DE youth services about how we need to drill down on this. The Children's Services Co-operation Act, which the Assembly passed in the past couple of years, speaks to that. That is all very well, but it is about action and about how we respond to this crisis. Adam said that politicians, including Ministers, are trying and that it is no easy feat. There is a need for a radical look at the issue, Pat. The Education Committee would be a good starting point, because some teachers' unions are speaking out about it. We need to do this urgently. We really cannot wait.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that, Chris. There is a lot in there that I agree with. I am new to the Education Committee, and I asked officials last week about funding that had been made available since the first lockdown in the spring. There was £5 million for the Engage programme, £5 million for something else and £1.5 million for another matter. It just seemed all very disjointed. When you think about it, £5 million might sound like a lot, but not when you divide it between 1,000 schools and however many hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren. It was targeted at teaching staff as well. That is why I agree with you that we need a radical response.

On the general issue of mental health, I agree that the waiting lists are an absolute disaster. We have been arguing for a long time about ensuring parity of funding for mental health and physical health in Health and Social Care (HSC). That is an issue that needs to be fast-tracked by the Minister. I understand the difficulties that we face at the minute with the pandemic, but we cannot allow everything else to fall back because of it. There are issues that can be dealt with, and dealt with quickly, and mental health is one of them.

Chair, if you will indulge me for one minute, I want to comment, rather than ask a question, on the understanding, or lack of understanding, of regulations and the messaging from the political leadership on the pandemic, the virus and so on. I am not surprised that young people are confused. I was on the Health Committee, and I was confused about some of messages. I see the Chair, who accompanied me on the Health Committee, nodding.

If we are dealing with a public health emergency, all decisions should be made on the basis of public health, and that does not always happen. I will give you one example. In early December, Matt Hancock, the English Health Minister, said publicly that the virus was out of control in the south of England and that the new variant, which is much more transmissible, had become dominant. Still and all, you could hop on a plane at Heathrow, get off at George Best Belfast City Airport, jump into a taxi or on to a bus or train, go into the centre of Belfast and do your shopping or whatever you wanted, yet the Health Minister, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) told us that that did not pose a significant risk to public health here. I am still scratching my head about that one, because now the UK variant, or the Kent variant, as it is sometimes called, is dominant here. The rise in infections was exponential. The number of deaths has risen massively as well since Matt Hancock said that. Young people are therefore not the only ones who are confused about what is going on. Even some of us right in the midst of all of it are confused. Thanks again for coming in.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much, Pat. Go ahead, Chris.

Mr Quinn: Natalie, do you still want in or has your point passed?

Ms Natalie Corbett (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): Yes. Since last March, I have had the pleasure of working alongside the young people whom you have heard from today.

I was thinking about children's and young people's mental health and about how things were pre-COVID. It is estimated that 45,000 children and young people in Northern Ireland have a mental health problem. A lot of the research and findings were done pre-COVID, so the issue is this: what impact is COVID having now?

I am supportive of the idea that Departments need to work together, but they need to talk to the people on the ground who are working with and supporting young people. As a worker supporting young people through mental health problems, I can say that we were already stretched before COVID, and statutory provision is often not there. That is not the fault of any doctors or nurses. Rather, it is because services are underfunded and waiting times are through the roof.

There was a point made earlier about young people having the right to have a voice. It is important to note that adults in society can vote. That is how their voice is exercised, whereas people who are 17 and under cannot vote. How are young people's voices therefore being heard?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thanks for that. I will what Pat said. This morning, somebody asked me a question, and I was straight on to the website to trawl through it to try to find the answer. You would think that we should know what the answers are, but the issue is so complex and there have been so many changes made that you are not assured what the answers are, so it is no surprise that it is completely confusing.

Mr Lunn: Thank you to all the panellists. We get plenty of presentations up here, but I have never heard one with so much content and that asked so many questions. We are going to have to take some of this away and come back to you on it, because there is a lot in there. I do not want to repeat anything that anyone else has said, but I was struck by the fact that 55% said that the regulations are unclear. It probably should be 100%. That links to 74%, I think it was, who say that they have no confidence in the Government, or precious little.

I want to ask you about the impact of decisions. My understanding of what that you mean is that decisions are taken by government — I dare say by older people — without taking into account their effect on young people. You have probably already done this, but can you give any concrete examples that come to mind of the Government taking decisions that are meant to benefit the whole population but that perhaps do so at the expense of young people? Is that a fair question? That is for any of you who wish to answer.

Mr Quinn: O-T, would you like me to make a stab at that first, and you can come in behind me?

Mr Ó Raghallaigh: Yes. That is fine.

Mr Quinn: Thanks for that, Trevor. On behalf of the group, I thank you for your positive feedback. As I said at the start, the young people never fail to impress, and, when I sit back and listen, I am the same as you. It was a very engaging presentation.

My analysis of part of what we are hearing is that one of the key things about the decision-making process is that it is not so much about decisions being made to the detriment of young people but more about decisions being taken that affect their lives. One example that I can give you is about education. Young people talk to us consistently. I am thinking about the number of times that education has been in the news. Last term, the schools closed early. There have been school restarts. In fact, before that, algorithms were used to determine exam results, after which there was the issue of getting young people back to school. All those things were in the news. The cycle goes on. The transfer test was a big issue. I guess that young people are saying, "Why aren't you talking to us about these things?". A group of young people had a campaign at the end of last term to place trust in teachers. The campaign was saying, "Don't use an algorithm. Trust our teachers. Our teachers know us". Young people are saying over and over again, "Listen, we have solutions here. We want to be part of this decision-making process, so let us in". That relates to the question about not having faith in the Government. Overwhelmingly, young people have been saying to us, "Let us be part of the decision-making process".

Everyone in here has highlighted the fact that the situation is very confusing. It is difficult to understand what the regulations are and are not, and they do change quite a bit. Interestingly, I have found that a lot of young people were educating me about the regulations and about what you could and could not do. Sometimes, young people are bang on and understand the regulations, while at other times, as it is for the rest of society, they find them quite confusing.

I do not know whether that has entirely answered your question, Trevor. We have a chat group here, and Lauren, Natalie and Jack have commented. Would any of you like to come in on the back of what I have said?

Ms Lauren McAreavey (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): I will jump in, if that is OK.

Mr Quinn: Yes.

Ms McAreavey: The thinking behind it is that young people be included in the decisions. It is about the ordinary moments of life that are being missed out on. That is being overlooked. Yes, the

pandemic is the absolute focus here, and it should be the priority, but young people are missing out on those moments that we all take for granted. I am only 23 years old. I graduated last summer, and I missed out on my graduation. It is about the simple moments that people look forward to in their lifetime. Those are moments that we will not get back. I can empathise with people going through similar experiences to mine. I agree with Chris that young people are leading the way forward. The Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI) ran the Trust Our Teachers campaign, and it was amazing. Young people are mobilising more than ever. This has geared their voices to shout from the rooftops. I could not be prouder of the young people in Northern Ireland. They have been a credit to themselves throughout the whole process.

Mr Lunn: I have just one more point to make, Chair.

Mr Ó Raghallaigh: I was going to jump in briefly about the algorithm. That is an example of the effect on young people. The Youth Forum had discussions about that before, and we knew that it would, in a way, discriminate against people, because it was using data based on a school's previous achievements. In essence, the way in which that is done means that people from low-income households and more deprived areas have their A-level and GCSE results pulled down. Using the algorithm was always going to contain an element of hurting the most vulnerable students.

Was there a meaningful consultation done on that? No, there was not. If you had told students that their grades would be pulled down based on their school's data, they would have said, "Is that not discrimination? Are you not hurting the most vulnerable?". That consultation was not done, however. Under article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), young people have a right to express their views in all matters that affect them and for those views to be given due weight. That is a perfect example of their views not having been consulted on meaningfully and not being given weight until there was a wider media backlash. That is the problem. We could have solved that before it happened. I will stop talking now, but I wanted to mention that, because it is a great example.

Mr Lunn: On the subject of education, I have three grandchildren: a 16-year-old, a 14-year-old and a 12-year-old. I have heard a lot of this from them. They are suffering in unseen ways through all of this. The 16-year-old is preparing for his GCSE assessments and is doing his nut with the technology. The 14-year-old — the same age as you, Jack — is trying to be homeschooled. He is a very diligent wee lad and is doing his best, but he cannot help it if the internet keeps breaking down when he is three quarters through an assignment. It just happens. The 12-year-old girl has seen her new schoolmates for only three or four weeks so far. That is pretty awful. There is no sport for them and no social interaction. I am with you all the way on this. It is a dreadful state of affairs. We have to plan our way through the pandemic. When I hear Chris talking about offering a repeat year, there may be something in that.

Finally, Jack, I can see you, and I am curious as to whether that is a Manchester United or Liverpool thing on the wall behind you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Dalzell: Liverpool.

Mr Lunn: I had better not mention my Everton credentials. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you, Trevor. I will bring in Christopher Stalford next. I am afraid that I have to semi-crack the whip in my role as Chairman, because we still have another three members to contribute and are nearly an hour and a half in. I suggest that members condense everything into one question or statement at the start, with just one or two witnesses giving a response. Hopefully, we will then get through those three members' questions in the next 10 to 15 minutes.

Mr Stalford: Thank you, everyone, for the presentation. I am very familiar with the work of the Youth Forum. I was involved in some of the Youth Forum's activities through the Boys' Brigade when I was coming up. You mentioned young people getting involved in politics. I joined a political party when I was 14. I was the youngest person elected to Belfast City Council in 2005. I know that I do not look it: I had a hard paper round. I was 21 when I was elected to the council for the first time. I therefore absolutely applaud, support and encourage young people to get involved in politics, political activity and public discourse.

I have four children who are younger than Trevor's grandchildren. My eldest daughter is in P6. P6 is a very important year, and she has lost almost the entirety of it. Home learning and homeschooling are very difficult when you have not only a daughter in P6 but a son in P5, another son in P3 and a toddler running around your ankles. I therefore know what stress is: trying to do three sets of homework with a toddler running around. Stalford Primary School can be a bit chaotic at times. Adults are certainly experiencing the stress of this situation.

I also represent the area that includes Queen's University. I have been contacted by lots of people, and, frankly, it is unscrupulous behaviour for landlords to hold students to contracts for properties if they are not able to get their year at university. It is really unfair. Landlords may have the law on their side, in that a contract has been signed, but the moral and decent thing to do is to cut people a break.

I want to ask about the student experience and the loss of the usual student experience. The presentation mentioned the option of repeating a year at any stage from primary school all the way through to university. I have some sympathy for that option. What would be the implications if that approach were instituted at university? Would it have a domino effect on admissions? Based on my personal experience, I have some sympathy for allowing repeating of a year. I think that it would be beneficial for my child to repeat P6, because she has lost so much of it. I am interested in your assessment of the knock-on effect for university admissions. I know that nursery education is not a legal requirement, but what effect would there be on kids going into nursery this year? Can you talk about that a bit? I am interested in your ideas. Thank you for everything that you have said.

Mr Ó Raghdhaigh: You froze a little bit, but I am going to jump in, because Adam has had to leave, unfortunately. He had to do some work.

There are real capacity problems in universities, and perhaps that will be a challenge. There is a maximum aggregate student number (MASN) cap in operation. That means that student numbers are limited by the Executive. The real capacity of a university does not necessarily meet that aggregate student number cap. We know that Ulster University was fined because it took on too many students. I see that as being absurd, but I understand why there is a cap, because the Executive have to put money towards students.

Removing the cap on numbers would at least help a little bit. The universities would be able to take on as many students as they can facilitate and not have to deal with an arbitrary number. I always find the limit on student numbers very sad. We do not have time to talk a lot about this, but I encourage you to look into it. We lose students who could have got capacity at Queen's or Ulster but have had to go to England instead because of the cap on numbers. We suffer a brain drain. Talented young people are going to England because they have to and are staying there, all because of the Executive's arbitrary number. Removing that number would be one way to deal with university capacity.

I do not know how many people would want to stay back a year. I look to my experience as a young person with a disability who had a classroom assistant growing up. I would not have been able to function properly in this environment. I look back and think, "Would I be in university now, studying politics, philosophy and economics, if I had lost a year and lost that classroom assistant support from school that helped me to develop in a healthy way?". I do not think that I would. Therefore, if it were me, I would have to stay back a year. It is about the individual's choice. We should not hurt young people's long-term prospects just because it would mean a lot of administrative challenges. You are right that it would mean that, but some young people's long-term prospects would suffer greatly, and that is not fair. I know that I would not be where I am now without the support that I had to get me through school, and I do not think that I could have handled it very well.

I do not have a lot of time. Chris, do you want to jump in on school experience?

Mr Quinn: Yes, thanks O-T. We are pushed for time, so I will be quick. Christopher, it is about opening up that conversation and looking at it. We need to look at it. We have done some initial work. Natalie will come in behind me to talk about this a bit more, but we have posed that question in some of the groups in which we are operating. There are mixed views. For example, some people who are nearing the end of their student experience at university want to get over that line, to finish and to get out to work. At the other end of the spectrum are children who might not have the literacy and numeracy requirements to go into post-primary education. One of the challenges with online learning is that there is an assumption that a young person can read what is on the screen. O-T spoke articulately about his journey. It is about opening up that conversation and having an inquiry into it, because not every young person will agree. There are mixed views. I am talking as a parent, and I see

my children missing out, and, as a person working with young people, I hear all the views. We need to open up the conversation, quickly, and to look at it.

Natalie, do you want to come in on that?

Ms Corbett: No.

Mr Quinn: It is about choice and opening up an inquiry into it as expediently as we can.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much, and thank you for that question, Christopher. Christopher was elected to the council at the age of 21 and is a great role model for young people. Those 40 years have flown past, have they not, Christopher?

Mr Stalford: Contrary to popular belief, I was not elected in 1846. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We will say nothing. We will pass now to Martina Anderson. Can we get Martina into the spotlight, please?

Ms M Anderson: After hearing all those presentations, it is hard to distil things down into one question. I am sure that the Chair will try to cut me off, but it is impossible to do justice by asking just one question. I was taken by Jack, in the first instance, because of what he said about his experiences due to the restrictions in education. It struck me that it is crucial to be talking about the various Committees. Pat Sheehan, for instance, is on the Education Committee, so you are not talking to MLAs who are on just one Committee. We are on various Committees. When I was listening to some of what you were saying, I had my Infrastructure head on, because I am very much of the view of, "Nothing about youse without youse". I am a firm believer in participatory democracy. I do not believe that any elected representative should be in any institution that does not have a participatory axis.

Chris said that there had been a 13-year campaign to get a youth forum; I remember it well. Prior to coming here, I spoke to the Speaker to get an update on where things are with that, because, and you are all across this, he is taking the idea of a youth assembly really seriously. A senior management team has been assigned to its establishment, a co-design group has been set up, and there is an advisory group, which Chris is on. There will be 90 young people in the assembly in a few short months. I am excited — we all are — to be able to hear more of your voices, just as we have had the pleasure and opportunity of doing so today. That is not me patronising you; I hope that some of you know me well enough to know that I do not do that, but it was a pleasure to hear what you had to say today.

Adam, you talked about the press conference, and therein lies your platform and opportunity, because, when the youth assembly is being set up, part of your conversations with the Speaker should be on how you will engage with people outside the assembly to let them know about the work that you are doing in it.

I will pick up on a couple of points that you mentioned, Blair. One of my responsibilities with Sinn Féin is to be its anti-poverty spokesperson, so I am acutely aware of everything that you said about food poverty. We need to elevate the issue of food poverty and food insecurity, because it is absolutely appalling and unacceptable that, in the Western world, we are hearing things like those that you outlined today and that 'Spotlight' revealed last night. There are models for us to look at. For example, Scotland is doing a right to food Bill, which is out for consultation and is something that we, as an Assembly, should be looking at.

Adam, you talked about the job that you were doing. A private Member's Bill is being developed by an MLA to try to end zero-hour contracts. The insecurity of jobs for people like you is an issue.

You mentioned that, when we were 18, fadó, fadó — a long time ago for some of us — we had the right to vote. At 16, if you can join an army or open a bank account, you should have the right to vote. I am very much of the view, as is Sinn Féin, that there should be a right to vote at 16.

In relation to what you said about mental health, it is important that you all know that you are not just talking to a group of public reps who do not understand that. We have friends and family members who are struggling in the same way as some of the people whom you talked about. We understand the depth of the issue and the impact that it is having on people's lives. We live it; it is our lived experience. We are sitting here today and doing this over Zoom with you, but we would all much

rather be in a room with you. However, the technology has enabled us to do this, so we are thankful for Zoom, StarLeaf and all the other platforms that are there.

Something else that you mentioned also struck me, and I will end with this comment to hear your views on it. I did some work that looked at Derry and the Foyle constituency and the kind of allocations that have come in here over a number of years. The Western Health and Social Care Trust goes beyond Derry into parts of mid-Ulster, Tyrone and parts of east Derry, so it is a big geographical area. Pat made a point about physical health and the importance of mental health. I looked at the funding allocation to acute services in the trust. There is an issue with how we spend our money in hospitals, but that is another discussion for another day. I am not saying anything about the doctors and nurses — you could not pay them enough — but there are some issues with procurement and the way that money is spent. I looked at the funding in the Western Trust — I am going to give you the wrong figures, but these are the ballpark ones — and there was something like £150 million spent on acute services in 2007 and close to £300 million being spent on acute services today; yet, when I looked at mental health, there was £20 million being spent on it in 2007 and only £30 million being spent on it today. That exposes the fact that due regard has not been given to mental health. You mentioned how it is impacting on young people; it is impacting on every age group across society. Therefore, what you are bringing to us today is something that needs more cross-departmental work to address the issues. The problem that we are all engaged with and conscious of is that Departments work very much with a silo mentality. Therefore, trying to encourage cross-departmental work is somewhat challenging for all of us.

You are pushing at an open door, but you do not want tea and sympathy. You want to come to the meeting today and be heard. It is up to us to take on board everything that you said. The hope that I have for you is that, in a few short months, we will see the youth assembly being established, and that gives you a platform and a voice to express all that you have done here today beyond the room of a Committee. Sin sin.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Does anybody want to respond to those remarks?

Ms B Anderson: Yes.

Mr Ó Raghdhaigh: I am going to pass that to Blair. She has already come in, so I do not need to. Go ahead, Blair.

Ms B Anderson: Thank you very much, Martina. Poverty is an issue that I am very passionate about. I have done a lot of research on it. Young people's lives are nearly mapped out for them from the moment that they come home from hospital. How your future is laid out will possibly be dependent on where and in what area you come home to.

We welcome more cross-departmental approaches. A lot of my work is with the Housing Executive and working alongside young people. There is an importance for everybody to work on the same level. Recently, so much good work is being done. It is about bringing all that work together and everybody working off the same hymn sheet, so to speak.

The impact that universal credit has on young people goes right the way through their lives. When you are suffering from poverty and poor mental health, that has an impact on your home life, education and well-being, and it has a knock-on effect. If we can try to tackle the small things, that could lead to beautiful destinations. Something that I always say in the Youth Forum is that, "Small steps always lead to beautiful destinations". There is a lot of good work being done, so it is about bringing all that good work together and moving forward with a cross-departmental approach.

Does anybody else have anything to add to that?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. Thank you, Blair. Thank you, Martina, for that question and those comments.

Can we get Emma Sheerin into the spotlight for her question? The panel will be pleased to know that we are getting towards the end. You have been well grilled with the questions that are coming through today. Emma, we will now pass over to you.

Ms Sheerin: You can hear me — brilliant. I do not want to rehash anything at this stage. You have been put through your paces. I want to start by reiterating that the presentation was brilliant. It was

great to get such a range of views from all of you. Blair came in again, but she said at the outset that she was nervous, yet she had absolutely no need to be, because hearing that strong voice on the issues that are affecting you is key. It is very useful for us, as has been said by all the reps who have spoken to you.

Martina touched on the issue of poverty. There has been a disproportionate impact on women and children as a result of COVID. I often think that children and young people are forgotten about. They can bear the brunt of that within a household, but it is hidden from the general population. More often, we think of the adults and the impact that it is having on them. The experiences that you relayed have been useful. I can see that, in your presentation, in the issues that are affecting the groups, boredom comes up in all the age ranges, as does mental health and well-being.

I may have missed it, but I have not heard or seen you mention, in your verbal or PowerPoint presentation, the impact of social media. Is social media proving to be a useful tool for young people during this time, or is it contributing to the anxiety that people feel and what is the outcome of that?

I also had a question about your group and rural engagement. I am a south Derry rep and will always speak to the rural experience. I think that I am the youngest member on the Committee. I do not feel it, but, 10 years ago, I was in my first year at university, and I remember the anxiety that I experienced at that time, the stress around exams and all the different worries that I had. There was no Instagram. There was social media, but it played a much smaller role than currently, and, obviously, COVID-19 was not something that I had to deal with. I am trying to consider the impact of all that, and then adding a pandemic.

I get a strong impression that the uncertainty around school and university and missing out on the social aspect of school and university is playing a big role in people's mental health. I suppose that we can all acknowledge and accept that, because of the health situation, the closure of physical learning spaces is necessary, but there is the lack of a plan and certainty. It is a moving situation. Nobody could expect the Education Minister to have known a year ago where we were going to be now. Going forward, we may have, "If the R number is in such a place at such a time, we will do this". We should have had options clearly laid out so that people knew what was likely to happen based on where the health situation was.

I wonder whether there were any comments or feedback coming in on that. Thank you, again. It has been a really useful presentation from my end, and I have really enjoyed it.

Ms McAreavey: Emma, thank you for your question. How social media impacts is an important issue. For us, as an organisation, we turn to social media as a key engagement tool in interacting with young people. If we are being honest, I think that all of us have turned to social media during the pandemic in how we interact, with even our loved ones. On a Saturday night, we do a Zoom quiz with my nanny and granda just to say hello and get the craic going.

It is a new normal, but there are definitely pros and cons. We tried to turn our social media platforms into a resource of positivity. We have a resource called LIFEMAPS, which is about positive psychology and how we spin and adapt that to online. It is usually a physical course, but we turned that around.

There are definitely pros and cons. Young people are turning to gaming to fill their time by going on to games consoles. That is even how I am engaging with my friends. It is great. It is an alternative way of socialising, but it involves staring at a screen for hours. I know that there are young people sitting all day for schooling on a laptop and then sitting in front of the TV or the gaming screen.

Another issue that we spoke in depth about was young people getting information on social media. In our first survey, we looked at where young people were getting information, and social media was one of the top places. They were listening to the press conferences, but sometimes that is not engaging for a young person. It is good and bad. We have talked about fake news, what that means in our society, and what is true and what is false. It is hard to interpret.

We have talked today about understanding the regulations and social restrictions, but you do not know what to believe. There is not a blue tick that says "verified", the way that Twitter does, so it is an interesting issue. Related to that is the digital divide and the access to these things. There is so much to talk about in relation to social media. As a young person, it is maybe about looking at where perspective comes in. A young person looks at it and says, "It's great. I'm talking to my friends all day, every day. It's amazing, and everyone's liking my pictures". At the same time, maybe parents are not seeing it as positively.

Mr Ó Raghallaigh: I am a Strabane man; not exactly rural but more rural than some of my Belfast friends here. One thing is clear, and that is the quality of the internet. Low bandwidth makes it hard for students and people working from home to engage properly. When I had a team project with someone who was in a rural area, they could not engage properly because the internet kept going off and on. I could not have a conversation because of the lag. It does not work, and people in rural areas are more affected by that.

Again, transport links mean that you are even more isolated from people. If you are suffering in poverty and live in a rural area with bad transport links, there are even more barriers to accessing mental health services and getting to food banks. We do not have a data breakdown on the effect of living in rural areas. We probably could do that, as we do have geographical information in the survey, but we have not done it. Those issues about the internet, transport and access to services come up again and again. Jack said that being from a rural area makes it even more likely that you might have to repeat the year, because you do not have access to high-quality education. If I have good internet access, I can engage effectively; if I do not, that really hurts my engagement a lot. I just wanted to jump in briefly on rural issues.

Mr Quinn: Do you mind if I make a final point on that? As I have said to many of the Committee members today, we need more information on a lot of these areas. We need to inquire further into the longer-term impact of COVID-19, and social media and gaming is a big part of that. I had a conversation today with the deputy director of the Youth Forum about our concerns about the hours that our staff are spending in front of the screen and the impact that can have on an individual. I am sure that it is the same for a lot of people in the room, and it is unhealthy. Recently, I read an article about the importance of routine. We know that young people, sometimes, sleep all day, game all night and do not leave their room. Yes, the feedback is, "I am engaging with my friends", "I am socialising" and "It is an outlet", and there have been articles that say that gaming is an outlet for positive mental health and well-being. However, it is about getting positive messages out there and encouraging people to have routines and to take breaks from screens. When I first started to work on computers, I was told that we needed to look away from a screen every 20 minutes. Sitting in front of a screen for your working day, and longer if you are using it to socialise, to study or to do sport, is a long time. I am worried about the longer-term effects of screen time, and we need to look into that.

O-T talked about rural young people. If we consider those who are most in need and disadvantaged, the digital divide has an impact on them. We have heard stories about young people who have been put in temporary accommodation in hotels and B&Bs where the TV has been taken off the wall. Can you imagine sitting in a hotel room on your own with no television, maybe no internet and no phone? We have heard about the pros and cons, but it is about getting positive messages out about well-being and thinking about the longer-term impacts.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. Emma, thank you for that question. Guys, thank you for the response. We have had questions from all the representatives who wanted to ask questions. I reiterate the point that I made at the start about your clear, articulate, informed voices. We really have had an insight into how young people have faced the COVID pandemic. Whilst our Committee is not necessarily charged with taking the decisions that impact everyday life for young people, we certainly have a role in scrutinising and influencing those who do take those decisions.

A number of the issues that you have raised and the challenges that you have set today are relevant to other Committees as well. We will pass on that information and put forward requests for those Committees to engage with the Youth Forum. One of the things that I wanted to achieve today was to highlight and show how powerful your voice is. If other representatives see how powerful your voice is and the benefit of the engagement, hopefully, they will ask you to interact with their Committees.

I thank O-T, Adam, Jack, Blair, Lauren, Natalie and Chris. Thank you for the work that you do. Thank you for being that voice for your peers. Please continue to be that voice: it is needed; it is relevant. It is not being heard by those in power, but I know that, when you collectively shout, it will be heard. If we can do that in partnership, we, as a Committee, will do all that we can to help you. We will come back to you on the issues that you have raised for us today. Once again, I say thank you very much, and I wish you all the best with your group work and work as you go forward. Thank you.