



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Introduction to Youth Engagement

20 March 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)  
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Baker  
Mr David Brooks  
Ms Cheryl Brownlee  
Mr Robbie Butler  
Ms Cara Hunter  
Mrs Cathy Mason

**Witnesses:**

Ms Inioluwa Olaosebikan	Diverse Youth NI
Ms Alex Deane	NICCY Youth Panel
Ms Mia Murray	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
Ms Eimear Crozier	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Ms Ellen Taylor	Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I welcome to this Committee session Eimear Crozier, Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF); Ellen Taylor, Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI); Mia Murray, Northern Ireland Youth Assembly; Inioluwa Olaosebikan, Diverse Youth NI; and Alex Deane, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) youth panel. You are all very welcome. Thank you for being patient. As a Committee, we are not setting a great example of timekeeping, but there were big agenda items today. We are delighted to have you all here. We hope to work today's session such that each of you will give a short presentation — we suggest three minutes each — and then we will move to questions from members. I ask members to direct their question to the organisation that they want to answer it, on the back of its presentation.

I want to be very clear that we have titled this agenda item, "Introduction to Youth Engagement". This session is intended to help us to understand the issues that are important to you and how we can best engage with you in the future. As a Committee, we very much want to prioritise youth. We are keen to have a youth engagement stakeholder event, so do not feel that you have to cram all your issues into today's session. That said, we want to hear as much as we can from you, and what we hear will probably set the agenda for our engagement down the line.

I will take the presentations in the order that they appear in my list and ask Eimear to start.

**Ms Eimear Crozier (Northern Ireland Youth Forum):** Thank you. I am here on behalf of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. I am a member of the executive committee and the mental health steering group, elephant coming out of the dark. I thank the Chair and members of the Committee for inviting

us to present today. I will share our insight into mental health and well-being and its place in our education and curriculum.

In August 2023, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland worked in partnership to explore the needs of young people and whether they needed and wanted mental health and well-being to be implemented in our compulsory curriculum. Both Ellen and I worked on this project.

Our youth steering group produced a survey to capture the views and opinions of young people on the topic of mental health and education. That survey, along with further research carried out by the Secondary Students' Union, showed that there is an overwhelming need and want for mental health and well-being to be a compulsory subject. In fact, 93% of our respondents felt that there was a need to introduce mental health and well-being as a core subject. As a group of young people, we are aware that change is not possible overnight and that it will not be straightforward, but we understand the importance of education and early intervention. We want mental health to be given the same priority as physical education in schools.

Our survey allowed young people to have their say about what is already in place from the Department of Education and the Education Authority (EA). We found that a majority of young people had never heard of the services that are provided in schools by the Department. We are also happy to send our survey findings to the Committee, following this meeting, if members are interested.

Our key asks and recommendations have been created to provide a pathway for how to deliver this. We feel that it is not just an Education Department issue but requires cross-departmental working. Over the years, we have seen the introduction of programmes aimed at improving the mental health and well-being of students in primary and secondary education. Unfortunately, none has been sustainable, due to funding cuts. The implementation of health and well-being as a core curriculum subject would do away with short-term programmes in selected schools and areas and provide an education for all students. Our asks are not about increasing the workload on our current teaching staff, minimising the support provided by current providers in statutory community and voluntary sectors, providing a sticking plaster solution or changing the role of our education providers.

Our first ask is the establishment of a youth-led and adult-supported cross-departmental working group, including relevant bodies such as the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Department of Education, to work towards the co-creation of a curriculum for mental health and well-being by 2025. The Children's Services Co-operation Act requires cooperation among children's authorities in Northern Ireland to contribute to the well-being of children and young people. We feel that there is a requirement for the Health and Education Departments to work together on this matter and to involve young people from the outset.

Our second ask is, by 2028, a co-created curriculum in mental health and well-being for primary, post-primary and special educational needs schools. This process has to involve young people from the beginning to ensure that their needs are being met.

Our third ask is, by 2029, the introduction of a mental health and well-being teaching qualification by working with initial teacher education providers such as St Mary's University College, Stranmillis University College, Queen's University and Ulster University. This is approved by the Department of Education and accredited by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland. Through a PGCE pathway for teaching well-being as a subject, we want to see a qualified, competent teaching workforce that is comfortable teaching the subject.

Our fourth ask is, by 2029, the development and implementation of a module within all teaching qualifications to provide a baseline knowledge for future education providers of mental health and well-being. By 2029, an upskilling programme for all qualified and active education providers should be developed and implemented, which will provide a baseline knowledge of mental health and well-being. That is to ensure that all our teaching workforce have a baseline knowledge of pupils' mental health.

Our final ask is, by 2033, a fully implemented mental health curriculum across all educational settings, with the usual moderation requirements to ensure that proper levels of education are provided. Just like PE, we want compulsory teaching with a set minimum of teaching hours. We cannot improve our mental health and well-being by addressing our physical health alone.

Our asks are taken from the views of children and young people across Northern Ireland and from mental health and emotional well-being organisations. They complement the ongoing work of the

statutory, community and voluntary sectors, and they are a long-term solution to improving the emotional well-being of children and young people.

I will try to wrap this up. We feel that our asks, if implemented, will impact not only students' emotional well-being but educational attainment. They will increase attendance, which, ultimately, will produce better outcomes for students.

We continue to gain support from other voluntary and community organisations that are burdened with the demand for services whilst being underfunded. We are building support with others, including the Children's Commissioner, to help us to achieve our overarching aim. We ask you to listen to the voices of young people and help us to turn our actions into outcomes. Thank you for the time to speak.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, Eimear. You did well on time. We will take the presentations first, and then we will move to questions. Next on my list is Ellen.

**Ms Ellen Taylor (Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland):** Good afternoon, everybody. I am the president of the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland, otherwise known as SSUNI. Thank you so much to the Chair, Deputy Chair and Committee for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the over 50,000 members of SSUNI whom I represent.

To begin, I will give a brief overview of what SSUNI is. We are in our fourth year, having been founded in August 2020 in response to the lack of consultation with students during COVID. We aim to represent secondary students across Northern Ireland and to advocate for the issues that matter to young people, from mental health, as Eimear said, to building a curriculum that prepares our students for life beyond school. In our view, exams place too much stress on children, with more time being spent on exam technique than on learning and with A levels limiting 16-year-olds to choosing only three or four subjects.

Our research found that school councils do not reflect the voice of young people and are not even instituted in a significant number of schools. Uniforms are not practical. They are expensive and restrictive for students with special educational needs, and many schools still do not provide the option for girls to wear trousers instead of a skirt.

Mental health continues to be the issue that is raised most often with us. Students do not feel supported by their schools, and counselling is all too often inadequate. Whilst there are fantastic examples of effective shared education, such as Politics in Action, we do not think that, in a large number of cases, shared education has contributed to better community relations. We would point to instances of young people participating in shared education events but never actually speaking to a pupil from the other school at those events.

We also uncovered the sexism and sexual harassment that plague our schools but that largely go unnoticed. Our survey revealed that 71% of pupils think that sexism at school is not taken seriously. They do not want to report incidents of sexism and sexual harassment. Of the 36% of respondents who experienced sexual assault and the 56.5% who experienced sexual harassment, only 7.5% reported it to a teacher.

Our most recent report, as Cara Hunter mentioned, was entitled 'Let Us Learn: A Learning for Life and Work report'. That looked in depth at learning for life and work (LLW), which really is not taught much in schools. A total of 77% of young people had not even heard of the term "relationships and sexuality education" (RSE); 69% of respondents felt that LLW had not prepared them for the world of work; 64% of young people had not received rights education; and 86.5% felt that LLW had not provided them with useful political education. Our young people are neither educated together nor taught about the Troubles, as it is taught only at GCSE, and around a quarter of schools do not even teach that module.

Modern languages is another area of focus for us as we feel that they are not taught effectively, which is, in part, due to the harshly marked exams; however, there is a huge amount of content to cover at GCSE and A level. We ran free and accessible revision sessions in collaboration with Queen's PGCE centre to fill the gap that action-short-of-strike left. We have worked with Marie Curie on bereavement education, partnered with NIYF on mental health education and campaigned for COVID adjustments, Central Applications Office (CAO) reform and more.

Our solutions to many of those issues are available on our website and are in our reports and resources. As you all know, however, funding is, arguably, the biggest issue facing education and

ensuring the future of our society. The £30,000 starting salary for teachers is welcome progress, but schools are still struggling to recruit the best and brightest teachers, particularly in STEM, and children from lower socio-economic backgrounds continually do not receive the same access to the arts and music as children from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

On a last note regarding special educational needs, the role of classroom assistants needs to be looked at. At the moment, they are poorly paid and have no routes of progression. It is like a one-size-fits-all approach, regardless of need. A child with dyslexia will be assigned a classroom assistant just as a child with autism or ADHD would, instead of specialised support.

I am happy to be questioned about any issues pertaining to secondary students. I thank the Committee again for the opportunity to speak today. I hope that this is the first of many engagements with the Committee.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, Ellen.

**Ms Mia Murray (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly):** I thank the Committee for the opportunity to say a few words about the Youth Assembly and to talk about some of the issues that young people in Northern Ireland face.

First, I will give you a brief background of the Youth Assembly. The Northern Ireland Youth Assembly recruited its second cohort of 90 members, aged between 12 and 16, in October 2023. We are a diverse group of young people from every constituency, and we represent groups with characteristics that are covered by section 75, such as gender, race, religious identity, background, care experience, disability, sexuality etc. The Youth Assembly has three main roles. First, to engage with the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly on legislation and inquiries that are relevant to young people. Secondly, to undertake project work that is generated by the Youth Assembly committees, and thirdly, to engage on wider consultation with Departments and youth voice projects.

In January 2024, we conducted our Big Youth Survey. Young people from across Northern Ireland completed the survey and shared the issues that they want their Youth Assembly to focus on. Our second plenary, which was in February and which Robbie Butler attended and the Speaker chaired, gave us an opportunity to debate the issues from the survey and to vote on our top three priorities. Based on those priorities, the Youth Assembly Committees that have been established are Education; Health; and Rights and Equality.

I will talk about some of the findings of the Big Youth Survey. Youth Assembly Members created a list of 18 issues that could be voted on in the survey, and young people could add their own issues to that list. Almost 1,800 young people aged between 12 and 21 completed the survey. Committee members should have a summary report in their packs, and I advise them to take a close look over it. As you will see, education was the second most-raised issue, and the number of comments on education was substantially higher than those on any other topic. The Minister referred to many of the issues today, demonstrating a serious need for improvement. Unfortunately, I do not have time to cite all those issues here; however, I will attempt to give you a brief summary.

The issue that received the most comments was curriculum. Many young people felt that the curriculum is outdated and not fit for the 21st century. As the Minister is working with CCEA on that, we must ask this: will the Committee hold him accountable for having a youth input to his decisions? Young people are concerned about the poor quality of careers education and the lack of opportunities to learn skills that will prepare them for adult life.

Violence against women and girls was also mentioned this morning. We believe that we should be consulted on that. Some felt that there should be more emphasis on raising environmental awareness, and the Youth Assembly is working with CCEA on that.

Many young people spoke of the stress of constant testing and the pressure of homework. They said that school itself could often be a source of poor mental health and that many schools do very little to support their students.

Due to the timing of the survey — it was done in January 2024 — many comments referred to the strikes that teachers and support staff undertook. Those resulted in extremely important days of learning being missed and have had a detrimental impact on young people and their families. The lack of teachers and teaching support staff was referred to this morning. Our report also referred to that

and to a shortage of substitute teachers, which has had a detrimental impact on GCSE and A-level students and overall on students in post-primary and primary education.

Young people told us of the poor conditions of some of their schools and of the lack of modern resources that they can avail themselves of. Again, that was mentioned this morning in references to the school maintenance backlog and the school improvement programme, which we hope the Committee will consult us on.

Many young people cited the right to free education. They stated that school uniform costs are simply out of control. We plan to talk to the Minister about that in his upcoming consultation on the matter. Many young people have asked for free school meals to be available to all students, given the cost-of-living crisis that affects many families. Holiday hunger payments during the summer and other holidays were, again, referred to this morning. We believe that those are crucial and that they should be a key priority for the Committee and the Minister.

The Committee recently met the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, which has a representative here today. NICCY produced its third monitoring report on 4 March this year on its review of special educational needs and disability provisions in mainstream schools. NICCY reports that the recent strain on the system has been worsened by education funding crises that led to cuts in both the SEN transformation budget and broader funding. That was echoed in our survey. As was said, last September, 1,000 children needed SEN school places, and we hope that there will not be a repeat of that situation this September. As the Youth Assembly, we have loads of children who avail themselves of those services, and we hope that the Committee will consult them and us on that. Members of the first cohort of the Youth Assembly gave evidence to the independent review of education panel in April 2022 and attended the report launch in December 2023.

A strong message came out of the survey about the voice of young people being heard and given due weight in all that matters to them. It is for the Minister and the Department to take forward the recommendations of the report. The Youth Assembly asks that all MLAs ensure that the voices of young people are heard when recommendations are being considered.

I will conclude by saying that, with the recent resumption of full Assembly business, Youth Assembly Members are looking forward to engaging directly with Committees, MLAs and Ministers on the issues as our work programme develops. We are just down the hall, and Lucy, Pearse and Claire will be happy to refer you to us. I would be happy to take any questions that you have, so do not hold back.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you. Our next presentation is from Inioluwa from Diverse Youth NI.

**Ms Inioluwa Olaosebikan (Diverse Youth NI):** Good day, everyone. I am a proud member of Diverse Youth NI. I express my gratitude to the Committee for extending the invitation to us to speak on the pressing issues surrounding education policy, children's services and, more specifically, empowering and enhancing education and employment for BAME, asylum seeker and refugee youth and children in marginalised communities in Northern Ireland.

In the heart of Northern Ireland's vibrant communities lies a group of resilient individuals, often overlooked in the landscape of opportunity: the marginalised youth. In that demographic, asylum seekers, refugees and those from BAME — black, Asian and minority ethnic — backgrounds silently contend with a significant challenge. That challenge is the uphill battle to access quality education and secure meaningful employment.

Diverse Youth NI stands at the forefront of that challenge, as it is dedicated to fostering educational growth for those underprivileged youth. We collaborate with civic institutions like Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast to provide ICT and digital literacy courses. We also offer comprehensive coding training and academic enrichment programmes for young students in their final class. Those courses are designed to equip the youth with the necessary skills to navigate the digital world, which is a crucial aspect of today's technology-driven society.

We all know that education serves as a fundamental pillar of a child's development, acting as a primary vehicle for empowerment. However, what are the implications when the most vulnerable members of our society are denied that basic right? Asylum seeking, refugee and migrant children in Northern Ireland encounter significant obstacles in their education, as outlined by the National Children's Bureau (NCB). Those challenges include language barriers, trauma, racism, bullying and social isolation, hindering young people's access to quality education and integration into the system.

As a representative of that community, I clearly understand the harsh realities of the challenges. On arrival in Northern Ireland following my 17th birthday, my initial excitement began to fade into hopelessness. Over 100 sent emails often resulted in rejections or were simply ignored. Each "I am so sorry" or "Unfortunately, we do not have a place for you" echoed the reality of my situation. I wondered whether I would ever get the opportunity to go to school. That should not be the case. Other young people who are fortunate enough to arrive in Northern Ireland when they are under the age of 16 might get an opportunity if they have qualifications to their name and understand basic English. Otherwise, we are all in the same boat, desperately craving the opportunity to gain education but often meeting a wall of disappointment.

The challenges extend beyond rejection letters and bureaucratic hurdles. Older teenagers like me who arrive in Northern Ireland as immigrants, often receive no education or help with language learning beyond the age of 16. Unlike in other parts of the UK, there is no statutory duty in Northern Ireland to educate children beyond 16 years of age. That contrasts with regions that have education programmes for immigrants when compulsory education ends. While English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes are available, lengthy waiting lists mean that some young people wait more than a year to access such vital resources.

Disparities also affect BAME students, with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland noting a gap in further education entry based on ethnicity. Additionally, a Queen's University's report underlines the struggles of minority ethnic groups in navigating the education system, which is exacerbated by schools denying admissions to newcomers, despite available places.

Furthermore, the costs of university education often present a significant barrier for asylum seekers in Northern Ireland, as they are required to pay the same fees as international or overseas students, which are substantially higher than for UK students. That stands in contrast with Scotland, which has extended free tuition to migrant students. Despite the efforts of organisations such as Diverse Youth NI, many still cannot afford the fees due to their inability to work. That underscores the need for systemic changes to ensure educational accessibility for all.

How can we change all that? First, we could advocate legislative amendments to establish a statutory duty to provide education beyond the age of 16, preferably until the age of 18, for all children, including immigrants and asylum seekers, in line with other parts of the UK. Secondly, we could create specific pathways for older immigrants, including refugee and asylum seeking teenagers, to access further education and vocational training. That would include allocating additional resources to expand ESOL programmes and reduce waiting times for enrolment. Thirdly, we could review the fee structure for asylum seekers in higher education in order to assure affordability and equitable access while considering options such as extended free tuition or providing scholarships specifically for that demographic. Fourthly, we could allocate resources to specialised language support programmes in schools, catering for asylum seeking, refugee and BAME children. Fifthly, we could integrate trauma-informed education practices into school curricula and teacher training programmes in order to better support children who have experienced adversity. The sixth step could be to implement mandatory cultural competence and anti-racism training for all educational professionals to create a more inclusive and welcoming school environment. The seventh measure could be to establish protocols that would include clear reporting and disciplinary measures for addressing instances of racial bullying or discrimination in schools. Next, we could develop standardised enrolment procedures for fair admission, regardless of immigration status or ethnicity. The ninth step could be to improve communication between schools, local authorities and refugee support organisations in order to ease transitions and access to educational services for newly arrived children. As a tenth measure, we could foster partnerships between schools, community organisations and Government agencies to provide comprehensive support services, including mental health support, family engagement and mentorship programmes for asylum seeking, refugee and BAME children. Implementing those recommendations has the potential to significantly improve educational outcomes for marginalised communities in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, asylum seeking and BAME children in Northern Ireland face complex educational challenges, including systemic barriers, language barriers, financial constraints and discrimination in the education system. Current policies and children's services often fail to adequately address those issues, resulting in disparities in educational outcomes and limiting the potential of marginalised youth. The recommendations that we have provided offer concrete steps towards creating a more equitable and supportive educational environment. Urgent action is needed to empower those young people to access equal and quality education and opportunities for growth. Collaboration with organisations like Diverse Youth NI and engagement with stakeholders across all sectors are crucial for driving forward those necessary reforms. Together, we can create a future where every young person, regardless of

their background or immigration status, can thrive and succeed in Northern Ireland's educational landscape.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That leaves Alex from the NICCY youth panel to give our last presentation.

**Ms Alex Deane (NICCY Youth Panel):** Good afternoon, Chair, Deputy Chair and Committee members. Thank you for inviting me to attend today's meeting and for hearing my voice. I am 16 years old, a member of the NICCY youth panel and a student at New-Bridge Integrated College in Loughbrickland. I want to be a voice for children who do not have one so that I can voice issues that concern them and protect their rights.

So many things in our education system impact negatively on young people, but I want to touch on a few things that are really important to me. Those are SEN, bullying, mental health, attendance at school and RSE. I emphasise the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and especially of articles 28 and 29, which focus on the right to education and the fact that education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential. The concluding observations of the recent UN Committee on the Rights of the Child should be implemented in full in order to support our Executive to realise that. The UNCRC observations should be fully incorporated into local legislation.

I will talk first about special educational needs. In primary school, I always struggled with writing, getting work finished, PE, making friends and many more things. I would take two hours a night to finish my homework. I never got work finished, and I had to stay in at break time to finish my work. While I was on question two, my peers were on question eight. I felt stupid and different from everyone else. Every year, my mum kept saying that something was wrong, but my teachers dismissed her. I ended up having to drop out of the transfer test after getting terrible scores, not because I could not understand but because I could not finish the test. At that point in my life, I started to have suicidal thoughts. Then, when I went to secondary school, I was taken seriously and went from feeling stupid to feeling smart. At 12, I was diagnosed with dyspraxia and some hyper-mobile joints, and, at 15, I was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). After getting those diagnoses, I am still fighting to get the support that I need, which cannot be facilitated because there is not enough money. I have spoken to people and parents who have gone through the same things as I have and who have no school to go to because unit and special school places were cut and there is nowhere that can facilitate them.

Secondly, on addressing bullying in schools, I understand what it is like to be bullied. Name-calling, hitting and berating eventually give you low self-esteem and make you not want to come to school for fear of being hurt, all because you are different or do not fit in. Bullying has been identified as a persistent issue affecting pupils in Northern Ireland, particularly those from certain equality groups, including trans students, ethnic minority students, students with special education needs or a disability and students with same-sex attraction. That can happen in person and online. Recently, I witnessed a version of bullying where horrible, nasty things were written about people on the bathroom walls in school. There should be robust monitoring of the implementation of anti-bullying policies in schools, and the Department of Education should record instances of bullying.

Many young people in Northern Ireland are struggling with their emotional health and well-being, whether that is due to bullying, isolation, family issues or pressure from social media, especially after the COVID pandemic. Social media is at the forefront of bad emotional health and well-being in children and young people. Children and young people feel the pressure from social media to be perfect and to always have to present themselves in a perfect way when, in reality, the things that we see on social media give us a tainted view.

Many young people fail to cope with other pressures, such as exams and financial stress. Our education system assesses young people on the basis of five GCSEs. Should it not also assess them on their self-esteem and overall health and well-being? There is not enough support or services in schools to facilitate the number of students who are struggling with their emotional health and well-being.

From witnessing attendance in my school, I know that it is extremely low, with my year group, which is a GCSE year, having the lowest attendance rate in school. The Department of Education has informed NICCY that 44,000 pupils are reported as having persistent absence, which is an increase of 123% from 2017-18 to 2021-22. Since the COVID pandemic, I have witnessed the attendance rate in school



decline rather than increase as it should. That is down to a range of factors such as anxiety, unmet SEND needs, bullying and shifting attitudes post-COVID.

Finally, RSE needs to be taught consistently in primary and secondary schools in Northern Ireland at an age-appropriate level, with no religious or cultural influence, so that children and young people can understand and maintain healthy relationships and get their information from a factually reliable source. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the UNCRC concluding observations have both made recommendations to deliver age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health to young people. Currently, RSE is taught with the religious and cultural ethos of each school. Children and young people are not accessing certain information due to that and are having to look elsewhere, where information may not be entirely factual.

A recent Education and Training Inspectorate evaluation received almost 15,000 pupil responses and highlighted their frustration at not being consulted sufficiently on the content, relevance and delivery of RSE. If you compare that with the Department of Education's consultation last September on the new RSE legislation, you will see that only 0.86% of the responses were from pupils. In addition, no young person's version was made available.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I thank all of you. Those were all excellent presentations. I do not know where we are going to begin with our questions or where to direct them. I am going to break with the normal format and see whether Cara wants to come in, because I know that she needs to get away and is keen to ask a question.

**Ms Hunter:** I really appreciate that. The Chair has been very good, because he has put such an emphasis on the Committee having young people at the forefront of all that we do. All of us agree with that. Hearing directly from you has been fantastic. You are all very inspiring young people. When I was your age, I could not have done what you did today, so thank you.

I have questions for you all, but I can choose only one, so I will ask Alex a question. Alex, you spoke so eloquently about the important issue of bullying. I would love to know what you think of the current bullying policies. What do you think works, and what changes do you think should be made? What should be brought forward to support young people who have experienced bullying?

**Ms Deane:** For a start, in order to help to combat bullying, we should have a part of the curriculum that addresses diversity. That is a big issue. A lot of people do not understand the diversity of different young people. One of the biggest issues that needs to be touched on is that people really need to be educated about the diversities of young people.

**Ms Hunter:** Thank you so much, and thank you, Chair. I am afraid that I have to go now, but thank you all. You did an exceptional job today.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I am going to ask Inioluwa a question. You, as Diverse Youth NI, have a really comprehensive set of proposals that you think would make a real difference to education for children from black and ethnic minority communities. What level of engagement have you had with the Department on those? Have you had the opportunity to share those recommendations with the Department of Education, and have you had any response?

**Ms Olaosebikan:** No. This is our first meeting with the Committee for Education or with any governmental body about those issues. I really want to highlight the fact that a lot of teens and people from asylum seeker, refugee and minority ethnic backgrounds do not have enough educational support when they come to Northern Ireland, especially those people who do not have an understanding of or education in English. They are usually subjected to a lot of harsh factors. There is not enough support for those people. When I came to Northern Ireland a few months ago, it was very difficult to access education. I still have not accessed education, by the way. A lot of issues compound the difficulties that those people face, so we need to address them in order to build a more equitable society in education terms.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you for that. I know that time is short, but I will make a proposal. I am conscious that this is your first opportunity to engage in this sort of forum. If you have those proposals in a format that you can share with us, I seek the Committee's agreement to share them with the Department and ask for its response to each of them. That would be a really important first step. Do we have agreement from members?

*Members indicated assent.*

**Mr Baker:** Thank you. That was brilliant. It fills me with so much hope. Equality and respect were at heart of everything that you said and are at the heart of everything that you want to do. I have no doubt that we will probably see you on the other side of the table in a number of years or maybe even setting policy, because you are absolutely brilliant. I mean that. You really nailed everything that we are trying to do and say.

Any of you can jump in and answer this question, because I am going with the same theme. You are articulate in what you are saying, and you are hitting the key issues, but is your voice really being heard? I volunteer at a youth club, and young people say to me all the time that they feel that their voice would be more respected if they could vote. I am talking about dropping the voting age down to maybe even 16. What is your view on that? I will touch on the homework side of the curriculum, because what I hear a lot is that you should not have homework. Youth workers say that, and so do some teachers with whom I engage. They say that the amount of homework on the curriculum should be reduced. What are young people's views on homework?

When I was doing research for my party's motion on school uniforms that was debated in the Chamber, something jumped out that surprised me — it is a bugbear of Pat's as well — and it was to do with the fact that over 90% of parents and grandparents want school uniforms to be retained. I would like to hear your views. Do you want uniforms to be kept or to be got rid of?

**Ms Murray:** Do you want to take that, Ellen?

**Ms Taylor:** I do not mind. I will answer the question on uniforms first, because that is the one on my mind. The Secondary Students' Union conducted research on uniforms in 2021 in collaboration with the Parent Engagement Group (PEG) that found that the price of uniforms was extortionate. Everyone knows that, so the findings just backed that up. When we asked young people for their views, the stories that came out indicated that young people were embarrassed. Wearing a uniform is meant to be seen as a social leveller, but that is not what it is at the moment. If a pupil is wearing, for example, a second-hand blazer or has a different type of uniform, other children pick up on that.

I will move on to GCSEs and the curriculum. On the point about homework, I will say that the curriculum is totally overloaded at the moment. I touched on modern languages as an example. Teachers cannot physically teach everything for the year in the hours that they have available, because the curriculum has had so much piled on to it. A lot of time in schools is spent on exam technique rather than on actual learning. Pupils are told how to answer a question in the way in which the CCEA wants them to. Learning is therefore very formulaic, especially for exam subjects. That is an issue.

I am sorry, but what was the first point that you raised?

**Mr Baker:** I was just thinking about younger pupils coming home bombarded with homework. Did that come up in the survey? I am thinking more about the younger age group.

**Ms Murray:** I am in third year, and I wanted to reference that, because an awful lot of Youth Assembly Members brought that up at our most recent plenary meeting. The number of exams in first year represents a huge jump. At GCSE level, it is another huge jump. In first year, the amount of homework skyrockets, as does the number of exams, especially in grammar schools. Pupils are automatically expected to conform to a standard that is not exactly reasonable for somebody who has just come from such a relaxed environment as a primary school. Our Members frequently mention homework.

I apologise to you, Mr Baker, because I remember that you were at our second plenary sitting.  
*[Laughter.]*

**Mr Butler:** He did not have a tie on then either. That is why you did not remember him. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Sheehan:** Mr Baker. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Butler:** You make him sound like he is Dr Who. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Murray:** Yes. Homework was referenced quite heavily. Pupils who are going from P7 into first year definitely need support to get throughout that huge stage for them mentally, especially given their skyrocketing workload. I am glad that I have not yet experienced going from third to fourth year, but I am most certainly not looking forward to it. It is therefore about providing support for students.

Homework is a good way of bringing school into the home and of making sure to hone in on all the things that are taught in the school day. It definitely needs to be kept to a reasonable expectation, however. Schools should not be expecting students to complete it. In my school, the guideline is for 16 hours of A-level study a week and two hours of GCSE study a night. It is set at one hour a night at junior level, which is simply unacceptable. It really should be a maximum of half an hour at that level.

**Mr Baker:** That feeds into what I was saying. If the voting age were to drop to 16, would your voices be heard more? When I talk to young people about mental health — you have all mentioned it as well — it is the number-one priority. I remember when I was on Belfast City Council that that was the elephant in the room. I do not know how many of the recommendations were taken on board. If you were voting, would policy change any quicker?

**Ms Crozier:** I definitely think that lowering the voting age to 16 would be a positive thing. I am very passionate about that. Young people's voices would then be respected, but not only respected: it would no longer be optional to listen to us. I have found that, a lot of the time, organisations or Governments in a way pretend to listen to young people by bringing us in and listening to us, yet nothing then comes out of it.

I think that it was Alex who mentioned some of the recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. At the beginning of last year, I went to the UN Office at Geneva, where we presented on issues that young people are facing. When we started the process, we looked back at recommendations that had been made, I think, five years before COVID. All the same issues had been brought up then. In a way, that was demotivating for us, because we said that we had come all that way and were talking about the same issues that were talked about five years before, out of which nothing had come.

I believe that young people have the capacity to vote. That is demonstrated by the young people who are in the room today, but that capacity to vote could be further enhanced by having more political education in our education system. As a young person, I am interested in and passionate about politics, but the first political education that I got was in GCSE history, and that was because I chose to do that subject. Students who do not choose GCSE history therefore do not have that experience or that knowledge. Even so, my political education was still tainted in a way that is representative of each school, because the only education that I got was what our teacher chose to teach us.

**Ms Deane:** To add to that, lowering the voting age to 16 has been brought up many times at the NICCY youth panel, not just by its members but by people who have come to members to raise it. As Eimear said, there is not that much education on politics. Young people want a say on such things, but they are not really educated enough. They want to have a say on stuff that is impacting on them and their future, but they also do not know that much about politics. Politics is not really touched on. It is mainly done through history, especially at GCSE level, but the subject is optional. That really needs to be implemented in LLW.

**Ms Murray:** The Youth Assembly is interested in taking forward the approach of lowering the voting age to 16. As you know, one of our main roles is to have an impact on legislation. Ours is the first sitting Youth Assembly to have a sitting Executive, so, if that issue were to come into play, we would be really interested in taking it forward.

On the point about political education, it is well known that very few schools in Northern Ireland offer government and politics at GCSE and that fewer again offer it at A level. That is completely wrong. So many more schools should offer it as a subject, but I understand that it comes down to funding and having enough educated teaching staff to take it. That is another issue about which we really need to talk.

**Ms Taylor:** May I jump in really quickly? Sorry, I know that I keep going on, but it is about our LLW report. Political education is there in the curriculum. It is just not being taught. LLW is relegated to the sidelines because there are not the trained teachers and there is not enough time in school for LLW when you have 10 GCSEs to take. Schools are sticking it in as a 30-minute period. In our report, we have instances of students being told to just take out their phone and sit there. LLW is about

citizenship, RSE, political education and financial education, and it is not being taught in schools. Our 'Let Us Learn' report has everything on that. We have all the recommendations in there. I wanted to add that, because political education is in there. The curriculum is really good if you look at it, but it is just not being taught.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is great. As you referenced, if there has ever been an example of why lowering the voting age might be a good idea, we are listening to it in this room today.

Cheryl, had you indicated to come in? I was not sure.

**Ms Brownlee:** Yes. I will just jump in front, Chair.

Thank you so much. It was absolutely incredible to hear you all speak. You were all pitch-perfect in your delivery, and I wish that I could do that. If you have any pointers, it would be great to hear them. Each and every one of you raised so many valid points, and so many things resonated with me. I wish that I could go through them all, but Nick gives us the evil eye. Bullying is a huge issue, and we touched on it previously when discussing social media, self-harm and suicide. There are so many things that we have to do to get bullying under control, and, for our young people growing up, that terrifies me. School is only one part of the equation. You are in school for eight hours a day, but, when you go out at the weekend, it becomes about the people with whom you are socialising. You cannot escape it. What do you think we can do better to protect our young people from bullying?

My second question is about confidence. I come from a working-class area in Carrickfergus. A lot of young people do not have the confidence even to apply to be on youth panels and boards. What can we do to improve their confidence so that they feel that they can apply and have a voice as well?

**Ms Murray:** May I jump in on the first point? There is so much talk about policy and about how we can change bullying policy. A huge thing is the amount of stigma attached to it. Bullying, at the minute, is rampant. It is not, "I am going to hit you" or, "I am going to do this", or even sending nasty messages. There is this by-the-way bullying, which is making rude remarks about other people's family members, and it just goes completely under the radar. Teachers know about it, and they simply do not care or else think that it is just boys being boys.

That ties into misogyny, which is a huge issue, especially with the rise of social media, Andrew Tate and so on. There is also the issue of violence against women and girls, which I know that Sinn Féin has a huge approach to at the minute. It is paramount that we get that sorted, because it all ties in. Bullying is where it really starts.

What you guys could do is set out to tell schools that we have expectations. Teachers cannot just let those issues fall by the wayside. Pull up people for any remark. I am sorry to keep talking about boys, but it is primarily boys who think that they can just say things and get away with them. They think that they can say things because, "Och well, who cares?", but they cannot. They have to be pulled up on it. That is what teachers should do, and you guys should really send out a message to schools saying, "Listen, we are not going to put up with this". You just let it go until it becomes physical, becomes a suicidal thought or a serious mental health issue. You can let it get to that point, but teachers need to start pulling up people for those wee remarks, which is where the seed is planted that then grows into bullying.

Sorry, can you repeat your second point?

**Ms Brownlee:** It was about my area being a working-class area. We struggle to get young people to apply to boards or panels because of a lack of confidence.

**Ms Murray:** I understand that. I am from Mid Ulster, from a town called Magherafelt. We do not have a lot of opportunities. One hears of all these things that are going on in Belfast. In Magherafelt, nothing is going on. Everything seems to happen in Belfast, and that is probably another issue. I applied for this opportunity simply because one of my teachers told me about it, not because it was actively advertised. That is another issue: kids not knowing about the opportunities that are available to them. Everyone here will have a different story of how they joined their committee or group. In areas outside of our major towns and cities, such as Bangor and Belfast, things like this fall by the wayside.

As you mentioned, this is about mental health, confidence and feeling as though you are going to stick out. There is often a reference to the word "tout", and things like that. You are a teacher's pet if you

join something like this. I can remember telling some of my classmates about this, and their response was kind of like, "What are you doing? Why are you doing it? Why are you giving up your weekend to go up to Belfast?". That is part of the issue.

**Ms Deane:** My add-on that is that, yes, a lot of young people do not know that such groups and organisations are a thing, as they are not advertised the best. A lot of young people do not know about the different groups that are represented here today and do not know how to find out about them. On top of that, they are not aware of their rights and that they can voice their opinions. They do not know that it is their right to do so. A lot of young people do not know that we have the UNCRC to begin with.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I have an indication from David. I will then bring in Robbie. I brought in your colleague ahead of you, David. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Brooks:** Rudely, she took the question that is right in front of me. *[Laughter.]* I will find something. I will just put a line through that question.

Ellen, you mentioned school councils being unrepresentative. I was going to ask how you ensure that your organisations are representative. Nevertheless, it is something to think about. I was the type of person who would have applied to these kinds of organisations, and you have all been fantastic, but it is about how we make sure that we involve some of the people who are less likely to engage with those processes. Some of the parent organisations — NICCY, for example — are, I am sure, engaged in that work, but it is about making sure that some of those voices are brought in, encouraged and given a little push to get involved. I am happy to hear your comments on that, but, as that question has been asked, I will ask another question.

Mia, you commented on the standard of careers education, so this question is for you, or for anyone else who wants to comment. What would you most like to see changed about careers education? Where do you think that it is most lacking, and what would you like to see more of?

**Ms Murray:** I cannot fault the careers education that I was given in my school. We had a very good careers education. I did a thorough review of the report, and all of you should do that. It gives anonymous insights from 1,800 children from hundreds of different backgrounds across Northern Ireland, and the main issue spoken of is careers education. I have to say that careers education is simply sitting in front of a computer and doing a couple of quizzes on platforms that were made more for children of an age above. Careers education really should be more face to face and be designed more for whom you are. I think that a lot of kids who are — I want to find the right term, and it is not "academically gifted" — smarter tend to be pushed into going to university. A lot of kids do not like school, and they are then pushed into a trade. There is no real in-between. You either go to university or to tech. There are hundreds of other opportunities that we are not told about. We do not live in the same era in which our parents or most of you lived. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Butler:** The oldies. Just say it. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Brooks:** Careers education does not seem to have changed much though.

**Ms Murray:** That is what I am trying to say. You either go to university or you go to tech. Even at my age, that is what we are being told. If you get your grade C and thus pass maths, English and science, you can go to tech. If you do well, you will go to university. There is that middle ground now, however. For example, there are tech diplomas, there is further education and there are institutions such as the Northern Regional College. All offer absolutely amazing opportunities. If you do not enjoy school, you can leave at 16, go to tech, do a BTEC and go on to university after that, if you so desire. Schools are not educating children on that, however. I have a very good careers teacher, but what she tells us is not standard in the curriculum. She is telling us things from her own knowledge. When we go through our books, it is not in our books. The issue that I think needs to be brought to the forefront is making sure that children know all the possibilities that are available to them.

**Mr Brooks:** When the Minister was in earlier, he said that he had talked to the Economy Minister, Conor Murphy, about how that transition works. Hopefully, over this Assembly term, we will see some changes that destigmatise some of the other options and put them on a par with university. I went to university, but I certainly would not advise people to go to university unless they are sure that that is what they want and need and that it will take them into the right field, because there are other options available that are equally as good.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** We are looking at having a joint meeting of the Education and Economy Committees, and careers advice is certainly an issue that we can raise.

**Ms Murray:** I will add that there is an awful lot of stigma attached to going into a trade. It appears that if you go into a trade, it is because you are not smart enough to do something else, and that is simply not the case. The other day, I spoke to a boy who said, "I think I'm just going to be a joiner, because I don't think I'll do well in my GCSEs. I think that's all I'm going to do". I said, "Is that all you want to do?". He replied, "You need to get whatever grades to do engineering at university, and that is what I would like to do, but I can't get the results, so I've resigned myself to doing that". I said, "If you think you could work hard, why wouldn't you?", and he replied, "It's just so hard".

That is what young people are up against. If you do not do well, you will do a trade, and there is a stigma attached to that. That is not right, because those trades are good jobs. They are jobs that we need people to do. You cannot seem to get a plumber these days. There should be no stigma attached to a trade being what you do if you cannot do anything else. Children should be pushed. If they are not doing well in school, push them, because if they want to do something, they will do it.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you. I will bring in Robbie. Robbie, do you want to direct your question to Eimear, who is keen to come in? Only if that is appropriate, but I want to make sure that we hear as many voices as possible.

**Mr Butler:** No problem. That was absolutely fantastic. I have another question as well. The only group with which I have not had many dealings is Inioluwa's group, but I commit to doing so, because I have an interest in it. I will therefore come to you after I speak to Eimear. I will be honest, you are incredibly powerful, and I am not just saying that to be nice to you. You communicate with passion, and it is excellent to hear. Young people in Northern Ireland are very fortunate to have you advocate for them. The emergence of your groups over the past four or five years is a powerful moment in Northern Ireland, and your platform has been exceptional.

Eimear, you talked about equity and its purpose on the curriculum. I raised that to do with GCSEs with the Minister earlier. The independent review of education has indicated that now is the time to talk about the value of the GCSE as a terminal exam. Can you speak to and expand on that? It may have been picked up in your report.

**Ms Crozier:** Sorry, but I do not understand the question.

**Mr Butler:** In your report, you talked about the purpose of the curriculum and what it leads to. One of the reports from the independent review of education mentioned the pressure put on young people, particularly with GCSEs. There is pressure with the transfer test, yes, but also with GCSEs. People often ask how many GCSEs a person has, but the world now asks, "Why are we asking that question?".

**Ms Crozier:** My school is very —. I do not want to make —. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Butler:** You are OK. We will blur the video. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Crozier:** My school is quite curriculum-focused. I go to a grammar school. Everyone in my school starts off doing 10 GCSEs, and there is an option to drop one or two subjects if you are struggling. We on the Youth Forum have talked to and worked with the Secondary Students' Union on the need for support for young people's mental health. Coming up to exam time, a lot of schools have talks about stress, mental health issues and coping mechanisms. It is tokenistic for it always to come up right before exams. We think that the support should be consistent throughout the year for all students. Ellen, do you want to come in?

**Ms Taylor:** Yes. I will speak about the mental health support for students. Eimear and I spent a long time working on the issue. The support for students is not there in schools. The support for teachers to deliver that support is not there either. We do not want to come across as being rude about teachers and say that they are not doing this or doing that. Teachers do not have the support or the time to deliver well-being education on top of everything else that they are expected to do. They are expected to be counsellors, teachers, parents — everything all in one — and that is not a reasonable expectation. I know that the deadline for their workload issue to be resolved is 31 May, but what I have said should also be considered a serious issue.

**Ms Crozier:** That is why one of our key asks was to develop a module in all teaching qualifications to provide a baseline. We do not want teachers to be counsellors. We just want them to have an underlying knowledge so that they can help students. When we were coming up with our asks, we sat down and had a long discussion about how we do not want to put more pressure on our current teaching workforce. We recognise that it is a long-term solution and is not going to happen right here and now, which is why we have given a time frame of until 2029 to do that. We have also talked about implementing an upskilling programme for the current education providers. We really want to stress, however, that we are not looking to add to the workforce's current workload.

**Ms Murray:** I will make one point on the back of that, as we are talking about teacher training. As was referenced earlier in the Minister's address to the Committee, the underlying need for teachers to have a base level of special educational needs training — Alex, you can definitely touch on that — is a huge thing, and it was heavily referenced in our survey. There is a need for more specialist support for educational needs, but there is a base level of training that all teachers in mainstream schools should have got. Alex, do you want to come in?

**Ms Deane:** I heard someone say that student teachers at Stranmillis University College got one hour of teaching on special educational needs. That is therefore a big issue that needs to be addressed. When someone is training to become a teacher, that aspect definitely needs to be covered for more than just an hour. As I said, there is also a need for training for teachers to notice students who may be struggling because they have unmet special educational needs. That is a big issue, especially in mainstream schools.

**Mr Butler:** Thank you, guys. I have just one point for you, Inioluwa, if that is OK. I will set out the context. One of my daughters is of mixed-race, and, while she was reading a book, I became aware of the challenges that she could face. It was a Disney book from the library, and I was not aware of this until I had my daughter. She was reading the book, and it was about page 16 before she got to the point at which she discovered that the princess was black. She came to me and said, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy". I looked at the book and then realised that, in all the books that we had ever read, there was a real lack of inclusivity. Some of the points that you raised earlier on struck a chord with me, as someone who is proud of Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland should be much more proactive, especially for families who come here and want to live here. Do you think we could do something about the offering, inside and outside of school, to change the dynamic and to change how we think about whom we all are?

**Ms Olaosebikan:** Inclusivity is definitely a big issue. A lot of times when policies are enacted in law, marginalised communities do not get a voice. Usually, they are under-represented. We should try to change that, because everybody's issues matter. If you live in Northern Ireland, your issue matters.

There is a loophole. OK, if you come to Northern Ireland and are over 16, for some reason you are not able to access education. That is because councils do not deem it to be an obligation to educate students beyond the age of 16. That should not be the case, especially for people who come into the country who do not understand English or the complexities of Northern Ireland's education system. There should be a system in place to integrate those young students and make sure that they get a place. No matter how they came here or what their immigration status is, they should have a place in a school. For schools to deny newcomers admission, even though they have places available, is simply unacceptable. When I first came here, I experienced that. I applied to over 100 schools in Northern Ireland, and not a single one offered me a place.

I found that alarming, because I am not the only one who experienced it. There are a lot of other asylum seekers, immigrants and refugees whose voices go unheard and are not listened to. It is said of their situation, "Well, it's not happening to everyone, so there's no reason that we should highlight the issue". They need to be heard, however. We should definitely create specific, targeted pathways to integration for older teenagers who arrive in Northern Ireland in order to make sure that they can access education if they need to. Vocational training should also be an option for them, as should ESOL training, because some do not have a basic understanding of English. There are many instances in which people wait for over a year to access ESOL classes. The waiting lists are too long. Those people do not do anything during that time. Our organisation tries to fill the gap by providing them with education and support, but it needs to be more systemic. There needs to be a wider reach. We cannot simply meet everyone, so there needs to be change made in that space.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** There has been a pretty clear commitment from the Committee today that we would really like to engage with your group. As you have identified, this is your first

opportunity to speak to us, but it has been so good to hear from all the groups that are represented here today. You are all so impressive and articulate. We can probably all learn a lot from you.

**Ms Murray:** I extend an invitation to all of you to our next plenary meeting. It is a hoot and great fun. Robbie said that you know that we are an in-house organisation, so pop down the hall at any time. We love giving feedback not only to you guys but to the Committees responsible for our rights and equality and our health.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** We are very happy to. We took up more of your time than we had planned to, but thank you so much.