

**The Commission and Clerk/Chief Executive's Office**



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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Mr Steven Agnew MLA  
Room 259  
Parliament Buildings

27 September 2019

Dear Mr Agnew

Thank you for the Assembly question that you tabled for written answer, namely:

**To ask the Assembly Commission to lay in the Assembly Library any reports they have (i) written; or (ii) commissioned in relation to the establishment of a Youth Assembly.**

**(AQW 165/17-22)**

Further to AQWs 107 to 114/17-22 in relation to the establishment of a youth assembly, it would be useful to provide an update on developments since last year.

The Speaker asked officials to include an item on the agenda for the Commission's meeting in March 2018 to provide it with the opportunity to consider the potential for addressing the issue of a youth assembly. A paper was presented to the Commission at its meeting on 5 March 2018 and the Commission decided that officials should prepare an options paper in relation to a youth assembly.

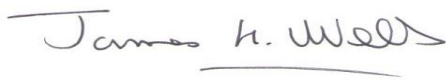
That options paper was produced following engagement with a range of relevant stakeholders and was presented to the Commission at its meeting on 24 June 2019. The Commission considered it and agreed that a further paper be prepared developing the option of a Commission-supported model of a youth assembly and that this should

make clear the independence of the youth assembly in setting its own agenda. Work is now underway to produce a detailed paper on that preferred option for consideration at a future Assembly Commission meeting.

Arrangements will be made for a copy of the paper that was presented to the Commission on 5 March 2018 to be laid in the library. The options paper presented to the Commission at its meeting on 24 June 2019 will not be placed in the library at this stage as it relates to a policy still under development.

I hope you find the above information helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James H. Wells". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

**Jim Wells MLA**  
**(On behalf of the Assembly Commission)**

## UNRESTRICTED

Submission Number: AC0609

**Paper Submitted by:** Director of Parliamentary Services  
**Subject:** Development of a Youth Assembly  
**Date for discussion:** Assembly Commission meeting on 5 March 2018

### Recommendation/Purpose

It is recommended that the Assembly Commission agrees that officials will prepare an options paper on the development of a youth assembly, for consideration by the new Commission in due course.

### Preceding

#### Papers/Discussions:

A range of papers, concluding in AC2012 – ‘Youth Assembly’ (attached at Appendix A), tabled by the then Director of Information and Outreach in 21 January 2013. That paper was subsequently considered by the Assembly Commission on 27 February 2013 and Members noted *“the progress made to date and reaffirmed their commitment to the establishment of a Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland. The recommendations as outlined in the paper presented were agreed.”* Subsequently at the Commission meeting on 18 June 2014 the Clerk/Chief Executive reported that: *“The Clerk/Chief Executive further highlighted that year on year budget pressures impacting on service delivery as efficiency savings become exhausted, providing the example of the Youth Assembly as a project for which funding was no longer available. The Speaker informed Members that he had held several meetings in relation to the Youth Assembly to explore its sustainability and that the Commissioner for Children and Young People had agreed to revisit the original proposal to see if costs could be reduced. Members confirmed their commitment to the establishment of a Youth Assembly and welcomed a further update when available.”* Subsequently the Speaker and officials were unable to obtain agreement from OFMdFM on a model which could be taken forward with Executive funding.

**Timescale:** For discussion at the Commission meeting on 5 March 2018.

**Fol Implications:** Fully disclosable.

**Legal Implications:** None at this stage.

**Financial Implications:** None at this stage. In 2011 the costs of a 2½ year pilot youth assembly were estimated to be between £417,000 and £517,000. Given the passage of time new estimates will need to be prepared, taking account of ongoing pressures on the Commission’s budget.

**Staffing Implications:** None at this stage.

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### Equality / Section 75

**Implications:** None at this stage.

**Equality Screening:** Not required at this stage.

**Consultation:** None.

**Attachments:** Appendix A – Commission submission AC2012.

### Executive Summary

- The Assembly Commission's first Engagement Strategy proposed the establishment of an 'Assembly Youth Forum', subsequently described as a youth assembly.
- This paper sets out the development of proposals for a youth assembly, and why its development has not progressed.
- The paper proposes that an options paper for the development of a youth assembly be prepared for the new Commission, including consideration of a range of options and implementation models.

### Background

1. On 22 February 2018 the Speaker permitted the use of the Assembly Chamber for the second Youth Congress, organised by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. In the run-up to this event the Commission received a number of written questions and the Speaker received correspondence from a Member on the subject of a youth assembly. In response the Speaker undertook to raise the matter of a youth assembly at the next Commission meeting.
2. The development of a youth assembly has been a matter of consideration by various Commission's since at least 2009.
3. The Assembly Commission's first Engagement Strategy, approved by the Commission in 2009, included a recommendation to establish an 'Assembly Youth Forum' which would "consider, debate and make recommendations on issues of particular importance to young people."
4. In 2010 a 'Youth Panel' was established by the Commission to undertake a time-bounded project to develop proposals for a youth assembly.
5. Proposals from the Youth Panel for a youth assembly were considered by the Commission in 2011. Based on those proposals, the Commission undertook a public consultation between May and September 2011. That consultation demonstrated widespread support for a youth assembly and for the Youth Panel's proposed model.
6. Since 2011, the Commission encountered a number of challenges including constraints on the Commission budget, no alternative funding being identified from the Executive and being unable to obtain political agreement around a particular model to take forward.
7. In recognition of the difficulties and disappointment in introducing the youth assembly over this time, the Commission pursued a range of other activities where progress could be made to engage with young people and reductions to the Education Service

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budget were minimised relative to other business areas of the Assembly Secretariat. This work included:

- Efforts were made to integrate youth engagement into mainstream committee business and the Education Service worked with a number of Assembly Committees to consult young people on legislation and inquiry issues, including the Marine Bill (2012-13), the Shared and Integrated Education (2014-15), School Inspections (2013-14), Building a United Community Strategy (2014-15), Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill (2015-16) and the Road Traffic Bill (2015-16).
  - European Union funding (Erasmus+) was secured by the Education Service to run a year-long programme involving over 30 young people. They consulted other young people across Northern Ireland about their chosen issue of young people's mental health and the services available to support them. The young people reported their findings to two Assembly Committees.
  - The Education Service developed a 'Let's Talk' programme, to bring young people and MLAs together to discuss issues concerning young people, with an average of five events per year held across Northern Ireland.
8. Additionally, Speaker McLaughlin granted the Northern Ireland Youth Forum the rare privilege of using the Assembly Chamber for its Youth Congress debate for the first time in November 2015 and presided over the event. Speaker Newton repeated that privilege on 22 February 2018.
9. Following the Youth Congress event, and ahead of the 2016 elections, Speaker McLaughlin recorded correspondence at the Commission between himself and the Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum regarding engagement with the Commission on the establishment of a Youth Assembly. While agreeing that this was an issue to be returned to in the future, the Commission concurred with Speaker McLaughlin's view of the need to take an approach which reached as many young people as possible, including by mainstreaming youth engagement into the main business of the Assembly and its committees on issues such as mental health which the Northern Ireland Youth Forum had chosen as its priority issue.

### Discussion

10. It had been intended to make progress to resolve the issue of a youth assembly early in the 2016-22 mandate but this was impacted by the difficult political environment which soon emerged. Since the Assembly dissolved for early elections in January 2017, and in the absence of the Assembly itself sitting, the outgoing Commission has not given consideration to the introduction of a youth assembly and instead has been prioritising issues arising from the political situation, including staff temporary redeployment.
11. Within the youth sector there has been considerable frustration over the inability to move ahead to address the absence of a youth assembly at this time. Therefore it is recommended that, once the Assembly returns to normal business and elects a successor Commission, officials will engage with the new Commission at an early stage to obtain authority to advance the development of a youth assembly. This will include consideration of a range of options and implementation models. Officials will then engage further with the range of youth organisations interested in this important issue as part of that process.

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12. The Commission will wish to note that the costs of a 2½ year pilot youth assembly, in line with the model developed by the Youth Panel, were estimated to be between £417,000 and £517,000. These figures were partly informed by the costs of other youth assemblies, including the Scottish Youth Parliament. Given the passage of time, new estimates will need to be prepared, based on a range of options and implementation models.

### **Recommendations**

13. It is recommended that the Assembly Commission agrees that officials will prepare an options paper on the development of a youth assembly, for consideration by the new Commission in due course.

### **Risk/Corporate Governance Issues**

14. None at this stage.

### **Corporate Governance**

15. None at this stage.

### **Next Steps /Future Actions**

16. An options paper on the development of a youth assembly will be prepared for consideration by the new Assembly Commission.

**AUTHOR: Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services**

YOUTH ASSEMBLY

Number of Submission: AC2012

From: John Stewart, Director of Information and Outreach, 21327

Date: 21 JANUARY 2013

Summary

**Issue:** *To provide an update on the progress made towards the establishment of a pilot Youth Assembly and to note the revised plans in light of the current economic climate*

**Timescale:** *To be discussed at the Assembly Commission meeting on 27 February 2013.*

**Fol Implications:** *Contents of this submission are fully disclosable*

**Legal Implications:** *None*

**Financial Implications:** *Referenced within the submission*

**Staffing Implications:** *Referenced within the submission*

**Equality Implications:** *Referenced within the submission*

**Equality Screening:** *N/A*

**Attachments:** *None*

**Recommendations:** *That the Assembly Commission notes the progress made towards the establishment of a pilot Youth Assembly; agrees to seek funding partners within the Executive; and seek programme delivery partners from the youth sector.*

## **Background**

1. One of the key commitments of the Assembly's Engagement Strategy is to establish a youth forum to consider, debate and make recommendations on issues of particular importance to young people.
2. A number of well-established youth parliaments already exist, including the UK Youth Parliament, Scottish Youth Parliament, Funky Dragon (Wales) and Dáil na nÓg. Funding for these parliaments/assemblies generally comes from the executive branch of government, often with additional local government support.
3. Following research work by Assembly officials, initial proposals for the development of a Youth Assembly were presented to stakeholders, including young people, in October 2009. Informal discussions were also held with a range of stakeholders including officials from OFMDFM, the Department of Education, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and Public Achievement.
4. The Youth Panel, comprising 30 young people aged 16-18, worked to develop the proposals between March 2010 and February 2011. It undertook a range of research and evidence gathering activities including meetings with a wide range of stakeholders, including parties represented in the Assembly, regional workshops with young people, research visits to other youth assemblies and an online survey. Additional research was also undertaken by the Assembly's Research and Library Service to support this work.
5. Based on this process, the Youth Panel developed draft proposals which were presented to OFMDFM Junior Ministers and the Minister for Education in March 2011. The Ministers supported the establishment of a Youth Assembly. The proposals were then presented to the Assembly Commission which approved, in principle, the establishment of a Youth Assembly and a public consultation on the proposals.

The public consultation took place between May and September 2011 and responses, which have been analysed and considered by Assembly staff and a delegation of Youth Panel members, indicate strong support for the establishment of a Youth Assembly. Some adjustments have been made to the original proposals to reflect both the consultation responses and consideration of current business circumstances of the Northern Ireland Assembly. A summary of current proposals is given below (from Paragraph 7).

6. Requests for updates on the project have been received from interested parties including the Youth Forum, NICCY and the British Youth Council. A report on the public consultation has not been published yet due to the need to resolve funding issues (see discussion below).



7. It is proposed that the Youth Assembly should be established as a two-year pilot programme allowing effective procedures and partnership relationships to be established. The project will be reviewed after this period.
8. It was the Youth Panel's view that the overarching mission of a Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland should be to:

*“Encourage positive, respectful relationships and represent the voice of young people on issues which affect their lives”.*
9. The pilot Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland would provide opportunities for members to:
  - Develop positive, respectful relationships with each other and promote good relations between young people;
  - Listen to the views of young people in their local area;
  - Campaign on issues of interest to young people;
  - Research, investigate and debate issues of interest;
  - Engage meaningfully with MLAs, Ministers and policymakers in the Assembly and the Executive;
  - Respond to a limited number of consultations of their choice; and
  - Receive training and on-going support to enable them to pursue these goals.

### **Age Range**

10. The age range would be 14-18 at the point of recruitment. This would mean that the young people will be 16-20 at the end of a two year term. This is a slight change from the initial proposals which favoured an age range of 15-20, leading to a completion age range of 17-22. Consultation responses broadly agreed with the proposed age range or favoured a slightly younger age range. Therefore, adoption of the age range 14-18 (with a completion age of 16-20) is more reflective of the Youth Panel's views and the consultation responses.

### **Number of candidates**

11. Three members would be drawn from each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies to make a total of 54 Members of the Youth Assembly (MYAs) as per the initial proposal.

### **Length of term**

12. Members would serve one term of two years. In a change from the initial proposals, there is no opportunity for re-election. Consultation responses suggested that re-election gave incumbent Members an unfair advantage in the recruitment process. The single-term rule will also give more young people the opportunity to be involved.

### **Recruitment**

13. Membership of the Youth Assembly would be determined by a regulated selection process (application, short listing, and interview) that would be delivered by the youth sector partner, overseen by funding in conjunction

with the Equality Commission. It is important that the MYAs are reflective of their peer group and there must be reference to Section 75 as appropriate.

14. The opportunity to become an MYA should be communicated widely through a range of media and to young people directly as well as through a variety of organisations, including schools and youth groups. This approach is required to ensure that the recruitment reaches and is open to as broad an audience as possible, with the emphasis on being as resourceful and innovative as possible in reaching the target age group. The facility to receive applications in a variety of formats should be established to overcome any barriers that young people may experience.
15. Recruitment would most appropriately be held in all constituencies simultaneously. This is a change from the initial proposals which favoured an annual, rolling selection process with an intake of 36 in one year and 18 in the next. However, after considering consultation responses and reflecting on this issue, representatives of the Youth Panel recognised that there might be some implied seniority built into the rolling selection approach which is not in the spirit of equality which should underpin the Youth Assembly.

#### **Frequency of meetings**

16. Deliberations of the Youth Panel and the public consultation have suggested that the Youth Assembly should meet ten times per year, (likely to include two residential sessions). The Youth Panel suggested that five meetings should take place in Parliament Buildings, with a further five held in community settings around Northern Ireland. Discussions would need to be undertaken to consider the feasibility of using Parliament Buildings.

#### **Role of the Youth Assembly**

- 17 The work and working pattern of the Youth Assembly would not directly mirror the NIA. It should complement the work of the NIA and the executive departments and will have a particular focus on campaigning and responding to relevant consultations.

The Youth Assembly would choose, plan and participate in a minimum of two campaigns during a two year term on issues of interest or concern to young people. It will also participate in consultations where appropriate and the Youth Assembly's choice of campaign issues and consultations will be based on relevance and interest to young people and workload of the Youth Assembly.

It is intended that the Youth Assembly will be aware of the work of the NIA committees and plenary sessions. It is also intended that the Youth Assembly will contribute to the work of the NIA committees and executive departments, as appropriate. The Youth Assembly will provide a useful, ready source of views from young people for the NIA and executive departments. Through its work, the Youth Assembly will raise political awareness among young people in Northern Ireland – highlighting the work of government, showing its relevance to young people and encouraging young people to get involved.

## **Discussion**

- 17 The Assembly Commission agreed in principle to the establishment of a Youth Assembly when the Youth Panel presented its proposals in March 2011. Deciding to proceed with the proposed pilot programme will confirm the Assembly's commitment to young people and assist the Assembly to meet statutory requirements and business targets in relation to the issues of equality and good relations.
- 18 It is important to note this project in light of the current and changed financial climate. With the outworking of the Business Efficiency Programme and the reduction in the Assembly's budget in this CSR period, it is not possible for the Assembly to fund the pilot for a Youth Assembly on its own. Therefore, it is proposed to seek funding and delivery partners.
- 19 The two options detailed below both involve seeking Executive and delivery partner funding. It is also important to note that the costs included in the two options below are highly indicative at this stage.

### **Option 1 – Assembly and Executive funded project delivered through a youth sector partner at £245k**

- 20 The indicative cost of this option is £245k to set up and run the pilot Youth Assembly over the two year period (£45k set up plus two years at £100k). It is considerably less than the neighbouring jurisdictions' equivalents; however this represents a minimum spend and it does not allow for employing a small secretariat of young people (under 25) to work full-time for the Youth Assembly as is the case with the youth assemblies and parliaments in other jurisdictions. The UK Youth Parliament, which is delivered through a tender, costs over £1m per annum, while the Scottish Youth Parliament receives approximately £800K per annum and core funding to the Welsh Funky Dragon is over £500K from the Welsh Assembly Government.

To properly respond to consultations etc. a small, permanent secretariat would be required and this would take the annual cost of the pilot well beyond the £100K per annum minimum cost. It is likely that the Executive departments would seek to consult the Youth Assembly on all relevant policy consultations and this could be funded by those departments as needed, or through core funding. However, there should be no obligation on the Youth Assembly to respond to departmental consultations because it is funded by the Executive. The Youth Assembly should be free to choose the relevant consultations to which it wants to respond.

This model is based on providing and seeking the bare minimum in terms of resource, delivery and support – it is very much a “make-do” approach to the pilot Youth Assembly.

- 21 Given the lack of financial or staff capacity with the NIA, Option 1 is not feasible at this time. A more feasible option is to seek greater Executive

funding and deliver the programme through a youth sector organisation. This is covered in detail in Option 2.

### **Option 2 –Assembly and Executive funded project delivered through a youth sector partner at £517.5k**

- 22 The indicative cost of this option is £517.5k to set up and run the pilot Youth Assembly over the two year period (£107.5 to set up the pilot plus two years at £205k). Although still less than most other jurisdictions, it represents a more realistic cost.
- 23 As OFMdFM has responsibility for children and young people, informal official-to-official discussions have been undertaken with colleagues from that Department along with colleagues in the Department for Education. While not entering into any commitment, these discussions have been positive and highlighted that both Departments have anticipated the existence of a Youth Assembly to facilitate their youth engagement policies. The officials from both departments stressed that they could offer no decisions or commitments without reflection and consultation with departmental colleagues; however, they suggested that discussions with further departments would be useful.
- 24 The benefits of delivery through a youth sector organisation would allow any funding partners to progress the current proposal ensuring that the partners retain oversight and governance roles, while allowing the Youth Assembly to be independent from the Assembly by operating from a distance. It would also allow the delivery organisation to provide the expertise and experience of the youth sector required to recruit and operate the Youth Assembly, while being more able to mitigate any risks involved. For example, it is likely that there will be considerable reputational risk associated with the recruitment and operation of the Youth Assembly and it is considered this kind of risk will be best managed by an organisation with significant experience of working with young people.
- 25 It is anticipated that the delivery organisation will have working with young people as its core purpose. In turn, it is expected that the necessary training, experience of facilitating young people in discussions and decision-making will be key and common processes within this organisation. Further, in looking at other participatory youth organisations, it is clear that in order to reflect best practice and offer young people a positive experience that encourages them to stay involved and participate effectively, significant and on-going support is required.
- 26 This method of delivery would allow significant youth sector participation through established networks and would also be more likely to secure the broader recruitment of MYAs to ensure representation from as many areas and groups as possible. The recruitment process is expected to be labour and time intensive. Therefore, it is preferable that a youth organisation who can focus significant staff resources for a short time, deliver these services.

27 The success of the Youth Assembly depends on using existing networks to communicate with young people and to support MYAs. It is anticipated that the delivery organisation will provide support and advice to MYAs throughout the two year tenure. In particular they will be required to provide support at local level with an MYA's constituency. It will also provide a point for communicating with constituents.

28 Additionally, a youth organisation would be in a better position to resist undue influence from political parties in the running of the Youth Assembly, mitigating an area of potential risk. It is possible that the media would be less likely to simply transfer any criticisms of the NIA/Executive to the Youth Assembly if it is being delivered by a youth organisation.

There is also considerable experience and expertise amongst organisations in the youth sector in drawing down funding from other areas, such as the EU etc. which might prove more difficult for an NIA/Executive-run Youth Assembly.

29 The safety and well-being of the young people in the Youth Assembly must be paramount. There is an organisational and legal obligation to adhere to relevant policies and good practice guidance from all agencies involved with the Youth Assembly. However, it is imperative that the delivery organisation has mainstreamed protection and promotion of young people as a central tenet of all its work and that all relevant policies are implemented vigorously. Building this level of experience and capacity within the internal Assembly team would take a considerable time and expense.

30 This option represents a greater investment in terms of set up and launch of the pilot. It also represents more support in terms of staff support and resources. In terms of overall risk mitigation and delivery of a high quality, youth-sector driven project, it is clear that seeking greater funding from the Executive to deliver a Youth Assembly by way of an appropriate youth sector organisation is the best option. In terms of maintaining the focus and integrity of the Youth Assembly this would also appear to be case.

### **Recommendations**

1. That the Assembly Commission notes the progress made towards the establishment of a pilot Youth Assembly and confirms its commitment to the establishment of a Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland.
2. That the Assembly Commission endorses the approach to seek funding partners and ask OFMDFM to make a bid to the Executive on our behalf.
3. That the Assembly Commission agrees to seek a youth sector partner to recruit and deliver the pilot Youth Assembly.
4. That the Assembly Commission publishes a report on the consultation, outlining the model for a future Assembly.

5. That the Assembly Commission nominates a Commission member to chair a steering group to oversee the work of the project.