



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill: Youth
Assembly

17 June 2026

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Matthew O'Toole (Chairperson)
Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Gerry Carroll
Miss Jemma Dolan
Miss Deirdre Hargey
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Brian Kingston

Witnesses:

Mr Lawrence Asar	Youth Assembly
Ms Mia Hall	Youth Assembly
Mr Logan Scott-McKinley	Youth Assembly
Ms Jennifer Soutar	Youth Assembly
Mr Landon Woodfield	Youth Assembly

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Following their written submission on the views of young people on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill, five Youth Assembly Members have kindly come to brief the Committee. I welcome Logan Scott-McKinley, Landon Woodfield, Mia Hall, Jennifer Soutar and Lawrence Asar. I do not have information on your respective constituencies. I know that you all represent a constituency. Should that come up, you are more than welcome to —.

The Committee Clerk: Chair, technically, Youth Assembly Members do not represent a constituency. Youth Assembly Members are randomly selected, based on other criteria. It may, however, be interesting, when they introduce themselves, to hear where they are from.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): That would be interesting, yes.

I ask you to make an opening statement. I do not know whether you have decided who will start.

Mr Landon Woodfield (Youth Assembly): I will.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Please go ahead. Thank you all very much, guys. We really appreciate your coming to the Committee.

Mr Woodfield: Thank you to the Committee for Finance for meeting us. My name is Landon, and I will begin by giving a brief background of the Youth Assembly. It was established in June 2021 and comprises 90 diverse Members, aged 12 to 16, from all constituencies, with representation from

section 75 groups, including on gender, sexuality, disability, race and political opinion, plus care-experienced young people and those on free school meals. My fellow Youth Assembly Members and I have been in our role since November 2025.

The Youth Assembly has three main functions. First, we engage directly with the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Committees on inquiries and legislative scrutiny. Secondly, we conduct Youth Assembly Committee-led project work. We meet experts, undertake research and present our findings to Committees and Ministers. Our three Committees in this mandate are the Education Committee, which is looking at the impact of hidden school fees; the Health Committee, which is looking at social media addiction; and the Rights and Equality Committee, which is examining the topic of ending violence against women and girls from the perspective of young men. Thirdly, we work with Departments and other youth organisations on issues that affect young people's lives.

On 6 May 2026, we met the Clerk and the Senior Assistant Clerk online to consider the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill. Today, we will present our key findings from that discussion. The full report has already been sent to the Committee and should be in members' packs. I will now hand over to Mia, who will explore young people's awareness of the issue and their views on non-religious ceremonies.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Thanks, Landon.

Ms Mia Hall (Youth Assembly): Good afternoon. My name is Mia, and I will begin by discussing the awareness and views on non-religious marriage ceremonies. Before taking part in the online session, most Youth Assembly Members had limited knowledge of the laws on marriage and civil partnerships, with 65% saying that they knew a little and 30% saying that they did not know much. That highlights the importance of improving awareness and understanding of the issues among young people. Members suggested that schools should play a greater role in teaching young people about relationships, consent and forced marriage so that they understand their rights and know how to seek help.

We then explored whether couples should be able to get married in a non-religious belief ceremony, such as a humanist ceremony, and have it legally recognised. Seventy-five per cent of Youth Assembly Members supported that proposal, thus showing strong backing for greater inclusivity and choice. Members felt that all people should be treated equally before the law, regardless of their beliefs. Fifteen per cent, however, opposed the idea, while 10% were unsure, with some raising questions about how non-religious ceremonies would operate alongside traditional practices. Overall, Youth Assembly Members support expanding choice in how people get married, while recognising the need for clarity and balance. I will now hand over to Jennifer, who will discuss equality in the law and future regulation.

Ms Jennifer Soutar (Youth Assembly): My name is Jennifer, and the area that I will explore is equality in the law and flexibility in the proposed Bill. Youth Assembly Members showed strong support for treating religious and non-religious marriages equally, with 90% agreeing with that approach. Members saw that as being an important step in promoting fairness and ensuring that the law reflects a diverse society. A small number of Members, however, raised concerns about maintaining the independence of religious institutions, highlighting the need to respect freedom of religion alongside equality.

We also discussed the proposal to allow the Government to set rules in the future about which organisations can conduct marriages. Eighty-one per cent of Members support that flexibility, recognising that laws may need to adapt over time to reflect changing societal needs. That having been said, 19% are unsure, suggesting that some young people would like more detail on how the powers would be used. The Youth Assembly recognises that the regulations will come later, so we have some concerns about what the criteria will be in order for an organisation to be able to offer marriages. I will now hand over to Logan, who will focus on the proposed change to the minimum age of marriage.

Mr Logan Scott-McKinley (Youth Assembly): My name is Logan, and I am from Mid Ulster. I will discuss the proposal to raise the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership to 18. The proposal received overwhelming support from Youth Assembly Members, with 95% agreeing that the minimum age should be increased. Members identified several benefits. First, safeguarding and protection were key themes. Many felt that the change would help prevent child and forced marriages and better protect young people's rights. That reflects the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular article 19, which emphasises the need to protect children from harm and exploitation.

Secondly, Members highlighted the importance of maturity and informed decision-making. Marriage is a significant commitment, and Members felt that individuals should have the time to understand fully its implications. Some also suggested that raising the age could lead to more stable and long-lasting relationships. Concerns were also raised, however. Some Members questioned whether 18 is still too young, suggesting that the age could be further increased to 21. Others highlighted the potential for unintended consequences, such as marriages taking place abroad or uncertainty over how international cases would be handled.

Overall, although Members strongly supported raising the age, they also emphasised the importance of clear guidance, enforcement and ongoing safeguarding measures. I will now hand over to Laurence, who will discuss forced marriage and conclude on behalf of the Youth Assembly.

Mr Lawrence Asar (Youth Assembly): My name is Lawrence, and I will conclude by addressing forced marriage and Youth Assembly Members' overall views on the Bill. Members were unanimous in their view that forcing or pressuring someone under the age of 18 into marriage should be a criminal offence, with 100% of Members agreeing with that. When asked whether, overall, the Assembly should pass the Bill, 95% of Members said yes, while some felt that changes, such as raising the age and further expanding protections, could strengthen the Bill. There was clear support for the Bill's overall direction.

In summary, the Youth Assembly supports the aims of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill. Members value fairness, equality and protection and believe that the legislation has the potential to improve outcomes for young people in line with children's rights principles. At the same time, we encourage the Committee to consider areas for refinement, including safeguarding, education and clarity on implementation. Thank you for listening. We welcome your questions.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Thank you very much, guys. That was a lesson in concision. For some of our other witnesses, and probably some Committee members, including me, we could point to your opening statements as an example of how to be more concise. *[Laughter.]* A few things arise from your statements. It is interesting that, overall, there is very strong support for the Bill. A couple of the points that you raised have been made by others. I will ask a couple of questions and address them to the person who raised the relevant bit, but if someone else wants to chip in, do chip in. We will not be too formal about it.

Jennifer, you said that 75% supported the provision for belief marriage. The view that it should be allowed was fairly clear and widespread. Did people give any specific reasons as to why they felt that that should be the case?

Ms Soutar: As in, why do we think there needs to be a separation?

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): No. All that the Bill is doing is formalising in law what exists at the minute, which is that non-religious organisations have the ability to perform weddings. Did Youth Assembly Members say anything more specific about that area or give any particular opinions on it?

Ms Soutar: We did not look too much into the detail in the legislation on that would entail, but it would be good for us to look into it. The Youth Assembly could do that.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): There was support for the broad principle, however.

One point that came up, Mia, in your evidence was that, as well as supporting belief marriage, Youth Assembly Members overwhelmingly supported raising the minimum age for marriage to 18. You guys are examples of people under the age of 18 who are very mature and wise. Why is the Youth Assembly so certain that the minimum age should be raised to 18? One might say that you guys are a lesson in how people under 18 can be very mature and thoughtful. Why do you think that everybody was so supportive of raising the age to 18?

Ms Hall: I think that everyone's support for that was mostly based maturity being important. Especially in some parts of Northern Ireland, that might take longer to achieve, but I believe that support for changing the minimum age for marriage is —.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): That is fairly consistent.

I have one final question. Logan, you talked about there being widespread support among Youth Assembly Members for forced marriage being a crime. Did any particular discussions take place on that? Were there any specific observations from the young people?

Mr Scott-McKinley: The consensus among Youth Assembly Members was that we should be doing as much as possible to ensure that young people are protected and not forced into marriage. The consensus seemed to be that that is a very important factor in keeping people safe and making sure that everyone is treated equally.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): One final point has just occurred to me. I do not know whether it was Landon or someone else who raised it. Having broader knowledge of marriage law seemed to prompt a conversation in the Youth Assembly about having broader awareness of issues such as healthy relationships and consent. Is it fair to say that the Youth Assembly Members were prompted to consider those questions about whether you should be allowed to marry at 16 and 17 in the context of having a conversation about education on relationships more broadly?

Mr Woodfield: Yes. The Youth Assembly believes that knowledge of, as you say, relationships and sexuality education should be more successfully taught in subjects such as learning for life and work. The reason that the vast majority of us wanted the minimum age for marriage to be raised to 18 is to prevent child marriages. I heard that even from people outside the Youth Assembly. A friend of mine in school did a presentation yesterday on child marriage across the world, so it is an ongoing and very prominent issue that we can stamp out in Northern Ireland at least.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Hopefully. Thank you very much, guys. I will now bring in other members.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you all for being here. It is great to have the Youth Assembly at the Committee, especially to discuss an issue that affects young people. Your perspective is so important. We sometimes think about an issue in a different way because we are not at the heart of it. I represent South Down. I do not know whether anybody here is from South Down. No? I will get Members from the South Down area brought in next time. *[Laughter.]* It is brilliant to have you here and to get a spread of Youth Assembly Members from across Northern Ireland.

You touched on the Bill a little bit, but, based on what you have said, it seems that the Youth Assembly has an appreciation of how serious marriage is. I am concerned, based on some of the engagement that I have had, that, if the solemn nature of the serious contract that people are entering into through marriage is not kept at the forefront, and it thus becomes too widespread, light-hearted and a bit of a party, people will not necessarily take seriously what it is that they are entering into. Was that the feeling from the Youth Assembly? Is there an understanding and appreciation among young people that, when people get married or have a civil partnership, a legal contract is involved, meaning that there are serious legal consequences and that it is a serious process from which people will not just walk away? Was the gravity of marriage fully appreciated?

Ms Soutar: We talked about that in our online discussion. Although it was not mentioned in our speeches, we talked about the science behind brain development and how the brain does not fully develop until people are 25, or perhaps even 30. We discussed being able to get married at 16, given that, as you mentioned, it is such a big commitment with so many legalities attached. One of the reasons that we think that the minimum age should be raised to 18, if not higher, is that brain needs to be let develop in order to allow consent to become a properly thought-out choice, instead of having people say, "I'm 16, and I want to marry this person", without their really thinking about how that could affect them in the future as they change as a person.

Ms Forsythe: Absolutely. It is good to hear that you are having those conversations. Jennifer, you gave evidence on the eligibility criteria for performing marriage ceremonies. What sorts of ideas did you have?

Ms Soutar: We did not go into extreme detail about how the marriages would be carried out. We thought that religious and non-religious marriages should be treated equally but that they should be allowed to have their own separate laws and rules. The Bill should therefore not try to bundle them all into one big mess. Religious and non-religious marriages should be treated equally, but they should be allowed to be performed differently.

Ms Forsythe: That is great to hear. Does anybody want to add to that?

Mr Asar: You mentioned people marrying young. If a young person meets someone when they are 18, which is what we propose changing the minimum age for marriage to, thinks that they are the love of your life and then decides to get married but, two years later, thinks, "I don't really like this person", the divorce could ruin their life, because everything has to be split in half, and it becomes about who gets this and who gets that. For that specific reason, I believe that the age should be higher.

Ms Forsythe: I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

Mr Kingston: Thank you again for your attendance today and for your consideration of the matter. It is very helpful for us to have the voice of young people represented, because the issue affects your age group. You have approached it in a very mature way. I thought that you might have had more people saying, "We want the freedom to do what we want to do", but you have pointed to the right things, including having maturity and avoiding coercion, forced marriage and child marriage. That has also been our approach. There is a move towards recognising that early marriage particularly disadvantages young women. Do you feel that your views are representative of young people more generally?

Ms Soutar: Yes. The Youth Assembly is a diverse group, made up of people with different religious beliefs and from different backgrounds. Taking into account that diversity, we think that the views expressed reflect widespread opinion. We all seem to agree that vulnerable women, for example, can be targeted, so it is an issue that needs to be looked at.

Mr Kingston: I will take that as meaning that your views are representative. I am encouraged by your responses. As Diane said, one of our concerns, given the broadening of the criteria for who can conduct marriages, is about ensuring that the solemnity of marriage as a commitment is maintained. In the era of 'Married at First Sight' and so on, there is a danger of that not being the case. A marriage is always a joyous affair, but there is also solemnity involved in the ceremony, be the setting religious or non-religious, so it is about people understanding the commitment that they are making. We have a slight concern that the definition of "belief" could become too broad and be interpreted too liberally, resulting in more and more wacky versions of marriage. We want to ensure that marriage is seen as being a serious commitment, personally and legally. It is intended to be a lifelong commitment. Do you appreciate that?

Mr Scott-McKinley: The Youth Assembly recognises that marriage is a very serious affair and that it can have lifelong impacts. A large part of the reason that we feel that the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership should be raised to 18 is down to how impactful a commitment it is.

Mr Kingston: We have a concern about who will be allowed to conduct marriages. We want to ensure that that solemnity is maintained.

Mr Scott-McKinley: The Youth Assembly generally showed strong support for equality between religious and non-religious marriages, with the majority of Members saying that they agree or strongly agree that religious and non-religious marriages should be treated equally, with many feeling that it is about fairness and equal rights for different beliefs. Although there is some recognition of concerns about religious freedom, the consensus seems to be that there is strong support for that equality and for broad recognition of different marriages.

Mr Kingston: My final question is not really to do with the Bill. Do you feel that marriage, as an institution, has a strong future among your age group? Is it something that young people discuss, or is it considered to be something too far into the future? What is the view of people of your age on marriage? Do more people see themselves getting married or not getting married? I ask that just out of interest.

Mr Asar: I do not think that the Youth Assembly age group, which is 12 to 16, really talks about marriage. That is more for people aged 17 and 18. Someone at my school in higher sixth form proposed at a school dance. No, that is not something for our age group to consider. It starts being talked about by people who are slightly older.

Mr Kingston: Do you think that marriage has an important place in society?

Mr Asar: Yes.

Mr Kingston: OK. That is fine.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Cheers, guys. Big questions. *[Laughter.]*

Miss Hargey: I am 46 and am still not talking about marriage. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): You are young yet.

Miss Hargey: You win some, you lose some.

Thank you very much. It was a really brilliant presentation, so fair play to you. You have obviously had a good bit of discussion. Who thought that this topic would be so interesting? It is an important area, however, as you said.

I will touch on education. A couple of you mentioned consent and said that those who choose to marry should know what they are entering into. That is important. Are there other things that you would like to see happen, or that you think need to happen, through education to inform young people who make that decision? Matthew touched on relationships education, sexual health education and the issue of consent. What impact do they have on you, as young people who may be making such choices?

Mr Scott-McKinley: The Youth Assembly evidence showed that, before our online session, most Members had very low or limited knowledge of marriage and such things. We feel that that could be because it is not widely taught about in schools. We feel that young people need to understand their rights and choices when it comes to marriage and other issues. That may mean that there is a need for better education and awareness in school settings. Many Youth Assembly Members said that marriage should be included on the curriculum, in, for example, learning for life and work.

Miss Hargey: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Thank you, guys. Nobody else has indicated to ask a question. The session has been really useful for us. It has given us a sense of the views of a group of people who will be directly impacted on by the legislation, because, should the Bill pass, you will not be able to get married. That having been said, some of you probably will be 18 by the time that the Bill passes, but you are under 18 now.

That was really helpful, so thank you very much. While I remember everyone's name, I will thank you all individually. Thank you, Logan, Landon, Mia, Jennifer and Lawrence. You will hopefully be back here giving evidence again, either as Members of the Youth Assembly or perhaps in some other capacity in the future. You may even be on this side of the table, asking someone else questions. Fingers crossed, because you are all very impressive. Thank you very much for all your work that went into today, and thank you for coming in and giving us evidence.