

help shape



YOUR future



Towards a Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland

This report details the proposal from the Assembly Youth Panel in regards to the creation of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly.

Executive Summary

Should there be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly?

The Youth Panel are in agreement that there should be a Youth Assembly. The Youth Panel Survey of individuals and organisations found that there was strong support for this view, with 89.8% of all respondents agreeing that there should be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. The Youth Assembly should aim to:

“Encourage positive, respectful relationships and represent the voice of young people on issues which affect their lives”.

How should members of a Youth Assembly be selected?

The Panel have decided that membership of the Youth Assembly should be determined by selection (application, short listing, and interview). In the survey this was the most popular view amongst individuals with 40.4% choosing this option.

How many members should there be and for how long should they serve?

The preferred option in the survey was for there to be approximately 30 members with a 2 year term. With this in mind, the Panel recommends:

- (a) The inaugural Youth Assembly should have **36 members**, 2 per constituency;
- (b) Members should serve 2 year terms
- (c) At the end of the first year 18 new members would be elected, bringing the total to 54, 3 per constituency
- (d) This rolling selection cycle will continue to ensure that there are always experienced members in the Youth Assembly
- (e) In the first year the Youth Assembly would be supported by a team from the current Youth Panel.

What should the age range for members of a Youth Assembly be?

Since the survey was inconclusive on the age range, the Panel debated this issue at length and considered a range of views on the availability and capability of the various age groups. The Panel recommends that application for membership of the Youth Assembly will be open to individuals between the ages of 15 and 20.

How can a Youth Assembly make sure that all young people’s views are represented fairly?

The Youth Panel have identified some ways in which a Youth Assembly can try to make sure that all young people’s views are represented fairly. Some of these relate to the selection of members and some to ways in which the Youth Assembly can work.

- Special consideration must be given to people with disabilities during the selection process
- Due regard must also be given to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act
- The Youth Assembly should aim to be as diverse and representative as possible

- Where groups are not represented within the Youth Assembly steps should be taken to communicate with those groups with a view to representing their views

What should the Youth Assembly be able to do?

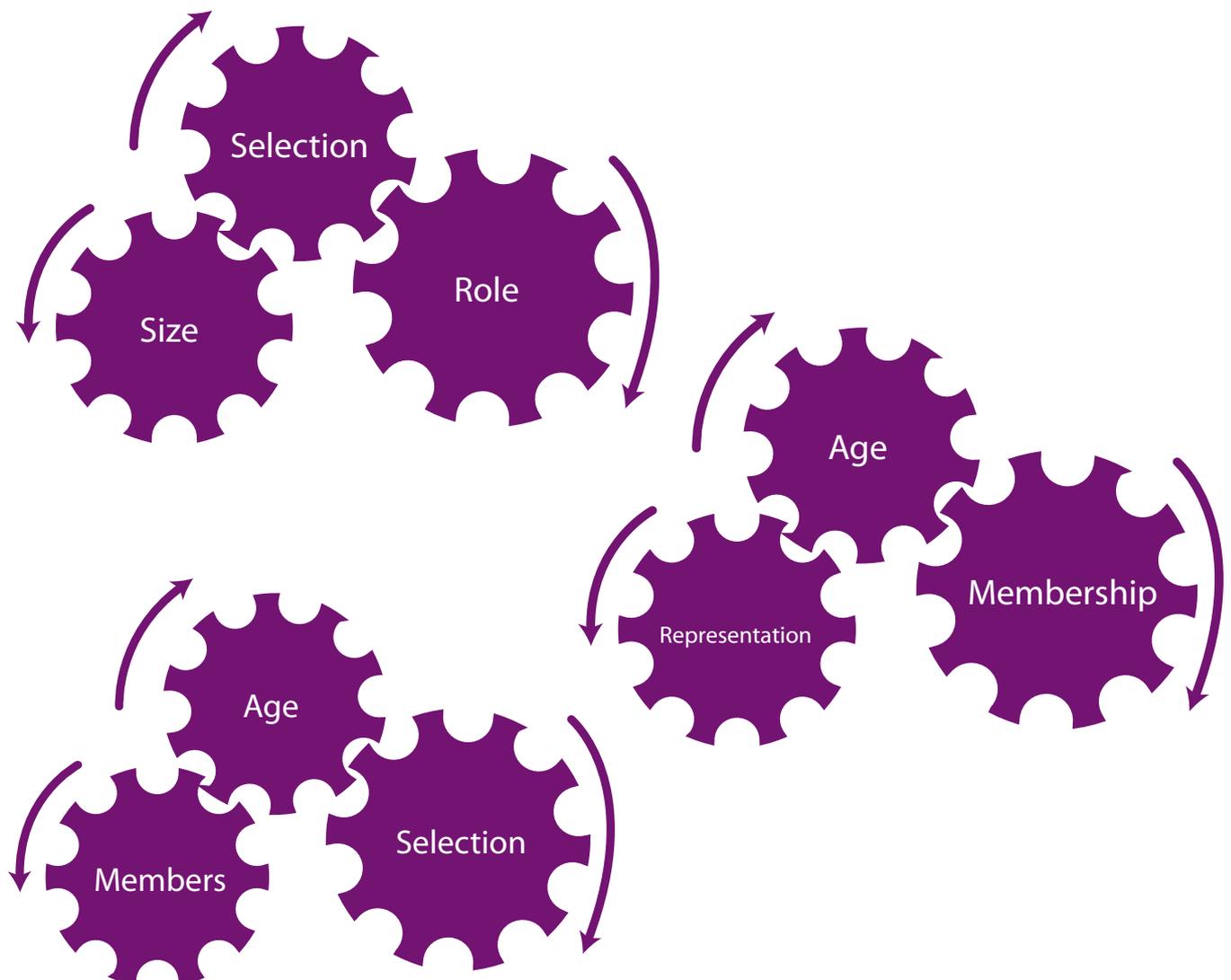
The Youth Panel recommended that during each 2 year term the Youth Assembly should select, organise and conduct 2 campaigns, respond to a minimum of 2 consultations and work with Assembly committees.

What role should the Youth Panel play in a Youth Assembly?

The existing Youth Panel feel they should act in a supporting role, providing guidance and advice based on the experience of the last year.

When and where should a Youth Assembly meet?

The Panel came to an agreement that the Youth Assembly should have ten meetings per year. Five of these meetings will be full meetings of the Youth Assembly and will be held at Parliament Buildings.



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Introduction

These proposals have been developed by the Youth Panel between March 2010 and February 2011. The Youth Panel made study visits to other youth parliaments and consulted with young people and other interested parties. An online survey was conducted and regional meetings were held to hear the views of young individuals and youth leaders. The Panel also met with other stakeholders, political parties, the Minister for Education and Junior Ministers from OFMDFM.

1. Should there be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly?

In the online survey there was strong support for the establishment of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, with 89.8% of all respondents, 89.2% of individuals and 98.1% of organisations agreeing that there should be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly.

In the survey, respondents were asked to give their views on why there should or should not be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. In total, 638 respondents gave the reasons why they were for or against a NI Youth Assembly being established.

Why there should be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

The main reasons why respondents thought there should be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly were:

- To get young people involved in the political process
- To provide representation for young people and to involve young people in decision making
- To give young people a voice

Why there should not be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

The main reasons respondents thought there should not be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly were:

- That the money could be better spent elsewhere
- Forums already exist which can engage young people in politics
- Apathy/young people not understanding the role of a Youth Assembly

Should there be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly?

The Youth Panel have held regional meetings and reviewed research carried out by others and the Youth Panel have identified further arguments for and against a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly:-

For a Youth Assembly:

- Young people should have links with the Assembly;
- It offers a new and fresh approach;
- It helps our generation move into the future and not continue the past;

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- It will help young people gain new skills and experience;
 - It will give more recognition to the needs and achievements of young people;
 - It will give young people a voice;
 - It will allow the Assembly to actively reach out to young people and involve them in the various processes
 - It will give the Assembly more authority in decisions relevant to young people.

Against a Youth Assembly¹:

- It may only attract popular and confident young people and become a popularity contest;
- It could overlook some excluded groups or personality types;
- It could become elitist;
- It would only involve limited numbers of young people;
- It might not have a strong structure at local level and may not be representative;
- It could mirror sectarian politics or only reflect the views of political parties, not young people;
- It could be too formal and exclude some young people;
- It may be too expensive to run in current economic climate;
- If it is Stormont based, it may exclude young people from rural areas;
- Some individuals may object to Stormont and wouldn't go there;
- There may be overlap with other similar organisations.

On balance, taking into account conversations with young people, with other organisations and the results of the survey, the Panel propose that there should be a Youth Assembly. As far as possible it should be designed to avoid the possible negative outcomes listed above.

The mission statement of the Youth Assembly should be:

To encourage positive, respectful relationships and represent the voice of young people on issues which affect their lives.

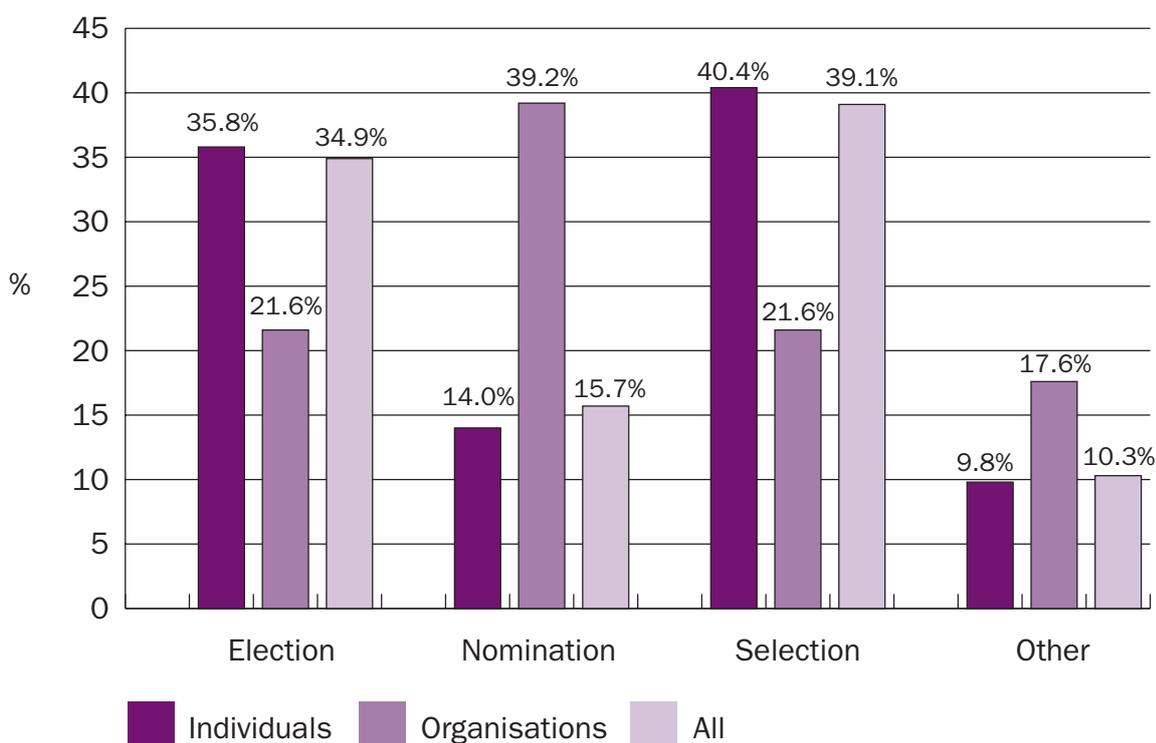
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See Network for Youth Consultation – An Overview of Responses, January 2009.

2. How should members of a Youth Assembly be selected?

The Youth Panel Survey of individuals and organisations found a significant difference between the responses of individuals and organisations. With 40.4% of individuals opting for it, their preferred method was selection (just like applying for a job: application form and interview). This was followed by election (nomination followed by a vote) with 35.8% opting for this. Organisations preferred nomination (by organisations working with young people 39.2%) but this was the least popular option amongst individuals.

Chart 8: How members of a Youth Assembly should be chosen²



Taking these statistics into account, the Panel recommends selection as the method of determining membership of the youth assembly as follows;

1. **Advertising** The opportunity to join the Youth Assembly would be broadly and aggressively advertised to ensure high public awareness of the project.
2. **Application** Prospective Members of the Youth Assembly (MYAs) will complete an application for the Youth Assembly, detailing how they would be suitable for the job. (The issue of people with disabilities was raised. It was decided that existing youth groups should be encouraged to assist people with disabilities to fill out the initial application, to ensure disability is not a barrier to entry).
3. **Short Listing.** A small “Short listing Committee” including Panel members and the Assembly staff would compile a short-list of a maximum of five applications per constituency, who would proceed to the interview stage.

² Please note that the charts in this document are numbered to reflect numbering in the Youth Panel Survey Report

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4. **Interview.** The interview stage will be led by the Short Listing Committee, as well as one independent outside member. This will essentially be an extension of the application form; applicants will be told more of the nature of being a Member of Youth Assembly (MYA) and have the opportunity to explain what would make them an effective MYA. (Again, all steps possible will be taken to ensure total ease and comfort for applicants; the interviews will be as informal and comfortable as possible, with particular regard to any special needs).

3. How many members should there be in a Youth Assembly?

The survey asked “roughly how many members should there be in a Youth Assembly?” The highest proportion (38.2%) of both individuals (37.7%) and Organisations (45.1%) felt that there should be roughly 30 members. With this in mind, the Panel recommends the following membership size:

- (a) The inaugural Youth Assembly will have **36 MYAs**, 2 per constituency. This is close to the level recommended by the Survey and ensures all areas receive equal representation.
- (b) The Youth Panel was agreed that the Panel should have an ongoing role, at least for the first year.
- (c) At the end of the first full year of the inaugural Youth Assembly, the Panel delegation will stand down and be replaced by 18 new MYAs. This will bring the **total membership of the Youth Assembly to 54, or 3 per constituency**. The 18 new members will then benefit from the experience of the “older”, original 36. This will ensure the Youth Assembly will always have an experienced group to assist new members.
- (d) **If an MYA resigns “mid-term”, the replacement process should be initiated immediately.** The new MYA will serve until the end of that term.

4. How long should members serve on a Youth Assembly?

The Panel recommends a term of 2 years. The inaugural Youth Assembly would have 36 members with 2 year terms alongside the Panel’s delegation, who would only be in post for a period of one year. After this, the new 18 MYAs will be elected to a 2 year term, thus meaning there would be a consistent batch of “veterans” in the Assembly to support the new members.

Incumbent MYAs are allowed to seek a second term. However, they would follow the exact same procedure as new applicants and would have no hand in the interview process, to ensure a level playing field for all applicants.

5. What should the age range for members of the Youth Assembly be?

In the Survey, organisations most commonly identified 14 as the youngest age (44.2%) while individuals most commonly identified 12 as the youngest age. For the oldest age, organisations preferred 25 (30.8%) followed by 18 (15.4%). Individuals preferred 18 (26.4%) followed by 25 (20.6%).

Since the survey was inconclusive on the age range, the Panel debated this issue at length and considered a range of views on the availability and capability of the various age groups. The Panel recommends the following age range:

- (a) **Minimum Applicant Age – 15.** The Panel felt this was the suitable lower limit, as it is when young people begin GCSEs, which are essentially a young person's first formal "qualification." The Panel's opinion is that at 15, young people are able to maturely rationalise their opinions and efforts for a Youth Assembly.
- (b) **Maximum Applicant Age – 20.** In practice, with the two year term, this would mean the oldest possible MYA would be 22. The Panel felt that this was the eldest age at which a Youth Assembly would still be relevant to young people; beyond this age most young people are moving into a career from apprenticeships/ universities – that is, an age where they can be more singularly served by the N.I. Assembly.

As with other aspects of these recommendations, this age range should be kept under review.

6. How can a Youth Assembly make sure that all young people's views are represented fairly?

The Youth Panel has identified some ways in which a Youth Assembly can try to make sure that all young people's views are represented fairly. Some of these relate to the selection of Members and some to ways in which the Youth Assembly can work.

Selection Process

- Special consideration must be given to people with disabilities during the selection process. Due regard must also be given to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act.
- The Youth Assembly should aim to be as diverse and representative as possible. 87.5% of organisations and 82.9% of individuals agreed/strongly agreed that the Youth Assembly should have members to represent different groups such as people with disabilities, male, female, Protestant, and Catholic etc. 87.5% of organisation and 82.9% of individuals agree or strongly agree.
- Every constituency should be represented by an equal number of members. 95.8% of organisations and 89.4% of individuals agreed/strongly agreed that the Youth Assembly should have members from all 18 constituencies.

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- The Youth Assembly should make sure that all groups are reached and well informed of the selection and application process. Encouragement of the participation is necessary.

Representation in the Youth Assembly

- So that they can be supported and stay in touch with local issues MYAs must have a strong link with their community through:
 - School councils, 68.6% of organisations and 75.3% of individuals agree or strongly agree with this;
 - Local youth councils or other local youth groups, 89.5% of organisation and 83.7% of individuals are in agreement or strongly agreement.
- If possible, to ensure that communication takes place, workshops should be set up with the support of local youth organisations to provide MYAs with knowledge of their constituents' needs.
- There should be on-line engagement between young people and MYAs which will be monitored by the Northern Ireland Assembly staff.
- There should be ongoing contact with MYAs of the existing Youth Panel to pass on ideas that will help with outreach and representation.
- The Youth Assembly should check to see if any groups are under-represented so that members can listen to those groups and represent their interests.

7. What should a Youth Assembly be able to do?

The survey identified a number of activities the Youth Assembly could undertake:

Chart 11: What should the Youth Assembly be able to do (Individuals, n = 655)

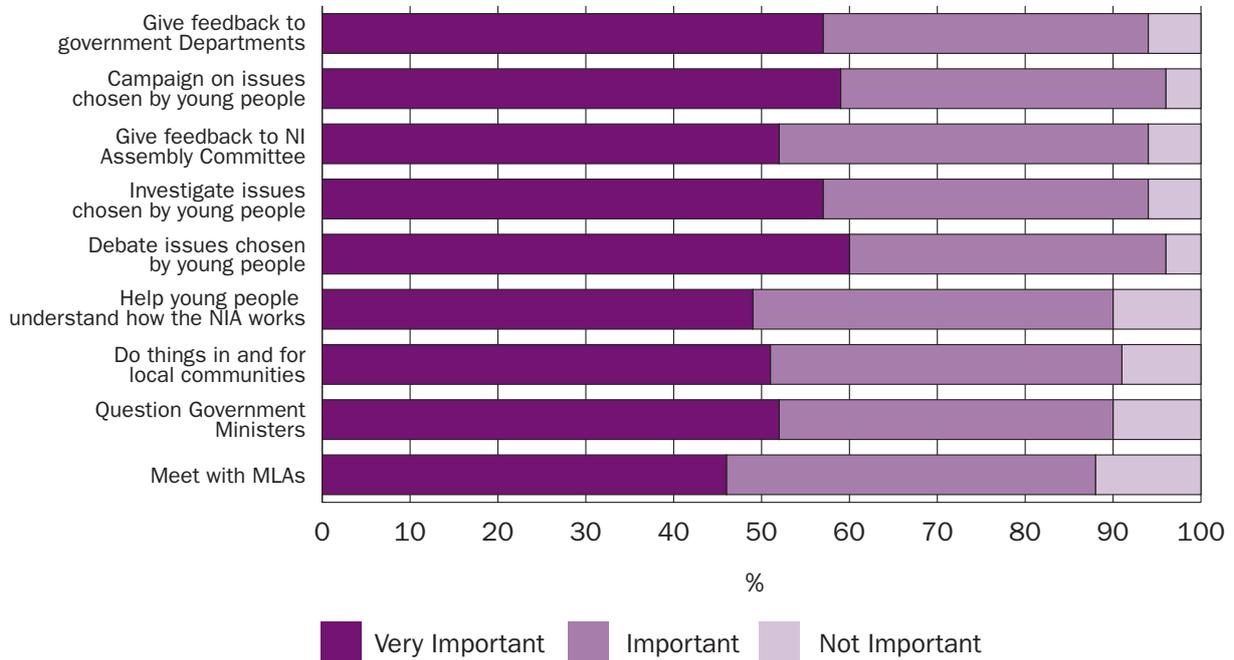
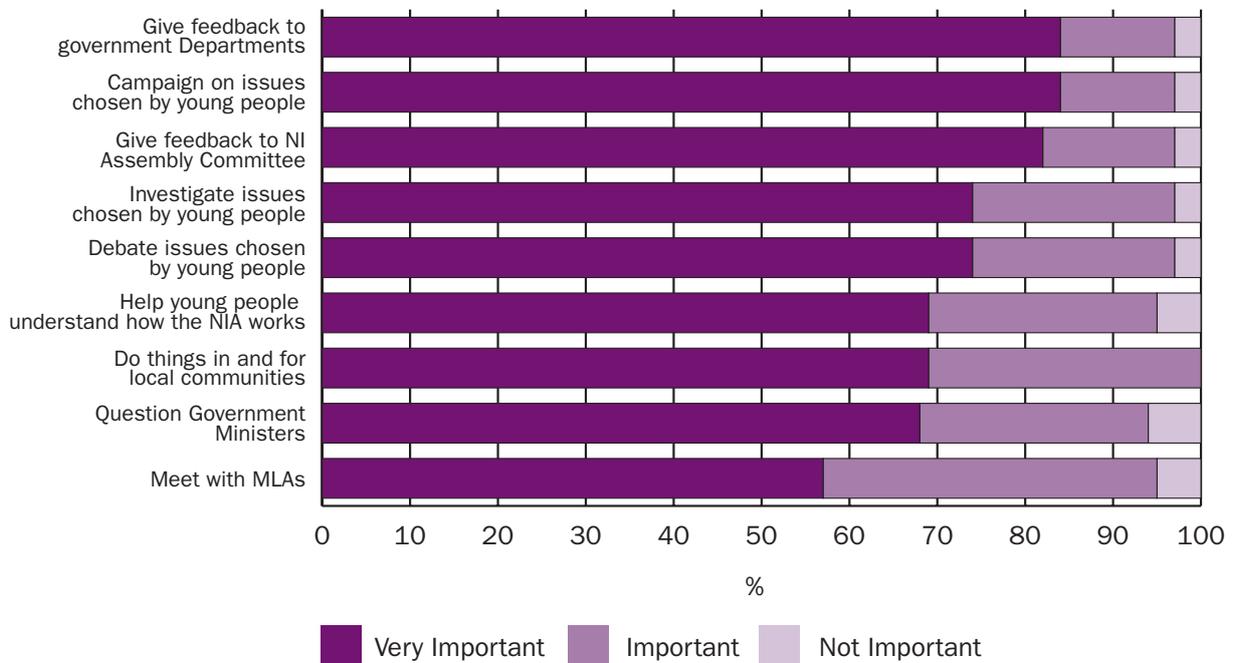


Chart 12: What the Youth Assembly should be able to do (Organisations, n = 46)



When coming to these decisions the panel based them not only on the questionnaires but also on the views of young people at regional meetings and with other stakeholders as well as study visits to relevant youth parliaments and organisations.

The individuals who completed the questionnaires told us they wanted a meaningful Youth Assembly not a consultative or tokenistic body. This view was reinforced at regional meetings. After analysing the statistics received from questionnaires and having a group discussion on the points above, the Panel agreed the following:

Campaigns

- A number of the participatory youth organisations which we studied influence legislation through campaigning. We propose that the Youth Assembly should adopt this and complete a minimum of 2 campaigns per 2 year term.
- The Panel proposes that the Youth Assembly follows the SYP model for campaigning. Young people submit their suggestions for issues to be campaigned on and the members then select the top two issues to be taken forward.

Consultations

- The Youth Assembly should respond to a minimum of 2 consultations per term and they should decide which consultations they should respond to.
- When the Youth Assembly agrees to assist in a consultation there will be an expectation that those conducting the consultation will keep the Youth Assembly informed of the outcome of the consultation and any actions that result from it.
- The Youth Assembly should, when relevant and when possible, work with Northern Ireland Assembly Members and Committees. Participants at regional meetings, in particular, students from Northern Regional College, told the Panel that they felt strongly about this.

Review

- The panel proposes that an annual review be conducted on the efficiency and quality of the Youth Assembly. This allows the Youth Assembly to evolve and change in the light of experience.

8. What role should the Youth Panel play in a Youth Assembly?

After lengthy discussions, the Youth Panel agreed that they should have a role after the Youth Assembly has been set up. There was some debate over the nature of this role. A consensus emerged that the Youth Panel should act in a supporting role, providing guidance and advice based on the experience of the last year, but that they should have no decision making power. Meetings could be held with the Youth Assembly and Panel Members would be willing to offer advice and support as and when asked to do so. Their views should also be considered during any review process in the first term of the Youth Assembly.

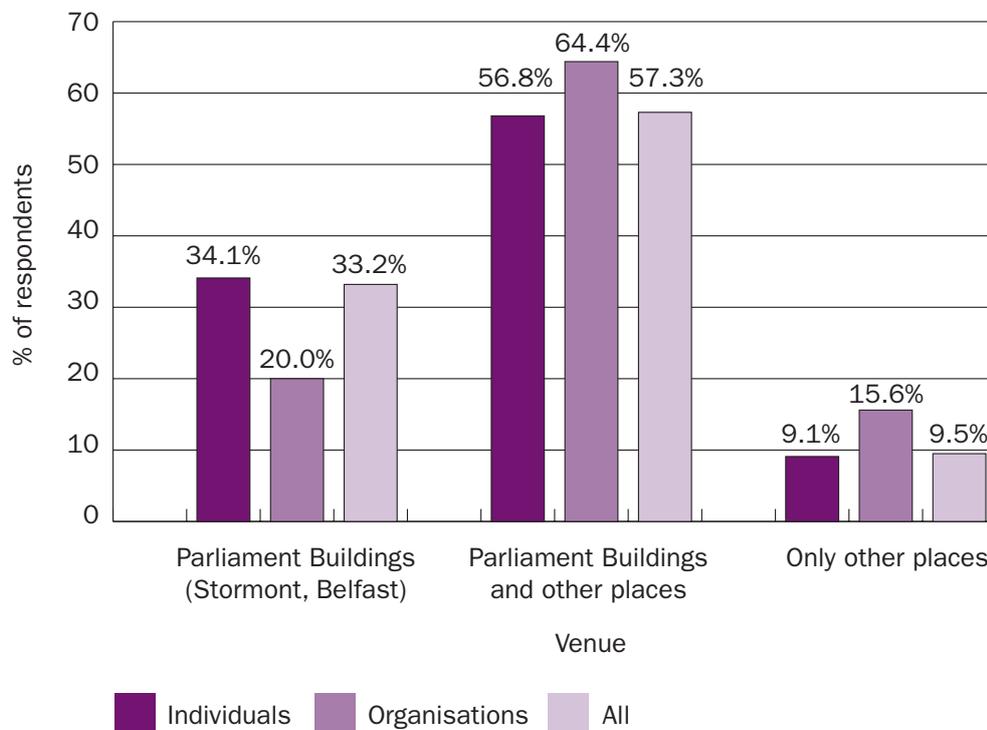
9. When, where and how often should a Youth Assembly meet?

The Panel agreed that the Youth Assembly should have ten meetings per year with 5 of these to be full meetings to be held at Parliament Buildings. Other meetings may be held on a regional basis.

The Panel feels that the Youth Assembly should meet regularly to sustain interest, commitment and good working relationships.

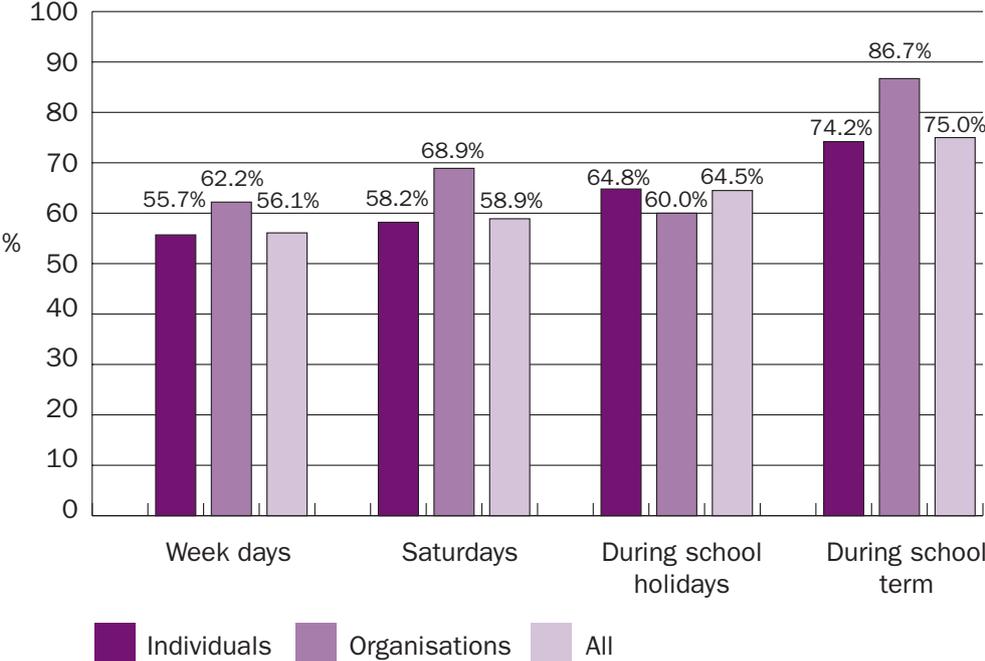
The survey showed a clear preference for meetings both at Parliament Buildings and at other locations. The five full meetings are to take place in Parliament Buildings because of the resources and facilities that are available to the Youth Assembly there. It also gives them increased access to MLAs. Belfast is also a central location for members from all constituencies.

Chart 14: Where a Youth Assembly should meet



The survey did not indicate a particular preference for when meetings should take place. The panel reached a consensus that meetings should be rotated between school terms and holidays and weekdays and Saturdays.

Chart 15: When the Youth Assembly should meet



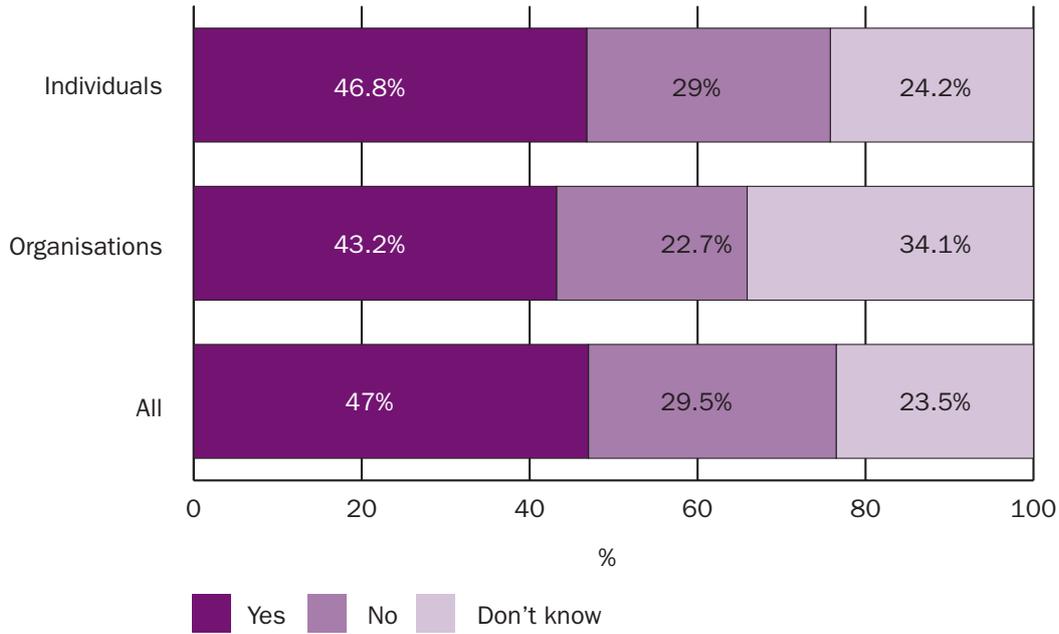
A code of Conduct should be established to deal with rules regarding the conduct of, and absence from, meetings. The Panel also agreed that unexplained absences need to be addressed and will result in a warning, however if members provide a valid and reasonable explanation then it will be understandable as to why they could not attend.

The Panel also came up with the idea that different Youth Assembly members could have their own regional meetings with the support of local youth organisations to discuss matters of concern in their own areas to bring forward at full Youth Assembly meetings.

10. Would you be interested in joining the Youth Assembly?

The survey asked young people if they would be interested in joining a Youth Assembly. 47% of individuals said that they were interested.

Chart 16: Interest in taking part in a Youth Assembly



	Yes	No	Don't know
All	46.8	29	24.2
Organisations	43.2	22.7	34.1
Individuals	47	29.5	23.5

The main reasons given by young people for being interested in taking part in a Youth Assembly were to share their ideas and opinions, to make a difference, because they are interested in politics and to represent young people:

“I would like to contribute my ideas into the community”

“I would like to give my opinions”

“Because I want to make a difference that counts”

“I would like to make a difference in what and how young people feel in our society today”

“I think it would be an interesting experience and I have an interest in politics being a sixth form politics student”

“I am interested in politics, welfare and the world around me”

“Be interested in changing how young people view politics”

“I think it would be a great idea to be able to represent my age group, gender group and my peers”

The main reasons given by young people for not being interested in taking part in a Youth Assembly were that they did not have an interest in politics and felt that with

commitments to schools or university they could not cope with additional pressure. Some also stated that they required more information before making a decision.

11 Other Recommendations

The Panel also looked into a number of other aspects of the Youth Assembly. They felt that the existing arrangements for the Youth Panel would not be appropriate for the Youth Assembly so made the following recommendations:

Residential

The Panel decided that it is necessary to hold 1 residential in year 1 and 2 residential in year two. At the start of each year, an induction residential will be held for all members including both the existing members and the newly selected members. At the end of each two year term an additional residential will be held to review the structure and operation of the Youth Assembly.

Partnerships

The Youth Assembly should encourage strong and mutually supportive relationships with groups such as:

- School Councils
- Student Unions/ councils (NRC)
- Youth groups/clubs/councils
- Unite against hate
- WIMPS
- NIYF
- SYP
- UKYP
- Funky Dragon
- Dáil na nÓg
- European Youth Parliament
- Organisations representing marginalised young people

These partnerships would allow the Youth Assembly to consult a wide range of young people with a view to representing them. It would also allow the Youth Assembly to benefit from their knowledge and expertise particularly in relation to the support of individual members of the Youth Assembly.

Management Arrangements

To secure a measure of independence for the Youth Assembly and to ensure a voice for young people in the management of the Youth Assembly, it was agreed that the Northern Ireland Assembly should establish a trust to administer the Youth Assembly.

Legislation

A small number of stakeholders were of the opinion that legislation by the Northern Ireland Assembly was necessary to establish and secure the independence of the Youth Assembly. The Panel does not feel that legislation is desirable at this stage since it would take a number of years to pass and legislation could limit the freedom of the Youth Assembly to review its structure and operation in the light of experience. However, the Panel recommends that this decision is kept under review.

Induction

An induction pack should be created and given to each member. It should include transport options and contact details, code of conduct, information about the operation of the Youth Assembly and information on the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive.

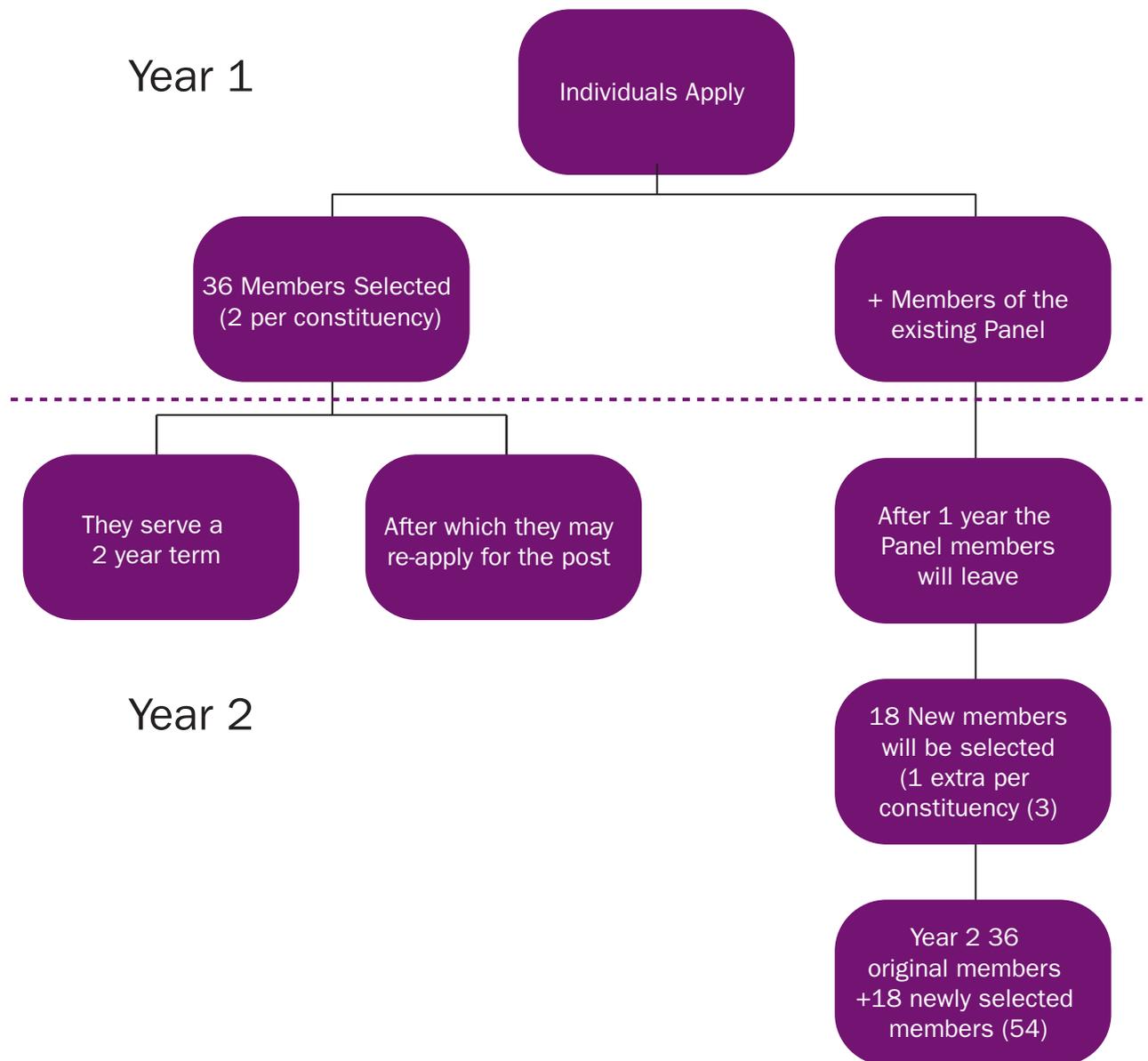
The Panel decided that training would be required for each member of the Youth Assembly. Having experienced various training activities this year the Panel felt the following would be not only beneficial but necessary:

Required Training



Appendix 1 – Action Plan

The following diagram shows the proposed structure and content of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, highlighting the 2 year term and one year rotation:



Appendix 2 - Youth Panel Terms of Reference

To listen to young people and other relevant stakeholders and to develop a policy proposal for a Youth Assembly, to be agreed with the Assembly Commission.

Terms of Reference

1. To agree
 - (a) the purpose of the Youth Assembly;
 - (b) a suitable structure for the Youth Assembly;
 - (c) a suitable means of determining the membership of the Youth Assembly, taking into account age range, method of election/selection and how to ensure fair representation (e.g. in terms of Section 75 groups);
2. To develop Panel members understanding of the issues concerned through:
 - (a) relevant training (e.g. parliamentary procedure, media skills, child protection);
 - (b) listening to young people and relevant stakeholders;
 - (c) Research;
 - (d) visits to other youth parliaments; and
 - (e) discussion with relevant experts;
3. To present a policy proposal for the establishment of a Youth Assembly to the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission by April 2011.

Following all the information above the Panel have put together this proposal in line with the brief. The structure and content are specifically designed to meet every area specified in the initial terms of reference.

We the panel feel that we have established a strong and efficient process and created a reliable and detailed action plan, which will ensure the stable running of the Youth Assembly.

The Panel wish to thank:

- Belfast City Council Youth Forum
- British Council
- College of Agriculture Food and Rural Enterprise
- Community Relations Council
- Dáil na nÓg
- Members of Northern Ireland Assembly
- Northern Ireland Assembly Education Service
- Northern Ireland Local Government Association
- Northern Ireland Youth Forum
- Northern Regional College
- Rural Community Network
- RG Consultants
- Scottish Youth Parliament
- Southern and Western Education and Library Board Youth Services
- Spirit of Eniskillen Trust
- Young people who attended regional meetings
- UK Youth Parliament
- Unite Against Hate
- VOYPIC
- WIMPS
- Youth Action
- YouthNet

and

All those who completed the questionnaire or made other submissions.

