

The Gateshead Youth Assembly is a group of young people from across Gateshead who make decisions and plan events as 'a voice for young people'. We are elected by our schools in annual elections. If a candidate is not elected, s/he can still volunteer to become an independent member of the Assembly.

When we elect new members, we then have a three-day training weekend. We meet and greet parents, and the new members get to know the 'old' ones. Then, over the next two days we choose the priorities for the year. All members split into different groups to discuss ideas and views, which are then sorted and become our priorities. A new executive is chosen by a vote, which decides the agenda for the forthcoming meetings and provides information on future opportunities.

This year, the Gateshead Youth Assembly has developed a child poverty strategy. This sets out our ideas, and what we think will change the way child poverty is viewed and handled in the North East. The strategy was developed through group discussions. We are confident that our strategy would make a real difference, as it not only looks at supporting young people living in poverty, but also at educating young people who are more fortunate. The ideas we came up with include the following.

- **Improving housing.** Restore run-down family houses and neighbourhoods, and rebuild where necessary.
- **Tackling the cost of school and improving schools.** Provide secondhand uniform shops/banks to ensure good-quality, secondhand uniforms are available at reasonable prices or free of charge. Provide free bus passes for pupils who need to travel on public/school transport for educational purposes. Ensure that school kit is reasonably priced so families can afford it. Provide more grants for low-income young people in schools. Provide breakfast clubs and lunches so people can eat at school. Bring back the Building Schools for the Future programme, so that all our schools are better.
- **Improving family incomes.** Introduce a living wage. Get rid of the youth rate of the minimum wage. Increase child benefit – make it for all young people. Make child maintenance work by ensuring payments are made and not taken off other benefits. Increase heating allowances over winter.
- **Ensuring no young person goes hungry.** Subsidise healthy food so everyone can afford it. Provide food grants for low-income families. Make sure breakfast clubs and free schools meals are available to all low-income young people and ensure that families on low incomes have the information/support they need to claim



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these benefits. Work to cover provision over the holidays. Look at supporting families to grow their own food with seed banks and allotments.

- **Making the childhood experience better.** Provide free leisure activities to young people from low-income families. Provide programmes to raise aspirations. Ban or change alcohol and junk food advertisements so young people do not get bombarded with them (as you have done with cigarettes). Change the citizen curriculum to include money management.
- **Making things fairer.** Cut higher wages – avoid helping people get super wealthy. Introduce harsher penalties and community service for people convicted of crimes.
- **Creating more work opportunities for younger people.** Look at moving public sector jobs out of London.
- **Tackling stereotypes of young people in the media and wider society.**

The Assembly also recently ran a weekend workshop on child poverty, in which we looked at all the pros and cons of growing up in the North East. We came up with projects to help young people, including: a scheme to give students secondhand school uniforms; promoting healthy eating in schools; providing free school meals over the Christmas break to eligible children; the Breadline project, promoting child poverty awareness in the North East; holding a conference with other young people to inform others of our ideas and facts/figures; and creating a map to show the parts of the region the Assembly thinks need regenerating.

We hope to carry on our work throughout 2012. We have recently pitched our proposal to Gateshead Council and Durham University, and we plan to share it with others, including Oxford University, the North East Children's Commissioner and two local MPs. ■

Melanie Caddle and **Mirander Delahaye** are 15 and 16 years old respectively, and are active members of the Gateshead Youth Assembly

In the first of a new series of contributions from young people, Melanie Caddle and Mirander Delahaye describe their work on the Gateshead Youth Assembly.