



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill: Mr Pat
Catney MLA

1 December 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Mr Pat Catney	Northern Ireland Assembly
Mr Johnny McCarthy	Social Democratic and Labour Party

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I warmly welcome, by StarLeaf, Pat Catney MLA and Johnny McCarthy, who is a researcher. Pat, I can give you up to 10 minutes for an opening statement, followed by questions. You know that the Committee is extremely supportive of the work in this area. You are amongst friends, and we look forward to hearing from you today.

Mr Pat Catney (Northern Ireland Assembly): Thanks very much, Chris, and thanks very much to the Committee. That was a great welcome. I thank the Committee for allowing me to brief members this morning on the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill. As I said during the Second Stage debate, although the Bill may seem to be very specifically about the provision of period products, it touches on the deeper concepts of equality, mutual respect and the right of all our citizens to live their lives with dignity.

I have provided the Committee with the shocking statistics from the Plan International UK survey in 2017 and the 2021 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) survey on period poverty. Although that is an important focus of the Bill, what stands out to me are the statistics around period stigma. The Plan International UK survey found that 48% of girls aged 14 to 21 were embarrassed by their periods and that 71% admitted feeling embarrassed buying sanitary products. In the CCEA survey, over half of pupils reported feeling embarrassed when buying period products. For me, the most horrifying statistic was reported by YouGov: 43% of girls have witnessed their peers being bullied or shamed about their periods. That is an absolute indictment of our history of the mistreatment, discrimination and under-representation of women and girls and their issues. Thankfully, there has been growing awareness around the issue of period poverty across the UK, mostly due to the great work of campaigners. In Northern Ireland, that includes the Homeless Period Belfast, led by Katrina McDonnell, and the Northern Ireland Period Poverty Action Group, led by Grace Boyle. That

raising of awareness has led to a number of schemes being put in place to tackle period poverty and to provide products on a universal basis.

The Scottish Government have made a total of £4 million available to councils to meet local needs for free period products. That follows a commitment of £5.2 million, which was later revised to £5.5 million, to make products available to students in schools, colleges and universities. In November 2020, the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced by Monica Lennon MSP, was unanimously approved by MSPs. It placed a legal duty on local authorities to ensure that free products are available to anyone who needs them. That Bill provided the basis for my proposal.

In England, from January 2019, NHS England committed to providing free sanitary products in hospitals for those patients who ask for them. Guidance for the scheme has been recently revised to allow for a number of sustainable options to be provided, in addition. Local authorities have started to offer free sanitary products for staff and users, and all students in schools, colleges and universities now have access to free products. Local authorities are receiving funding to help tackle period poverty, and further funding is being invested in schools to ensure access to good sanitary facilities for all children and young people who need them.

The Welsh Government committed funding of £1.1 million in 2018, £2.3 million in 2019 and renewed funding of £3.3 million for 2020-21 to tackle period poverty. That funding is for communities and to promote period dignity in schools and colleges across Wales. Local authorities were also allocated part of a £220,000 fund to help them provide free period products.

In September 2019, Derry City and Strabane District Council voted to approve a pilot scheme that provided free period products in leisure centres. The Committee will be well aware that, in December 2020, the then Education Minister announced a pilot scheme to provide access to free sanitary products for all schools, which was put in place for the 2021-22 academic year and will run for three years. The Department for the Economy also announced a pilot project, which began in September, providing free period products for students attending Ulster University, Queen's University Belfast, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College during the academic year.

Due to the Department of Education's scheme, I was very pleased when I heard that the Bill was coming before this Committee, as the Chair and members have already shown knowledge and a desire to move on the issue of period poverty. While each of those schemes is welcome, it must be noted that they are only pilot schemes and pilot programmes. Once again, that leaves Northern Ireland out on its own as the only part of the UK that does not have a permanent scheme in place to tackle period poverty or provide products in education or health settings.

We therefore come to the Bill proposal. I will speak generally about the duties that are placed on Departments by the Bill, and I will go into some specifics about the approach that is advocated here. I also want to discuss some of the issues that were raised at Second Stage. I am happy to take any questions members might have on the specific clauses proposed in the Bill. However, I want to make it clear that my only non-negotiable with the legislation is that it enables a range of free period products to be reasonably accessible to all who need them. I am open to any and all discussions around the specifics of the Bill, as long as they hold true to that central duty.

Clause 1 places a duty on the Department of Health to ensure that period products are made available free of charge on a universal basis. The approach used in both clause 1 and clause 2 gives the Department discretion as to the precise arrangements that will be made, but those arrangements must be consistent with the duty to make period products obtainable free of charge. After we learned from the Scottish Bill, we settled on the approach of creating a legal framework to allow for free provision while leaving the specific arrangements to the Department. The Bill introduced by Monica Lennon was a lot more prescriptive about how the scheme should look. However, during consultation with the Scottish Government, it became clear that that approach would lead to issues in the implementation of the schemes. The Scottish Government heavily amended the proposal at Stage 2 to make it more in line with the legal framework proposed in my Bill.

At Second Stage, there was discussion about the cross-cutting nature of period products and what Department it best sits. Across the UK, there have been varying approaches. In the Scottish Bill, the duty of the universal scheme is placed on local authorities, whereas, in England, it is the NHS that provides universal access. This was a deep area of discussion with the drafters, and we ultimately decided that the function best sits with the Department of Health. Universal access to period products is a fundamental health right so I completely agree with the cross-cutting nature of the Bill, and all Departments have access to provisions in clause 2. I believe that giving the responsibility for the

universal scheme to one Department allows for clear direction in the scheme's development and allows the Department to take ownership.

There has been discussion as to whether a scheme like the c-card scheme could be used to fulfil the duty in clause 1. There are clear benefits: it would be relatively easy to set up and an effective way of controlling the use of the scheme and preventing over-provision. However, I am very aware that there was significant debate about that type of scheme during the passage of the Scottish Bill. Concerns were raised about whether a card scheme would respect dignity and whether it would be available to those who did not want their personal information to be kept, or to those with no fixed address. To address those concerns in the Bill, any scheme developed under clause 1 or clause 2 must be shown to comply with the requirements in clause 3, namely that products should be accessible with reasonable ease and:

"in a way that respects ... dignity",

and that

"a reasonable choice of different types of ... products"

is available.

Clause 2 enables Departments to place a separate duty on other specific public-service bodies to provide free period products. The clause also specifically requires products to be available in health and educational settings. That is a separate and distinct duty to that proposed in clause 1. It is hoped that, in operation, clause 1 will provide period products to fulfil all a person's needs. However, clause 2 may be required to supply products that a person might require at a specific place or time. The use of the scheme in clause 1 will reduce the need for a person to use the provision in clause 2, but it is very unlikely to eradicate that need. It was therefore important to make products available under the provision in clause 2 but to also limit them so as not to overburden our public-service bodies and not have extensive over-provision or wastage.

Health and education settings are identified explicitly as areas where period products are required. That is due to period dignity being a fundamental health right and to the impact of periods on education as shown in Plan International UK and CCEA statistics. Members may ask why more public areas are not referenced specifically, and some have referred to public toilets. It is my hope that the Department makes full use of the powers in clause 2 to provide period products in the widest range of public buildings possible. I look forward to the responses to the Committee's call for evidence. If that shows that more areas need to be added to clause 2, I will be happy to amend it to do so. I have not included public toilets in clause 2 as drafted because I feared that doing so would allow public bodies to just put dispensers into bathrooms and feel that they have fulfilled their duty under the clause. It is my hope that any scheme that is developed will have more to it than that, but it should absolutely include provisions in public toilets.

In addition to the other requirements that are set out in clause 3, clause 3(2) states that the products must be available "at all times", allowing availability for staff as well as the public. There are provisions in clauses 1, 2, 4 and 5 that require consultation with product users and specific public bodies, and guidance to be produced based on that consultation. Clause 5 requires public bodies to produce a statement of how they will provide products, taking into consideration the guidance and consultation. That may seem like a long-winded approach and is a consequence of allowing Departments to develop their own schemes. However, I believe it to be the right approach. It will mean that any scheme that is developed will have a good basis in community need, which, ultimately, will make it more effective. I am happy to work with public bodies and Departments to make sure that those requirements are not overbearing.

The remaining clauses of the Bill refer to key definitions and commencement dates. The definition of period products in the Bill specifically allows for the provision of sustainable options, which is something that many pupils have said is an important issue when considering free products.

Clause 9 allows the Department two years to develop schemes under clauses 1 and 2. I want to see provisions put in place as soon as possible, but time must be given for full and meaningful consultation so that the schemes are as effective as possible. The Scottish Bill allowed for 12 months, but, in discussion with the drafters, it was felt that 24 months would be more appropriate. I am keen to hear the views of members and the Department on that matter; if it needs to be changed, it can be easily amended.

There was significant discussion at Second Stage around the use of gender-neutral language in the Bill. Gender-neutral drafting has been government policy since 2007 and was specifically advocated in the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel guidance of June 2020. The language in my Bill follows exactly the language used in the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021. Gender-neutral language is also used in local authority schemes in England and Wales. While the NHS England scheme refers to women and girls in press releases, the policies of the scheme make it clear that it is open to all who menstruate, specifically referring to those who are transgender and intersex. I note also that the Department of Education scheme, which was announced by the then Minister Weir, and again by Minister McIlveen, refers to pupils who have periods. That language is also used in the CCEA period poverty survey. The equality impact assessment for the Department for the Economy's scheme states that it is open to all who menstruate.

There is no doubt of the impact that this legislation will have for women and girls. It is, in fact, my hope that the Bill will go some way towards righting the history of inequalities faced by women from this Assembly and across these islands. If the language used needs to be changed in order to better reflect that, I am happy for the Bill to refer to women, girls and those who menstruate.

At Second Stage, many Members asked about the finances and the need for more scrutiny. I am happy to answer all questions about that, as it is an important issue for Members to consider. According to the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy, the ongoing cost of a scheme in educational settings is less than £1 million. In the explanatory and financial memorandum, a high figure of £3.08 million is estimated for the cost of the universal scheme. That is based on 30% uptake of those 459,266 people who have periods, minus the number of students who could avail themselves of the scheme in educational settings during term time. If all those who are eligible for the scheme were to take up the opportunity, the cost of providing products to all 459,266 people would be £12.56 million. Members will, rightly, ask what the likelihood is of the scheme reaching that level of cost. Some indication may be taken from the roll-out of the Scottish scheme. This year, the Scottish Government have allocated £4 million for universal provision through local authorities and £5.5 million for the education scheme: a total of £9.5 million for a menstruating population of 1,336,100. Based on those numbers, if the uptake of a scheme here was similar to that in Scotland, the cost to the Executive would be around £3.26 million. Those numbers do not take into consideration those who would opt for reusable options, which would reduce the cost, but that is very difficult to quantify. There will certainly be cost savings associated with the universal scheme, focused on the recouping of missed days at work and missed school days for pupils. There will also be a very small economic benefit from the reduction in instances of toxic shock syndrome. However, as I said at the start, the Bill is not about the scraping together of pounds and pence, but about the cornerstones of equality, mutual respect and the right of all our citizens to live their lives with dignity.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Pat. Well done, and well done to your team and to all the people whom you referenced in your contribution who have been involved in this campaign. Well done.

I do not have too many questions, Pat. Obviously, the Department of Health will be a key stakeholder and key respondent to the Bill. We will engage with the other relevant Committees, such as the Health Committee and the Economy Committee, insofar as the Bill engages with key stakeholders relating to those Committees. If time had allowed, the Health Committee would be dealing with this Bill, but I do not think that it would pass if we were relying on the Health Committee's capacity, given the scale of its agenda at this time. Given that schools and educational settings are a key provision in the Bill, we are glad to play our part by acting as lead Committee and engaging with those other Committees to make sure that the Bill has a robust Committee Stage and passes to Consideration Stage with, as you said yourself, good, constructive amendments, if necessary. We will also be able to engage with legal advice to get all the support that we can in that regard. Well done, Pat. As you know, this is an issue that the Education Committee has been working on, and we look forward to engaging with you on it.

Mr Catney: Sorry, Chair, I was going to say that I know that it might well have fallen to another Committee, but I was delighted, because of the work that your Committee has already done and the knowledge that it already has. The Department of Health was consulted early in the process to see whether there were any ongoing plans to set up a scheme. I have reached out to meet the Minister and his officials to discuss the Bill, and I will be happy to provide any information received from the Department of Health regarding its views on the Bill. I have also reached out to the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy in respect of clause 2 especially. I will make sure to pass on any information that I receive to the Committee.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I appreciate that, Pat. We look forward to working closely with you throughout the Committee Stage of the Bill.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for coming along this morning, Pat. I commend you for bringing this Bill forward. I have no questions; I just want to state our support for the Bill. We will do our utmost to support its passage through the Assembly. Hopefully it will get through before the end of the mandate. Well done. Maith thú. Thanks, Pat.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Pat. As discussed, I want to meet all the parties. When I walk through the corridors of the Building, I see other MLAs who are a lot younger than me — young women. The help, support and guidance that they have offered me to help me get the Bill right — from within your party, Pat, and right across all parties — is much appreciated. I pass on my thanks to them through you. Thank you, Pat.

Mr Sheehan: That is good to hear, Pat. It is an area that we should definitely all cooperate on. Thanks a lot.

Mr Newton: I thank Pat for coming along. Like the Chair and the Deputy Chair, I do not have a great number of questions. I had to nip out for a short time while you were speaking, so please forgive me if you have covered this. Towards the end of your remarks, I picked up that the cost to the Executive will be £3·26 million per annum. Presumably some of that will come from Health and some will come from Education. At this stage, do you have any idea of what that breakdown will be?

Mr Catney: Robin, would you mind if I call my colleague Johnny to answer that question for you?

Mr Newton: I am happy enough with that, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Johnny.

Mr Johnny McCarthy (Social Democratic and Labour Party): Hi, members. The universal scheme proposed in the Bill is estimated, at the higher end, to be about £3·08 million. The ongoing costs to the Department of Education for its pilot scheme are just under £1 million. We are more confident about the numbers from the Department of Education, because of the good work in the pilot scheme. That seems to be accurate. The £3·8 million is based on an uptake of 30%. Obviously, if uptake is higher than that, the cost will be higher. That is the estimate so far.

Mr Newton: Sorry, I thought that Pat said, during his remarks, that it was £3·26 million.

Mr McCarthy: We tried to use the early information coming out of Scotland. Scotland has spent about £9·5 million, and its eligible population is about three times higher than ours, so that is where the £3·26 million came from. We did that to indicate that, if there is slightly higher uptake, that —

Mr Newton: It is a pro rata figure.

Mr McCarthy: Yes.

Mr Newton: OK. Thank you, Pat.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Robin.

Mr McCrossan: Hello, Pat. It is good to have you and Johnny with us at the Committee this morning. Thank you for your presentation and the huge amount of work that has gone into the Bill. I know that you have worked tirelessly on it and have done everything possible to ensure that you have engaged with as many people as possible. I congratulate you on getting to this stage, and I wish you well as you go forward.

Pat, I have a number of brief questions, which you or Johnny can answer. We are becoming increasingly aware of the need to develop sustainable options for the sake of our planet and future generations. Do you think that Departments should actively promote the use of sustainable options in the development of their schemes?

Mr Catney: Absolutely. First, thanks very much for all your kind remarks and for your support when I have talked to you. Daniel, the definition of a period product, at clause 7, allows for sustainable options. We must aim to reduce plastic waste in any way that we can. Reusable options would also reduce costs in the long term. However, such options are not sustainable for all, and we must take into consideration those with disabilities and health conditions that impact on periods. A range of products should therefore be provided.

Daniel, I first became aware of renewables from my daughter when she was working in Shanghai, China. She tried to explain to me the impact of renewables on the economy and how their use would save money. She talked about trying to deal with them in Third World countries. Her company manufactures those products out there. It is a great way to go. If cups are made available in those proposed settings, it will not just help the environment on the renewable side, it will save on the costs as the legislation goes forward. Thank you, Daniel.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Pat. This is another brief question, and I know that you touched on it in your opening remarks. How important was the work of campaigners in bringing the issue of period poverty to light? How vital was that?

Mr Catney: Daniel, I can say categorically that we would not be here today without the campaigners. If you will indulge me in the name-dropping, two ladies — Katrina McDonnell from the Homeless Period Belfast and Grace Boyle from the Northern Ireland Period Poverty Action Group — personally helped me to understand the issues and provided input during the development of the Bill. I can definitely say that their scrutiny of the Bill when it was drafted gave me a thoughtful dry run in what it is like to be in front of the Committee. You have all been very kind. I cannot say it enough, Daniel, about the input that different people and groups who have come to me have made, and how committed they are as volunteers to try to eradicate the whole issue of period poverty, what it instils and its effects in the community. Thank you, Daniel.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Pat. Again, I wish you well as you go forward. Thanks to you and Johnny for being with us today.

Mr Butler: Good morning, Pat.

Mr Catney: Good morning, Robbie. Do you know, Robbie? I saw you at 8.30 last night. I am seeing more of you than I am of my wife. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Butler: Listen: I felt her pain last night and feel it again this morning. Thanks for your support last night, Pat. I can absolutely guarantee my party's support for the Bill as you take it through the Assembly. I commend you, Pat, for taking it through as a private Member's Bill. It is, genuinely, an issue that we have been discussing for some time now. We have three councillors who brought a motion through Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. I am genuinely delighted that it is you who is doing this, Pat. Your passion was evident in your presentation. You understand the pressures that people face.

I have only one question, Pat, if that is OK. Then, I will let you go on. We will do our best to facilitate and work with you on the Bill. How do you see the Bill dealing with provision during the school holidays? Obviously, for school-age children who would avail themselves of the free products, what will happen during holidays or, as we have seen with COVID, lockdown instances, unfortunately, if there is another event like COVID?

Mr Catney: Yes, Robbie: you make a valid point. We have allowed for that when it comes to schools. Two of the closest and more relevant examples that we have come across are from Scotland and England. Robbie, in order to get the facts correct on that one, would you mind if Johnny or I were to come back to you on that? I would rather come back to you on that. I have where it sits in my head, but I would rather come back to the Committee with the correct way of stating that.

Mr Butler: I fully appreciate that, Pat.

Mr Catney: It definitely alters the costings, and takes in quite a lot. I would prefer to come back to you on that one. Would that be all right?

Mr Butler: That is 100%, Pat. Listen: there are no curveballs here. This is about trying to ensure that the Bill —

Mr Catney: I know.

Mr Butler: — picks that up. Through the COVID pandemic, we have learnt, for instance, about free schools meals in particular, and children being fed, and all those things that are tied up with childhood poverty. This universal provision is excellent. We need to think of those instances where we might need to pick up any little gaps, or whatever. Thank you for that, Pat. I am more than happy to —

Mr Catney: As well as that, Robbie, when they are not in school, pupils can access products through the provisions in clause 1. I want to try to put all that together in a response to the Committee. All right, Robbie? Thank you.

Mr Butler: Thank you so much.

Mr Catney: Bye.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Catney: I think that you are muted, Chris.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks for advising, Pat. *[Laughter.]* Can I bring in Nicola Brogan MLA, please? Thanks.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Chair. I could see you miming my name. *[Laughter.]* Pat, thanks so much for coming along this morning. It is great to hear from you. You know that you have my full support for the Bill. I spoke in the Second Stage debate, and offered my support for the Bill to go to Committee. I am glad that it is coming through the Education Committee to give us a chance to get a good look at it. Anything that we can do to remove period poverty is a positive thing, especially with the rising cost of living at the moment. It is just another issue that families who are struggling have to face. It is definitely a worthwhile thing to introduce.

One of the concerns that I raised at Second Stage was the effect on attendance of girls at school: 49% have missed school because of their periods, either because they did not have access to period products or because of other things that come with a period, such as pain. Obviously, it is a major concern that so many girls are missing out, because attendance in school has a direct impact on educational achievement. Yet again, those from the least advantaged backgrounds will be impacted the most, which increases the educational divide. The least well-off will suffer more and be more disadvantaged. What will the Bill do to improve attendance and educational achievement across the board?

Mr Catney: In our wee constituency offices, we have come across young ones who, for whatever reason, have not had right product available to them and missed out on school as a result. There has been a significant impact on the education of pupils. Plan International UK estimates that over 137,000 children across the UK have missed school days due to period poverty. The results of the CCEA survey found that 8.12% of pupils with a period have missed school because they do not have access to sufficient period products, and 9.7% of those pupils have missed school many times because they did not have sufficient period products. Free provision in schools is meant to deal with that. I could go on and quote the figures in Scotland. At the very core of this is that no one should have to feel like that before they go to school. The most valuable asset that we have in Northern Ireland are our children and young people. Nobody should have to feel like that before they go out.

Ms Brogan: I completely agree with you, Pat. Never mind people missing school because they do not have access to the correct period products, in the Second Stage debate, the Chair told the story of a girl who used tissues because she did not have the right period products. Even though she made it to school, how would she be able to concentrate when she was there and get the same level of education as everyone else? I do not think she or anyone in her shoes would be able to. There is a lot of work still to be done, which is why I am so grateful that you have brought the Bill forward. I will definitely support you and am willing to engage with you at all levels.

Mr Catney: Nicola, thank you. I spoke to your colleague Pat about the young women here who have given me advice, and you are one of them. I am the brother of four sisters, the father of three daughters and the grandfather of three granddaughters, the eldest of whom just turned 12. I am lucky, and I feel privileged that they were provided for. No one should have that stigma in their little lives, especially as they start out at school.

I have heard all the stories and about all the things that people use, including rags and toilet paper. I have heard that from girls who go to school. A lot of the kids we are talking about are very conscious of their fashion, but imagine being a young person and having to go to one of your little school colleagues to ask for the lend of a product or ask whether they know where they could get one. That should not be happening anywhere in society.

I will probably get lynched for saying this, but women have, for historic reasons, have been undermined. If they are made to feel that way because of something that is completely natural and is, in fact, a gift that is given to women for the fulfilment of life, that needs to be eradicated. I will do that as best I can, and I thank you for your support, Nicola, and that of the Committee.

Ms Brogan: I agree with that as well. I welcome that we are openly discussing periods and that it is not a taboo subject. Everyone — men, women, girls and boys — should be having that conversation and be able to participate in it.

Mr Catney: Nicola, I have been on a journey as well.

Ms Brogan: *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* Pat.

Mr Catney: The words might have been mouthed behind my back by my mother to one of my sisters, but, thank God, those days are over. Let us pin them to the past.

Ms Brogan: That is a good thing. Thank you, Pat.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Pat, I do not want to draw you into this; do not feel the need to comment. However, it is important to say, given what we have said about raising awareness, creating platforms for voices, that, in my opinion, it was regrettable that some people used the Second Stage to make an issue out of the language used in the Bill, especially when you think of the voices of young women and girls, and all people who menstruate, that were heard throughout the Second Stage debate. You dealt with that extremely well, and I am more than content that the voices of the people who are most affected by this issue are being well and truly heard as a result of the work of the Committee and your Bill. It is important that we recognise that.

Mr Catney: Chair, I agree with everything you said. It touches on the deeper concepts of equality, mutual respect, which was mentioned earlier, and the right of all our citizens to live their lives with dignity.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Agreed.

Mr Catney: That is the very cornerstone of where we are. Thank you, Chair; you are 100% correct.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will bring in another member who, I am sure, will be extremely supportive of you — Justin McNulty MLA.

Mr McNulty: Thanks, Pat. Thanks, Johnny. Well done, Pat. Well done, Johnny. Equality, mutual respect and allowing people to live their lives with dignity — that is what our party is about and what we are about, as people. Unbelievably well done. I cannot commend you enough for what you have done, Pat, Johnny and your campaign support teams, in destigmatising this issue, bringing it out into the open, helping those people who need help the most and making sure that provision is there for them now and into the future.

How important is the Bill in tackling the wider issue of period stigma, and how do you see the Bill addressing that issue? What will your Bill do, should it become law, that the Department's pilot programme will not do?

Mr Catney: Thanks very much, Justin. There are two parts to that question. On the first part, we can see from the statistics produced by Plan International UK and CCEA how big an issue period stigma is. As young Nicola and the Chair said earlier, there has, for too long, been a history of inequality for women and girls, and that must be tackled in all areas. That includes under-representation in political and public spaces, online violence against women, which we are all talking about this week, and the historic mistreatment of women's issues. I noted with disgust that, a few weeks ago, Stella Creasy MP was told that she could not bring her newborn baby into the House of Commons. Those views are not just outdated; they are plain wrong. I hope that my Bill goes a long way to changing views and making sure that no one feels a stigma for something as normal as having a period.

I was first elected just five years ago — I come from a different background — and I remember looking around the table in the SDLP room and there were two young mothers there with babies. Both of them had their babies at that table. What a lift that gave me. As you know, it was Nichola and Claire, and they were able to bring their babies in. What a breath of fresh air that was. Justin, that is the simplest answer that I can give you. We need to eradicate all the inequalities that we know are out there.

I will move on to the second part of the question, Justin. I am grateful for the pilot schemes that were introduced by the Education and Economy Ministers, and I think that their existence strengthens the argument for a universal scheme. First, there is an opportunity to take learning from the schemes, as they roll out, on the cost and the type of products available. The costings and assessments used for the pilot schemes were very helpful in estimating the costs of the universal scheme. Secondly, as good as it is to see the pilot schemes, there are, in fact, 372,994 people whom those schemes will not cover. Even if the universal scheme has an uptake of 30%, it will enable over 100,000 more people to take care of their periods with dignity. It also sends a message to the 372,994 people that there can be equality, mutual respect and basic human empathy. That is an extremely important aspect of the universal scheme, Justin.

Mr McNulty: That is good to hear, Pat. We have taken your lead on this issue in that our constituency offices across the North make free period products available. You mentioned equality of access. I am all for unification of our island, as you are. What provision is there in the South for free period products?

Mr Catney: In February, the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth jointly launched a report that examines the prevalence and impact of period poverty in Ireland. The report was produced by the period poverty subcommittee of the national strategy for women and girls committee. The subcommittee was chaired by the Department of Health. In line with motions passed by the Oireachtas in early 2019, the subcommittee remit included establishing the extent of period poverty in Ireland and identifying the population cohorts that are most at risk. The terms of reference also included giving due consideration to the circumstances of young people under the age of 25, targeting high-risk groups, reducing stigma and mainstreaming period poverty measures across relevant Departments and public bodies.

The report sets out recommendations on strengthening the evidence base, addressing the stigma associated with periods, engaging with vulnerable groups and the voluntary sector, considering the provision of free period products on the grounds of gender equality, and developing a systems approach and coordinated funding mechanisms across government to progress cross-sectoral mitigation of period poverty.

Mr McNulty: Good.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Justin.

Mr McNulty: Well done, Pat and Johnny and your campaign support team. I reemphasise that we are all about equality, mutual respect and allowing people to live their lives with dignity.

Mr Catney: I hope that the Chair will not mind me — the only man I want to anger is Justin — saying, "Up Down". *[Laughter.]* That is a private joke.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We will end up going around the room here, and Antrim and everywhere else will be brought into it.

Mr Catney: He is the only All-Ireland medal winner, Chair. I have to get a wee punch at him.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I actually do not think that he managed to reference the GAA in that contribution. That is a first. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Catney: I know. He will probably do it tomorrow.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Justin.

OK, Pat. Thank you. There is obviously a fair bit of work to be done in a short time. We will write to the relevant Ministers and Departments to get a clause-by-clause response as quickly and comprehensively as we can. If there are any issues, we need to be aware of them from the outset. Working together on them is how we will get solutions. We will do that right away. We will seek legal advice, too. We will be glad to keep in touch with you on all those things. You know where we all are, and you have said that you will engage with the parties individually. Thank you for the initial briefing and engagement. We look forward to staying in close contact with you on the Bill.

Mr Catney: I thank you and the Committee Clerk. I will make myself available at any time for anything that you require of me. Maybe I should not say this — it is not against the Health Committee — but I am delighted by the work that you have done as a Committee to give a fair wind to the Bill. Thank you very much. I hope that we get it right, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Pat.