



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill:
Homeless Period Belfast

9 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
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Ms Katie Bryce	Homeless Period Belfast
Ms Katrina McDonnell	Homeless Period Belfast

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to Katrina McDonnell, founder and campaign manager, and Katie Bryce, campaigner, from the Homeless Period Belfast. We are really looking forward to hearing from you and talking to you. You have up to 10 minutes in which to make your opening statement, after which there will be time for questions from and discussion with Committee members.

Ms Katrina McDonnell (Homeless Period Belfast): Thank you so much for inviting us to the Committee.

Before I speak about the Bill, I will make members aware of what the Homeless Period Belfast does. We have existed for the past five years. We work on the ground with people who struggle to access and afford period products. They could be homeless people, rough sleepers, refugees and asylum seekers, people who depend on food banks or low-income families: the list goes on. We have seen a pressing need for free period products. It is why we have been campaigning for the past three years for access to free period products: to meet the need of people who struggle to afford them because of financial constraints but also, of course, to meet the need of people who get caught out by their period outside the home.

We see this Bill come to the Assembly Chamber, and we are delighted. We thank you, the Education Committee, for taking time to consider our reflections and views on it. We are delighted that the Bill has reached its Committee Stage and that there has been unanimous support for it in the Assembly, which we witnessed at Second Stage last month.

Although the Bill is a step in the right direction, and we are encouraged by the work that has been done, we firmly believe that it does not go far enough. We are concerned that this is a narrow

approach to a Bill and feel that it must go further in order to ensure that people accessing certain buildings are not left out when it comes to obtaining free, essential period items.

Before we give the Committee our broader views on the Bill, we want to raise our concern with clause 1, which is on the arrangements for obtaining free period products and how those will be left to the Department's discretion. In our experience of working with schools in particular and receiving feedback from pupils about the period dignity pilot scheme, we know that there is an expectation and preference for free period products to be available inside toilet cubicles or beside wash-hand basins in schools. In a survey that we conducted, 94% stated that they wanted period products to be accessible within the walls of bathrooms or toilets. We fear that giving the Department of Education or schools the responsibility and autonomy to decide where they provide the items could lead to pads and tampons not being placed where they are desired and needed most. If period products are placed elsewhere, it is inconvenient and awkward for people to access them. That is the case for school pupils especially, who are often already overwhelmed by the embarrassment that surrounds menstruation. If the products are placed, for example, in the nurse's office or reception or with the year head or form tutor, it could deter them from accessing the items.

I sit on the steering committee of the Department of Education's roll-out of the period dignity pilot scheme in schools. I know that, in some schools, that is how the period dignity scheme is being rolled out. Items are being controlled by teachers or staff members, and pupils are having to leave the bathroom when they take their period, present themselves as someone who needs a period product and then return to the toilet to use the item. Would we expect the same if someone needed to use toilet paper? We at the Homeless Period Belfast believe that period products should be available in toilets, just as toilet roll is. Our proposed amendment to clause 1 is therefore that it be a requirement for public bodies to place the essential items in toilets, first and foremost, and elsewhere, as they deem appropriate.

I will now pass over to Katie, a fellow campaigner on this issue, who will speak about our reflections and views on the Bill more broadly.

Ms Katie Bryce (Homeless Period Belfast): Thank you, Katrina, and thank you, everyone, for having me here today. When reading clause 2, we were immediately drawn to which public buildings are not included. We feel that there is a strong focus throughout the Bill on healthcare trusts, boards and, of course, education settings. We really want to query, however, why only those particular public service buildings are being considered.

We recently carried out a survey, and there was an overwhelming response stating that, although those essential items are desired in all education settings, public opinion suggests that there is also high and equal demand for free period products in public toilets, with 83% of people saying that that was their preference. Women's centres, community centres and youth clubs were at 85%, but, when ranked in level of priority, healthcare buildings were ranked second last, at 70%. The most common answer to our question was that period products should be available in all public buildings, polling at 96%, which shows us that the public see a real need for those essential items in all public toilets.

We believe that there is a pressing need to legislate for all public buildings, and, although we recognise that some of the buildings that we have mentioned fall under local government — for example, public toilets, which are run by councils — we take the stance that Stormont should legislate that councils must provide free period products in all council-owned buildings, particularly in public toilets, given that 83% of the people whom we surveyed ranked such buildings as their priority for the provision of free period products. For over three years, councils have made empty promises, dragging their feet on the implementation of the scheme, but still nothing has been done. We are calling for that to be included in the Bill, and we urge parties to support us on that stance. We hope that the Education Committee agrees that there is a pressing need to do that.

After reviewing clause 1, to reinforce Katrina's point about accessibility, we are concerned about the procurement of items for individuals who may not be able to access them easily, and the suggestion that the items should be acquired from chemists or via a card that a person should apply for online not only is inaccessible for some but is, we believe, a method that will further add to the shame and the stigma. It can be embarrassing for people to approach another person about a sensitive issue such as this, and we are really mindful of that. We suggest that the items be left in public spaces free of charge and inside all public toilets, where possible. If, owing to accessibility issues, people cannot access those items in a public space, we want to be assured that there will be options for them to have them delivered to their home free of charge, and we want to know how they can apply for that.

We notice the suggestion in clause 4 that different Departments may have autonomy over their own roll-out. That concerns us slightly. We want to ensure that all who need to avail themselves of the products can do so and that some groups do not fall by the wayside. How can we be assured of that? We are concerned about rural areas especially, as well as about individual roll-outs not aligning. How can we walk away from proposing amendments assured that everyone whom we speak on behalf of will be represented?

To sum up, we are delighted to be included in this conversation, and we are really pleased with the unanimous party support for the Bill as we see it through to its final legislative stages. We really hope that all parties can agree that this is an essential service that will meet the needs of every person who has a period: needs that have been sidelined for far too long. Not having free access to period products is not only a poverty issue but a health issue, a human rights issue and a gender equality issue. We want to ensure that the Bill recognises that. We want to see it go further, based on the recommendations that we have made, and we hope that the Education Committee will support our views and those recommendations. Thank you so much for having us.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks so much for being with us today and for that evidence. It is really helpful for our consideration of the Bill at this stage. I say a huge thanks for all the work done and leadership shown by the Homeless Period Belfast on the issue. As I said, our first engagement was in November last year. It was a privilege for the Committee to present the petition that you had worked on so well and that had gained so many signatures in support of free period product provision across Northern Ireland. We are really grateful for the work that you have done, and I hope that the progress that has been made, long overdue as it is, is encouragement to you for the work that you have done.

I am keen to bring in as many members as I can.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you, Katrina and Katie, for your presentation and for all the work that you have done on the issue. I agree with what you have said. Period products should be universally available and in all buildings, whether those be public buildings, schools, workplaces, hospitals or wherever. They should be as available as toilet paper is. I agree with that.

People often think that we try to talk out of both sides of our mouth, but, when it comes to legislation, we have to be very careful, because words sometimes have unintended consequences. We therefore have to be very careful that we do not end up with bad legislation that comes back on us in a year's or a couple of years' time. We in Sinn Féin are happy, however, to work with the sponsor to see whether we can expand the Bill in the way in which you have advocated.

I will raise a concern with you. Some people will object to the Bill on the basis of the cost to the public purse. What is your response to that?

Ms McDonnell: Quite simply, can you really put a cost on health and on health needs? People need access to the products because it is a health need. We are able to supply toilet paper, as you rightly said. You echoed our response about seeing period products as being just like toilet roll. For us, it has taken too long to recognise that. I do not think that you can put a cost on people's period needs.

People who have periods do not decide to have periods. People have irregular periods, their first period and periods unexpectedly outside the home all the time. To be quite explicit, people out there — I am one of them, and so is Katie and anyone else on the call — have probably had to use toilet roll at some point, because of a lack of access to period products in a public toilet. To me, that is a real human rights issue and a gender equality issue. As Katie rightly said, it is a health issue. I do not think that you can put a cost on period needs. That is how I feel.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that. I want you to be assured, because I think that most of us on the Committee are supportive of the Bill as it stands, but, if we can make it more comprehensive as it goes through the legislative process, I am sure that many of us will be willing to do that. Thanks a lot.

Ms McDonnell: Thanks.

Ms Bryce: Thank you.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you both for the presentation. This question may be unfair, but I will ask it anyway, because I think that, in making law, we need to take cognisance of the cost of the law that we are

making. Has anyone done any work on the associated costs associated, particularly if you want to place period products in every public building in Northern Ireland?

Ms McDonnell: Is that question directed at us at the Homeless Period Belfast?

Mrs Dodds: No. It is just that you have been doing a lot of work, lobbying and research on the issue.

Ms McDonnell: Finances are not completely within our remit. We are a small team with not a lot of resources, but I noted that the explanatory and financial memorandum — I do not know whether I pronounced that right — forecasts the cost as being £2 million for schools and £3 million for the public buildings associated with the Bill. The cost of including all public buildings in the Bill would go beyond that figure, so I assume that the cost might be up to £5 million. I do not know. I am just throwing that number out there. Again, I stand by my point that there should not be a cost applied to anyone who has a period's needs.

Mrs Dodds: I accept that it may not be entirely within your remit, but it is within the Committee's remit to consider the cost to the public purse. It is therefore an important issue. I cannot find any reasonable business rationale for how that is done, and I have looked. I was Minister in the Department for the Economy, and I personally think that the issue is very important. I do not want young women and girls to have barriers put in their way, and it is incredibly important that there be a level playing field for young people. I am not against what you say in principle, but I am exploring some of the issues around it.

You talked about where period products should be placed. Is there an issue there? I genuinely do not know whether they are more commonly placed in toilets or, for example, with the school nurse, whom you have to ask for them.

Ms McDonnell: The way in which the period dignity pilot scheme has been rolled out gives each school a lot of autonomy over the placement of the items. I mentioned in our statement that I sit on the Department's steering committee, and I take the stance that the items should be in cubicles, or at least by wash-hand basins. We do not feel that anyone should have to leave a toilet or a washroom to access an item. Some schools have taken that advice on board. Lots of schools have co-produced the scheme with their pupils and have been led by them, which is great. That is from where we got the statistic of 94% of them saying that they want period products to be in bathrooms and in cubicles.

For someone at a young age and going through puberty, having a period for the first time is difficult to navigate. There is already vulnerability attached to having a period, never mind having to present yourself to a teacher, nurse, year head or receptionist as someone who cannot afford the item or who has to say, "I forgot it". It is therefore a double vulnerability. That is why we recommend an amendment to the Bill. We want it to come across not as a controlling amendment but as guidance. Ideally, the items would be placed in the toilets, as you mentioned, so that there would not be as many barriers to getting them.

Mrs Dodds: That is fine. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): In an effort to be helpful, as Katrina said and as I referenced last Wednesday, I note that, in the explanatory and financial memorandum — it is challenging enough to say, Katrina, to be fair — paragraph 9, on financial effects of the Bill, states:

"Based on information provided in respect of the pilot scheme proposed by the Department of Education in 2020, the Member believes that the annual cost of period products in relation to schools under the proposed legislation would be around £2m per annum in the first year and less than £1m per annum subsequently. This reflects reducing costs as the system of provision becomes embedded."

The Bill sponsor estimates:

"the maximum product cost of a scheme of universal provision of period products is likely to be less than £3m per annum accounting for the target group experiencing period poverty. Based on an assumption of high uptake, a figure of £3.08 million would represent the upper range of possible product costs."

That is as much financial information as has been detailed so far. I appreciate, Diane, that you are asking about businesses cases and that that is different.

Mrs Dodds: I have read the memorandum as well, Chris. I do not see from it that those are any more than guesstimates, to be honest. As I have said many times, I am not against this as a general provision. In fact, I, as Minister, introduced the pilot scheme. It is not an issue for me, but I want everyone to understand what we are doing with public finances. We may well conclude, at the end of this exercise, that it is well worth it. I am probably one who will contend that it is. I feel, however, that it is absolutely important to go through the exercise.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I do not disagree. I think that most of us agree that it is absolutely essential and worth it. The estimates that you refer to are not just estimates but estimates that are based on information that the Department of Education has provided, which I hope, and I am sure that you hope, are more than just estimates. I think that that information has been extrapolated on some basis. I accept, however, that it is not a business case.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Katrina and Katie, for coming along this morning. It is great to hear from you. You know that you have our support on the Bill. It is good to hear from stakeholders. This is our first real engagement on it, and there is a bit of work to go through.

I spoke in the Second Stage debate on the Bill and supported its passing to Committee Stage. I am glad that it has now come to the Education Committee so that we can have a good look at it. Pat Catney, the Bill sponsor, was with us last week. I raised the same issue with him that I will raise with you and that I raised at Second Stage, which concerns the percentage of girls who miss school because they do not have access to period products. Something like 49% of girls can miss school. Attendance at school has an impact on educational achievement as well. Again, it feels as though the worst impact is felt by disadvantaged people and that the gap in educational achievement is widening for those who are least advantaged. In your role with the Homeless Period Belfast, have you had experience of girls missing school, and thus missing out on good-quality education, because they do not have access to period products? What is your experience?

Ms McDonnell: We —

Ms Brogan: Sorry. Before you come in, how do you think that the Bill will help to improve attendance?

Ms McDonnell: Our statistic is higher. Katie, I am not sure how quickly you can bring the figure up on your screen. I am nearly sure that the local statistic for people who have missed school in NI is around the 60% or 70% mark. Nicola, if you do not mind, we will give you it afterwards. I cannot recall off the top of my head exactly what the statistic is, but I know that it is higher than Plan International UK's 49%.

As Chris said, we briefed the Committee last November. We came with that evidence and lots of testimonies. I am happy to send those to you as well. There was one poignant testimony from a girl whose mum, a single parent, lost her job during the COVID pandemic. The girl took her period, and there were no items accessible in school. She went home from school and missed a few days of school because of it. There is that gap in and barrier to education again. That girl is someone who spoke to us. We also have lots of evidence of teachers having to provide period products out of their own money.

Since then, there has been the period dignity pilot scheme. I will be really honest, however: I have my reservations about the scheme. As I mentioned, I sit on the steering committee. I have seen how it has been rolled out. There has been a 30% uptake in schools. Some of the reasons for that are probably down to COVID. Understandably, teachers and principals are quite stressed out. Perhaps the information is not getting out to people. I hope that you do not mind my saying that it is quite a bureaucratic process for people to opt into. Even though the scheme exists, we are still being asked by schools to provide them with free period products. That is because some schools have been allocated such little budget.

Chris, you mentioned the forecasted cost of £2 million for schools stated at the end of the explanatory and financial memorandum. Again, I cannot pronounce the final word. I do not know whether I take issue with it as much as I am just a bit, "Oh, I do not know", because I do not think that the figure will cover schools. In fact, I know that it does not. There are schools in north Belfast that have been allocated £10, and those are schools in socio-economically deprived areas. I do not know whether it is

a budgeting error, but, from working on the ground, I know the facts. Some schools' budgets do not meet their needs. That is because the roll-out of the period dignity pilot scheme has been weighted against either the school's uptake of free school meals or its being in a socio-economically deprived area. We know that it is not just people who are disadvantaged who need access to those items but people who have their period for the first time or forget their period items.

I therefore have a few reservations about the scheme. I am delighted that it is there, but measures need to be put in place to implement it a lot better so as to increase uptake and so that the Homeless Period Belfast does not have to continue to fulfil that need. The scheme needs to ensure that no one is missing out on education.

Ms Brogan: That is a fair point. I would expect a lot more than 30% of schools to take up the period dignity scheme. The Education Committee is concerned about the attendance of girls at school and the fact that they are missing so much education. A point that we made last week was that it is not just that they are missing school but that, even when they are at school, if they do not have period products, they are probably not concentrating in the same way as boys, or girls who do not have their period, are, because it is distracting. As females, we all know that a period can be distracting, but that is amplified if they do not have the right period products or access to them.

Ms McDonnell: I can send you a statistic for that, Nicola.

Ms Bryce: I have the statistics here, and they are really shocking. We conducted a survey of 200 girls across NI, and 100% of the students agreed that the products should be available in schools. A total of 74% had left school early or missed an entire day because of a lack of period products at school. Some 53% had asked teachers for the products, 87% said that a lack of products had negatively impacted on their attention in class and/or their attendance, and 91% have had to use toilet roll as a temporary measure. Those are shocking statistics.

Ms Brogan: Yes, I agree, and that is of huge concern to us. I will continue to focus on the statistics as we scrutinise the Bill. Thanks for finding those statistics for me, Katie.

I will move on to Katrina's issue with clause 1, which you already touched on with Diane. I understand why you want the products to be in bathrooms and not in a school office or with the school nurse, because that is another barrier. As you said in your opening remarks, it can cause shame. Even though it should not be, it can be embarrassing for girls to ask for those products. That is another reason that they will not ask for them, and it is another barrier. I agree with you in principle that period products should be in bathrooms. Can you think of why that is not included in the Bill, however? Is it a fear of wastage or that people will not respect the products?

Ms McDonnell: No. As yet, we have no evidence of that happening in schools. I work with Education Authority (EA) youth clubs. I am not going to lie: there has been evidence of situations in which young ones have messed about with the items or stolen them. I have two comebacks to that. First, if people are stealing the items, they need them. Secondly, young people mess around with them because the items are stigmatised. They are items that have been hidden away for a long time, and now they are visible in toilets. Young people think that they are not supposed to talk about them: they are taboo and supposed to be embarrassing. Through my work with the youth clubs, we have found that, by persevering with keeping the items in the toilets, even after they have been messed with, the young people get used to them. The period products have become normalised and are no longer a joke. I appreciate that the first few weeks of putting items into toilets for free, where they will be very visible, will not be great for teachers and youth club leaders. If we persevere and keep the items out, however, that will help to destigmatise and normalise them, and they will become not so much of a novelty any more.

Ms Brogan: Absolutely, Katrina. I agree with that. Overall, the really good thing about the Bill and the work that you are doing is that it destigmatises periods. The fact that we can all openly discuss the matter is really important. If the products are visible to everybody, that removes the stigma and taboo, and that is also really important.

Ms McDonnell: I have another recommendation from the steering committee for youth clubs and the schools. There should be a poster with those sorts of messages alongside the products. There should be warnings given and workshops provided to destigmatise periods. I did some workshops with a secondary school on the north Antrim coast last week, and we talked about period products with every year group. It is about having those conversations with young people and explaining to them that

these are important, essential items and that they should make use of them, but not take advantage. The provision of the items needs to coincide with workshops around period empowerment and period positivity — they are quite closely linked — to avoid those kinds of things happening.

Ms Brogan: I do not want to go off topic here, but, just quickly, is it still really taboo for younger girls in the 12-14 age group? Are they still embarrassed and shuffling about with the products? Is that still the case?

Ms McDonnell: I delivered the workshop last week to first years right up to upper sixths. The years 8 and 9 were most engaged. We did it with boys and girls. That is another thing that we say: include boys in the conversation. We need to have them involved and welcome them in. Years 8 and 9 thought it was brilliant. They engaged a lot more than the years 10 and 11, where we found a bit of a pattern of embarrassment and getting a bit awkward.

Ms Brogan: That is grand; thanks for that. That is another good point about including boys in the conversation, because women having periods affects men throughout their lives. That is a valid point.

My last point is on the type of period products that will be available. Clause 1 states that it is up to the Department of Health to consult on which products will be available. I want to bring in the environmental aspect. We know that tampons and pads can take hundreds of years to biodegrade, and then we have the emergence of menstrual cups and that there. What is your view on what we should be advocating for?

Ms McDonnell: Katie, do you want to come in on that wee point?

Ms Bryce: That is something that I deal with a lot in the conversation. We recognise that these items are not environmentally friendly, but, right now, we are trying to destigmatise the conversation around periods, and that is a whole other conversation. For a number of reasons, some people do not want to use menstrual cups, be it religious background or personal preference. Not everyone has access to clean running water. Menstrual cups are quite difficult to work with, and it takes a long time. Anyone at that early stage of their life is only coming round to the idea of using those products and understanding that there can be a health backlash if they are left in for too long. There are a number of conversations around that. Our focus is on ensuring period dignity for everyone. We care deeply about the environmental aspect, but, as a preference, we are not going to get into the nitty-gritty of which products are used. Until this is rolled out everywhere, there is universal access to the items and we see what people prefer, we are not going to get into that conversation. In a couple of years' time, we might see the issue as something that we can pick up on, where we can say, "Now that everyone has access to these items, we need to do something environmentally". However, again, it is a question for the people who produce these items. That is another dialogue. For now, we believe that universal access is the most important thing, no matter what the item is.

Ms Brogan: That is fair, Katie. We know what your objective is and what the objective of the Bill is, but it is something that we should consider in the future. I take your points. Katie and Katrina, thanks for that. It has been really interesting to talk to you. Thanks for all of the work that you are doing. The work that you are doing with the Homeless Period Belfast is incredible. Well done.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have a couple of points to follow up. We frequently use the toilet paper analogy, which, in itself, is sometimes unnecessarily taboo, is it not? Regrettably, on a very small number of occasions, people misuse and abuse toilet paper, but that would never lead us to consider taking toilet paper out of toilets and having people have to access toilet paper in a different room or location. The toilet paper analogy continues to come in handy.

On the issue of it being taboo, I have found women who are a similar age to me still encountering and experiencing taboo around free period product provision, because it has been taboo for so long. Obviously, destigmatising it and breaking that taboo is so important. It is interesting, Katrina, that you said that year 8 and 9 girls are really open to that and that the emphasis is on including boys as well. There is a generation plus of taboo to overcome there.

Ms McDonnell: We inherit that. It is a generational shame that we inherit. That is why we welcome everyone to our workshops. We want adults to come, because they are still shrouded in that shame as well. We see changes being made in the conversation — even having this conversation today, and

even you, Chris, in November last year, talking about tampons and pads on the Floor of the Assembly. That was quite revolutionary. We are getting there.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Absolutely. OK. I will bring in Daniel McCrossan, and then Justin.

Mr McCrossan: Thanks, Chair, and thank you, Katie and Katrina, for taking questions and giving very detailed answers. I have a number of points, Chair. First, there is a point that I want to raise. I was listening to what you were saying about DE. The report of allocating only £10 to a school as part of the DE pilot is obviously an issue. I am a bit concerned about that, and I cannot believe it is only £10. I will say to the Chair afterwards that the Committee should ask for a report on how this is being allocated and what funds have been allocated, including resources.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Agreed.

Mr McCrossan: This is a concern and needs to be taken a fair bit more seriously than £10. It is typical of the Department to take such an approach. Have you any thoughts on that before I fire a few questions your way?

Ms McDonnell: Yes, I will come in on that. Sorry, I should have elaborated a bit more around the £10. Any school that was allocated £10 was a primary school, not a secondary school. I think that £11,000 was allocated to one particular school in west Belfast. The budgets are meeting quite obvious schools' needs, but the £10 is mostly being allocated to primary schools that have boys and girls. Where they have gone wrong is that they have estimated that only primary 6 and 7 — a handful of girls from that year — will have their period, when we know that girls as young as P4 can have their period. That has been an issue. Also, for me, weighing it against the free school meals is not a great model, a great equation or however you describe it. Some schools have been really happy with their budget and others have been quite disappointed. For example, schools have to do a whole procurement thing and sign in to a portal. It is quite long and tedious. One of the primary schools in north Belfast has said to us, "To save us the bureaucratic process of having to get the £10 from the Department of Education, we, as teachers, are just going to put a few quid in ourselves to get the items and speed it up". That should not be happening. Or they are coming to us as a project that wants to cease to exist — we always say that the aim of the Homeless Period Belfast is not to grow, but to become redundant and cease to exist because the responsibility has been taken on by the Government. So, yes, there are a few errors and things to be worked out with that period dignity scheme.

Sorry, can I ask a question? This Bill will make that period dignity scheme redundant. Am I right? I am not putting that to you directly, Daniel. It just came into my head, and I do not want to forget to ask it.

Mr McCrossan: I am not entirely sure. Chair, do you know?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I suppose that it will supersede it. I do not think that it will make it redundant. I suppose the Education Minister will contend that a significant part of what it proposes is in place, but it goes further. It places duties and, as you are giving witness to today, Katrina, some people think it needs to be amended further again. It would contribute, complement and extend. Those are some of the descriptors that I would use about that.

I will bring you back in, Daniel.

Ms McDonnell: Sorry.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You are grand; no problem.

Mr McCrossan: Clause 3 requires the Department of Health and specified public bodies to put into place the arrangements to fulfil their function under clauses 1 and 2. With that in mind, are the principles set out in clause 3 — easy access, dignity, choice and publicised arrangements — relevant and proportionate principles to implement the scheme, in your opinion?

Ms McDonnell: Sorry, I am not sure if I understand the question.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Say that again, Daniel. I did not catch it either.

Mr McCrossan: Are the principles set out in clause 3, which are easy access, dignity, choice and publicised arrangements, relevant and proportionate principles to implement the scheme? Are they sufficient to implement the scheme? Does more need to be added?

Ms McDonnell: Daniel, when you said that, you completely broke up on my screen. I am not sure if that happened for you, Katie, as well. I did not get that at all.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel, what are the three principles again?

Mr McCrossan: Easy access, dignity, choice and publicised arrangements.

Ms McDonnell: OK, and your question around that is whether we are happy with that and do we agree with it?

Mr McCrossan: Yes. Are they sufficient to implement the scheme, or does more need to be done?

Ms McDonnell: No, I think that that is great. Perhaps there could be further elaboration on what the exact process of easy access will be. Publicising is a massive one for us. There has been a lack of public awareness and advertising around the period dignity scheme. With this kind of thing, we need to do more to publicise it and make everyone aware that the scheme exists.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Clause 4 provides for guidance to be published and maintained. Do you think that clause 4 will achieve the objective of coordinating the implementation between Departments and public bodies? Would you change it in any way?

Ms McDonnell: I imagine that it will be quite tricky to keep note of that. I am not entirely sure how to answer that question. I think that Katie will agree with me that the intricate details of legislation have been difficult to understand.

Ms Bryce: We did pick it out and made a note. Obviously different bodies will have different approaches. How can we ensure that they are aligned? It is not our job to tell each Department, "You must do it this way", but if there was overarching guidance that people could follow, they could navigate around that guidance. There needs to be some kind of key alignments of placement, publication and things like that to make sure that certain people do not fall by the wayside, which is what we added in our revisions. We are not entirely sure how to completely suggest those recommendations, but we think that there needs to be some kind of general alignment.

Mr McCrossan: Clause 5 requires every public body to publish how it has had regard to the guidance issued under clause 4 and requires each public body to consult on the availability and quality of the products being issued. How do you see clause 5 being implemented in such a way that it provides transparency? Do you think that this level of consultation is necessary?

Ms McDonnell: Sorry, I am just trying to read clause 5 at the same time that you are reading it out. Katie, do you have any comments on that?

Ms Bryce: I am reading over it here. *[Pause.]* We are not entirely versed on the intricacies of the Bill. How does it normally work for you? If you implement something, will each body have to come back to you to say, "We have done x, y and z" to follow that? Is that how it usually works?

Mr McCrossan: They will be answerable to the various Departments, I suppose. These questions are very detailed, so it is fine.

Ms Bryce: They are a bit beyond our remit, but, to our best understanding, we have picked out what we can digest and what we would recommend. If you want, we can go back, read over it and then come back to you on it, but right now we are just trying to digest those conversations.

Mr McCrossan: Chair, I will finish on this. Clause 7 defines what period products are and who needs them. In your opinion, does that clause provide a comprehensive list of key definitions, or do you believe that more is needed? Are you content with the definitions as they are listed?

Ms McDonnell: To be fair, it is quite vague. It could probably list more examples of period products, especially for people who do not have a period. They may not know about things like reusable pads, period pants or menstrual cups. I think that the majority of the public think of period products just as tampons and pads, so perhaps that clause could elaborate a little more on examples of period products, if that is appropriate to put into legislation.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Katrina, that may be another area for you to give us some specific information around those examples. Clause 7(b) lists some examples, so they are in the Bill. Therefore, if it is useful to add to those, we would be happy to receive information about the additional products that it would be good to list. Is that OK?

Ms McDonnell: Yes, brilliant.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is great. I think that all members have had an opportunity to ask questions. Do you want to make any closing comments, folks?

Ms McDonnell: Do you mean us?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes.

Ms McDonnell: At times, I am struggling to work out who is talking to who. No, that is fine. We are really grateful to have our voice heard on the Bill. I mentioned at the beginning that we have been doing this kind of work on the ground for five years, so we appreciate being involved in scrutinising the Bill's clauses, even though sometimes we do not fully understand them; we are not going to lie. We are really grateful, and we hope that you can get behind some of our suggested amendments.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks so much for your evidence today. From our point of view, you have interacted with the Bill in an extremely helpful way and made some specific suggestions that could lead to substantive amendments. We are grateful for that. Our evidence sessions at Committee Stage will continue into January. The Clerk can correct me; it may have been extended to February, if my memory serves me right. We will try to keep you posted as to progress. You may want to watch some of the key evidence sessions and give us any further feedback, if you think that is necessary. We look forward to staying in contact with you as the Bill progresses through Committee Stage. Thank you.

Ms McDonnell: Thanks very much.