



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill: Ulster University Students' Union Period Poverty Action Group

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 Daniel McCrossan

Witnesses:

Mr Owen McCloskey	Ulster University Students' Union
Ms Grace Boyle	Ulster University Students' Union Period Poverty Action Group

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will move to our oral briefing from the Ulster University Students' Union Period Poverty Action Group. The witnesses include Grace Boyle, vice president for education at the Ulster University Students' Union Period Poverty Action Group, and Owen McCloskey, Ulster University Students' Union (UUSU) president. I advise our witnesses that they have up to 10 minutes to make an opening statement before questions from and discussion with members. You are really welcome this morning, folks. We look forward to hearing from you. Thanks so much for giving us your time.

Mr Owen McCloskey (Ulster University Students' Union): Thank you, Chair. I will kick off. I am Owen McCloskey. I am the students' union president at UUSU. I will give you a bit of the context behind where this all started for us.

Back in 2017, a policy came through our student council, which is the main area that our democratic processes go through and to which we are mandated. That policy identified the need for period products in the bathrooms across our four campuses at Ulster University (UU). We were not able to action that policy until early 2018. I became a student officer in 2018, and the policy fell within my remit. We started by looking at the existing access, and there was none. We also looked at ways in which we could collect those products to get a supply of them. There was very little access to that back then.

From there, my fellow officers and I wrote an insight article period piece that we were able to bring to senior management at the university and present to students and to our council. The article identified why the products were needed from the policy and the info and data that we gathered. From there, we were able to support and supply a year's trial that ran from semester 1 of 2019 to the end of semester 2 in early 2020. There were some delays to that, but it was great that we were able to launch it. That resulted in the launch of four machines that supplied free period products in our gender-neutral bathrooms, of which there was one on each campus. That was a very exciting time and it obviously showed the demand for this. The data gathered from that resulted in some further action.

I left at that stage, as my time as an officer was finished. My successor, Grace Boyle, who is with us today, took up the mantle. That covers my involvement up to that time, so I will hand over to Grace, so that she can cover the next time period. It has been great to see the work that has happened on this. I appreciate the invitation to speak on the Bill today.

Ms Grace Boyle (Ulster University Students' Union Period Poverty Action Group): I kicked off in March 2020, which is when the lockdown happened. At that point, the purpose of our trial was to collect data and feedback so that we could go to the university and demonstrate the demand. There are quite a lot of bathrooms across the four campuses, and we were only able to supply four of them. That was resourced by our campus VPs, so we were collecting data for an entirely student-led project that we could present to the university as a whole piece so that the demand would be recognised at that level.

Lockdown happened, so we could not collect the data that we wanted. We got a lot of anecdotal testimonies around the use of the service, that it was great for breaking down stigma and that it was really needed in the university. Those testimonies highlighted that there were no dispensers whatsoever across the four campuses. As a student, that was such a shock to me. In my first year, when I got my period, I ran around the campus to try to find a product dispenser only to discover that there was nothing in sight. The on-campus shop was closed at the time, so I could not even buy a product. I had to use toilet paper, which is something that we do not want to do.

While we were in lockdown, I contacted Ellen Fearon in the National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), and we started the period poverty action group with Queen's University Belfast Students' Union (QUBSU). QUBSU sends its apologies because all its representatives are in a meeting today and cannot attend. It would have been great to have them here today. During the year in lockdown, we planned what we were going to do about provision on campus and to have the service on campus. That was a challenge with lockdown. There were a lot of barriers insofar as the university estate's facilities branch did not want to have additional touch points on campus. It was a really good opportunity for us, as a national union, to work together and see where we could collaborate.

In a meeting in November, we were very fortunate to be joined by Pat Catney in order to help shape the Bill and to allow him see where we were coming from, with our perspective on period dignity and period poverty, so it was great from that point of view.

Since August, we have had funding of £2,600 from the Department for the Economy to relaunch our service in the four bathrooms. We have identified that our campus VPs are still replenishing stock, but there are differences in use across our campuses. Our Belfast campus has seen a significant amount of restock, three times a week, which cuts into our VPs' daily jobs. We timed it and discovered that it takes seven minutes for a campus VP to restock the products. The need is, obviously, there and it is accessible.

We have also launched a survey in order to collect data for the Department, not only on the accessibility of the service but on educational awareness around why period dignity is needed. Katrina McDonnell from the Homeless Period Belfast has been instrumental in helping us with workshops and talks in order to make sure that we understand period dignity and, as she mentioned earlier, to involve male allies. Even with female university staff, it is often a taboo and difficult topic to talk about, so Katrina has been instrumental in getting us to this point. We also want to thank Pat for giving up so much of his time to talk to me on the phone. He often rings me to see whether this is the direction that we want to go in, so it has been great to have him as an ally as well. That is where we are at this point.

In Belfast in particular, we have reordered stock, and the departmental funding is yet to come in. In the meantime, we have had to use the surplus stock from our first trial to replenish the bathroom in Belfast. I have worked with the Belfast School of Art, and it has launched, with funding from TOTM, the supply of period products in four bathrooms. It has run into the same resource issues. We can see that the need is there and that people are using the products.

Coming through in the survey results are the things that you have heard, such as, "I have had to use toilet paper instead of period products if I have been caught out on my period." We hear those stories over and over. At the end of the day, we are trying to alleviate the embarrassment and stigma and to make sure that there is provision — we have a big university — across the four campuses, which will be three campuses with the new Belfast build. That is we are at this point, Chair. Thank you for letting us speak.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Owen and Grace. Coming across loud and clear is the extent of the need and the usage. Would you like to emphasise that, Grace? Clearly, the free period products that your project has provided are being widely used, yes?

Ms Boyle: Yes. They are being widely used. We want to expand the locations on our other campuses, because we know that the accessibility of our student union (SU) bathrooms is important. The funding that we have been allocated is for our SU provision, and the bathrooms are beside our catering areas. For a long time — Owen can probably talk about this — we have had an issue because, in that space, particularly in Magee and Coleraine, footfall is not as frequent. We want to move our provision into the library bathrooms, where students and staff will have more access.

Provision at the Belfast campus was in a gender-neutral bathroom with a lot of footfall through the area. Robert, our campus VP, has had to stock that three times a week, when, usually, it is meant to be done once a week. He has identified that more stock is taken from that particular bathroom, but, if our stock in Coleraine and Magee were located in a different area, we would see the same uptake of provision. We have seen that we do not get the same amount of usage throughout the campuses, but the need is there, and it is about making services accessible. We have launched a survey and posted on our social media, and we have worked with the university to make sure that the service is accessible to everyone. Global emails were sent out, and, next semester, we want to see better uptake of that provision.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do you think that this Bill would help you to meet that need?

Ms Boyle: It would help. With the Bill coming through, I have had more messages from students and staff to my inbox. We know from working with the Belfast School of Art that it saw, when the Scottish Bill came forward, that the issue needed to be tackled. It should never have been an issue; there should always have been universal access.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks for that, Grace. I will bring in the other members.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks, Grace and Owen. I agree with the last point that you made. Period products should be universally available. However, some will argue — I certainly will not — that the cost of that will be prohibitive. The point has been made that toilet paper is universally available and no one would think of cutting back on that on the basis of cost. What would you say to those who put forward that argument?

Ms Boyle: I would rebut it. We know, from when we bought stock in bulk, that it is cost-effective, but it should never have had to be considered at a cost level. This is an involuntary act that affects 50% of the population, and those who menstruate deal with it every month or however often they menstruate. The consideration should never have been about the financial implications. It has always been a gender and health issue, so I would rebut that point from an equality standpoint alone.

Owen could probably talk about the costing from the launch. The paper that we produced was used as evidence for the funding that we got, this time round, from the Department for the Economy. We have seen that it is cost-effective. We had quotes from different companies and took the most cost-effective approach.

Mr McCloskey: I will come in and build on what Grace said about the narrative. For us, it is about education, and we do not want this issue to affect the education of students in higher education institutions. If they cannot access period products on campus, which is such a simple and basic need, how can they be expected to fulfil their degrees? The case that Grace used is a clear example of how students are being affected by it.

In my experience, when I first tried to launch the initiative, there was resistance because of the financial aspects, and the narrative that Grace spoke about — where this lies as a priority — should not be used as a way to rebut it. We have seen, through the trials that we have done and the clear examples at Ulster University, that finance is not really a factor, because we have been able to do it successfully with our small amount of funding. It has been massively successful. Even with such a small offering, the project has shown its success, and it is financially sustainable and can be sustained for a longer period.

Grace talked about the numbers and the success that we have seen. At our Jordanstown campus, we have one machine for 12,000 students, and that will increase to 15,000 students when we move to the

Belfast campus in semester 1 in September 2022. We have to consider that as well, therefore we think that the Bill will help us to alleviate the pressure on students' education. When we make that move, we do not want period poverty to affect students when they go to university. The fact that there will be access in higher education will help promote the Bill if there is access when they are in secondary and primary education.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that. I agree: it is definitely an equality issue. I commend you and the students' union for the work that you have done on this issue. Thanks a lot.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Grace and Owen. Again, it is great to hear from you this morning. The work that you are doing is incredible and really important, so well done on that. It is really important for us to hear from you — people on the ground who are facing these issues — when we are going through the clauses and the detail of the Bill so that we get that kind of information. I appreciate you taking the time to present to us.

Owen, last week, I mentioned attendance at school with the Bill sponsor, Pat Catney, and did so again in our previous session with Katrina McDonnell and Katie Bryce. I am sorry for making you repeat yourself, but I am really concerned about that issue. The stats that I had were outdated, but Katrina and Katie were able to provide stats this morning to show that 74% of girls had missed school because they did not have access to period products. I do not know if you have any statistics on the rates of classes being missed by girls who do not have access to period products at university.

Mr McCloskey: I do not have those figures, probably because it is a bit more inconsistent with universities, given different sizes and other factors. Grace, has there been anything from your side of things?

Ms Boyle: We saw, from our survey, that more people said that it was an issue that they had in school. I suppose that, from that point on, they became used to making makeshift pads and using toilet paper; it became second nature. The comments in our survey suggest that it was an issue that people had in school, and that it is great to have that provision. Katrina has been working really hard in that area. Those people were in school long before the Homeless Period Belfast was about. People are used to making those makeshift, toilet-roll products and stuff. It has become ingrained in the psyche. That is anecdotal; it comes through in comments when we ask why the provision is needed.

Ms Brogan: People might be used to doing that, but it would still impact their learning at university. It is another distraction. I will continue to make that point when we are discussing the Bill.

Grace, you made a really important point that I forgot to raise in the previous session: it is about not just period poverty but having access for everyone, even those who can afford period products but might not have them at a certain time. That is really important. As an overall concept, it is about women's health. It should be accessible to all. Nobody should be left without it. I am more concerned about those who cannot afford it, but it should incorporate everyone. I am glad that you clarified that.

Ms Boyle: That is something that we constantly get back, even from conversations in the university. It is changing now, but the narrative was that we should be using it only as an emergency service. We want to move away from that. It is about providing period dignity for everyone who needs it. There should be universal access. No one would have to take their own toilet roll to a bathroom. It is just not seen. We are trying to move away from the notion that it is an emergency provision. It should be universal, so that it is always there. It should always have been there.

Ms Brogan: I agree, Grace. You are making really good moves towards doing that. Opening up that whole conversation does that naturally, anyway. I support the idea that products should be available to anyone who needs them. That is a really valid point.

I raised a point about clause 1 with Katrina and Katie. The Department of Health has to consult on the type of period products that should be available. That brings into question the whole environmental impact of period products. Tampons, sanitary towels and so on can take years to biodegrade. Do you have any suggestions about using different products, such as menstrual cups or recyclable pads? What are your views on that?

Ms Boyle: Last year, we were approached by [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] about supplying some menstrual cups. We recognise that it is an issue that impacts the environment. If we can look

towards more sustainable options, that would be good, but, as a first step, we need to provide the provision from the get-go. Loads of sustainable products are on the market now. I know that from TikTok especially. We recognise that there is a sustainable need, and that we need to be more sustainably minded, but I am not sure that this is the right time to be looking at that. We should be setting up the provision first and exploring options along the way.

Owen, do you have any thoughts on that, given that you come from a very sustainable background?

Mr McCloskey: Yes. The original policy that I spoke about highlighted that at the time. I agree with Grace: that is definitely the direction in which we want to go in the long term. However, we first have to break down the barriers to even allow people to feel more comfortable about having conversations about their periods. Then, we can talk about the environmental impact. The long-term goal is to be more environmentally friendly when it comes to periods, but dignity is really the core of it.

Ms Boyle: There are more and more products coming onto the market. I only knew last year that there was period underwear. Even for us, it is an education to understand what products are out there and understand people's needs. As we learn more about our own periods, we learn that there are more things to help to alleviate menstruation. It is an exploration but, as Owen said, and as I said, the first step is provision.

Ms Brogan: I agree with both of you. I totally understand that viewpoint. Going back to a point that was made with Katrina and Katie, it depends on where you provide these services. At university, when women are a bit older and more experienced with their periods, they may be able to use the likes of menstrual cups or other recyclable products, but young girls who are experiencing their period for the first time need the most sensible and practical products, and ones that are easy to use. There is a wider conversation to be had on that.

My last point is about communication, and making sure, first of all, that public bodies, universities and schools know that these products are available and that there is funding to make them available. What additional measures could be put in place to make sure that they know that so that they can reach those most in need of period products?

Ms Boyle: I am going to pass that to Owen, based on initial experiences and considering how many bathrooms we have at UU.

Mr McCloskey: From memory, clause 1(6) refers to the Department publishing information on where free period products can be obtained. It is important that that information is shared in a way that is not only accessible but clearly visible to the public. That is the point at which there will be clearer measurables for us on how that is going to look.

Outside this conversation, how we promote and communicate things is a business in itself. We deal daily with how we communicate our wins and different aspects to students, and to the wider public as well. It is going to be multichannel with different social media. It is also going to be community based, where everyone plays a role in communicating where they can access the products. There needs to be more support in terms of a clear place in which people can identify where they can access products in the first place. That is outlined in the Bill.

Ms Brogan: Yes, you are right, Owen. We should be paying attention to getting that message out. Thank you both so much. It is really great to hear from you. As I said at the beginning, well done for all the work that you are doing. It is really good and important work, so thanks for that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much indeed, Owen and Grace, for your evidence. It will be extremely helpful in our considerations during Committee Stage. We would be glad to keep in touch with you as the Bill progresses. Thank you so much for all the outstanding work that you are doing to make period products available in your own context as well.

Ms Boyle: Thank you, Chris. Would you mind if I ask the Committee a question about the guidance?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Go ahead.

Ms Boyle: I am not privy to how Bills work, so if you bear with me for just a moment. We recognise that it is good that the Bill is being flexible with each institution and public body on how they will deliver

the service. However, how are you or, maybe, the Department going to oversee it? Where is the accountability to make sure that there are no gaps in the provision? I do not know whether that is something that you can answer, Chris, or if it is something that needs to be brought to a different place.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That concern is something for us to note. You referred to the guidance, which is covered in clause 4. Statements are covered in clause 5 and the duty to publish information in clause 6. Those clauses have in mind that need for openness, transparency and reporting, but I will take on board your interest in the oversight and monitoring of consistent implementation. We will factor that into our consideration at Committee Stage.

Ms Boyle: Thanks very much, Chris.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, folks. All the best.