



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill: RaISe
Briefing

16 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
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Ms Niamh Devlin Northern Ireland Assembly

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to Niamh Devlin, a research officer from the Northern Ireland Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe). I invite Niamh to brief members on the research paper. Thanks, Niamh.

Ms Niamh Devlin (Northern Ireland Assembly): Thank you, Chair. Good morning, members. It is great to be here and to have the opportunity to provide a briefing on the Bill paper from the Assembly Research and Information Service. By way of background, the paper was prepared to inform Committee consideration of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill by joining together detail on the proposals in the Bill, undertaking a review of research related to the accessibility of period products and providing an overview of existing schemes for the provision of free period products in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. The paper provides descriptive commentary on the Bill's individual clauses and highlights issues for further consideration throughout. The paper refers to a variety of matters. Therefore, for the next 15 minutes, I will do my best to summarise the key points concisely.

I will commence with evidence generated by desk research that provides insight into the affordability and accessibility of period products. Literature reflects that, in the past decade, there has been growing awareness of menstrual-related challenges, including the issue of period poverty, which is defined as a lack of access to sanitary products due to financial constraints. However, evidence suggests that, despite that growing awareness, barriers remain to ensuring affordable and easy access to period products for all. For instance, in a UK-wide survey of 14- to 21-year-olds, Plan International UK found that one in 10 respondents had been unable to afford sanitary wear and one in seven had struggled to afford it. A follow-up survey in May 2021 found that that figure had increased to 36% during lockdown, which suggests that the pandemic had an impact on the affordability and accessibility of period products.

Furthermore, a Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) survey of more than 1,700 pupils in June 2021 revealed that over a quarter had difficulty accessing period products and that almost 12% reported difficulty accessing period products because their parents could not afford them, while 6.5% said that they themselves could not afford products.

Plan International UK refers to a toxic trio of issues that limit access to period products and contribute to period poverty. Those include the cost of sanitary products, a lack of education about periods and shame, stigma and taboo. Furthermore, a review of the literature suggests that there is a growing body of evidence that menstruation is experienced negatively, that it contributes to absenteeism from school and the workplace, that it can lead to feelings of embarrassment or shame and that it is source of psychosocial stress. Period stigma has been highlighted as a key issue. Most recently, the CCEA survey revealed that over of half pupils feel embarrassed when buying period products.

Further evidence suggests that some may feel that they have no choice but to miss school if their menstrual needs are not met. The same survey revealed that 8.1% of pupils had missed school because they did not have access to sufficient products. Almost one in 10 of those pupils reported that they had missed school multiple times due to insufficient access to products. Research suggests that limited access to products can lead some to create makeshift solutions that are uncomfortable and unsafe. Furthermore, studies have shown that a lack of appropriate products can result in upset, distress and discomfort. Further research suggests negative mental health impacts arising from period poverty.

The evidence reflects that certain groups are more likely to face challenges in accessing period products. The aforementioned survey's statistics largely reflect the experiences of young people and some of the difficulties and associated impacts arising for students and pupils who are unable to afford period products. Research suggests that other groups face particular barriers in accessing period products, and that includes homeless people, those with disabilities and those who may be non-binary or transgender. Asylum seekers and refugees have also been identified as particularly vulnerable to their menstrual needs not being addressed. Other groups identified as facing additional barriers include Roma and Traveller communities, victims of domestic abuse, individuals with caring responsibilities and those living in remote locations.

Further consideration might be given to the needs of groups who may face particular barriers in accessing period products and how those needs might be identified and met through a universal scheme of free period product provision, as per clause 1 of the Bill. Similar to guidance issued in Scotland, consideration might be given as to whether specific consultation arrangements may be required to ensure that the needs of these groups are explored, and appropriate or alternative arrangements established to facilitate access to products.

I move to clause 2 and the requirement that it places on each Department in the NI Executive to specify, by regulations, the public service bodies within its functions that must make period products obtainable free of charge on their premises. As members will be aware, the Bill requires that schools, further and higher education premises, and health and social care trusts and boards must provide free period products on their premises. Therefore, in light of this requirement, there is merit in taking some time to provide further detail on the two pilot schemes that commenced this September to provide free period products in schools and higher education institutions. Although the respective pilots by DE and DFE are in the early stages, and a full assessment of uptake, implementation arrangements and outcomes is yet to be determined, information on the pilots can provide insight into how the schemes have been established in addition to any logistical and cost considerations that might be relevant in the context of the Bill.

The Period Dignity pilot scheme is being led by the Department of Education in conjunction with CCEA and the Education Authority (EA). As members will be aware, that pilot scheme is designed to make period products freely available to pupils in primary, post-primary, special schools and education other than at school (EOTAS) settings. It is expected to cost £2.6 million over three years. A breakdown of costs provided by the Department reveals that just over £2 million of the total relates to the cost of period products. The Department has reported that, once the scheme is embedded, the cost of period products for the school sector will likely be in the region of £0.9 million per year.

Guidance developed by CCEA suggests that the budget for free period products has been allocated between schools on the basis of the total number of learners of menstruating age who are enrolled in a school. For primary schools, that is calculated at 12.5% of year 6 and year 7 enrolments. A weighting has also been applied based on the percentage of pupils who are entitled to free school meals.

Expected uptake for the pilot has been based on similar schemes elsewhere, including in England and Scotland. As such, it has been estimated that there will be a 15% uptake in the first year and that that will increase each year as the scheme becomes established, to 20% in year 2 and 30% in year 3. Uptake is defined in the school guidance as the percentage of pupils using the scheme for all their needs throughout the academic year, including taking products home. That varies from the requirements of the Bill, which propose to provide for pupils' needs whilst on school premises. It is notable that school guidance on the pilot states that it is not the policy intention to make blanket provision of period products for all pupils and that the provision does not extend to the school holidays. However, schools have been advised that they may wish to consider making provision over the holidays for pupils for whom it is essential, if their budget allows. It is not yet clear how many, if any, schools might provide period products during the school holidays.

Clause 2 of the Bill requires education providers to make free period products available to learners who attend their premises in person so consideration might be given as to whether specific arrangements are required to be put in place for children and young people who are home-schooled or who access education remotely and whether this would be provided for at clause 1.

On the pilot scheme to provide period products in higher education institutions, feedback from the Department for the Economy revealed that, when developing that programme, DFE worked with university stakeholders, including students' union groups, who provided background information on their own provision schemes, including usage and uptake. In establishing costs, DFE estimates were informed by indicative costs provided by Ulster University's students' union, which were then calculated across all higher education institutions based on their overall enrolment figures. The total funding allocated across all institutions is £5,140 for the year. That funding is for the purchase of period products only, as the pilot scheme monitoring and reporting is intended to be efficient and not require significant time or resource commitments.

With regards usage of the scheme to date, officials noted that, three months into the pilot, there is little indication of uniformity in the use and uptake of the products. Reported figures show varied usage across the institutions, ranging from 12% in one to 61% in another. It is anticipated that greater information and clarity around demand and usage will emerge as the pilot progresses into its latter stages.

To inform this paper, RalSe asked the Department about proposals to implement a similar pilot in further education (FE) colleges. Officials stated that the six FE colleges already have initiatives and partnerships in place to help ensure that students have access to free sanitary products on their campuses and that the products are supplied from a range of sources. The Department reported that its FE division has established a college working group to consider how best to implement a similar pilot in FE to that being undertaken in higher education, without disrupting existing initiatives and partnerships.

It was noted that, once agreed, one of the pilot's main aims will be to quantify trends and demand for free sanitary products for pupils in further education. That, in turn, will be used as an evidence base. Similarly, it has been noted that the higher education pilot is being used to gather evidence of and learning about period poverty in higher education institutions, as no such data was available previously.

I will move on to other provision of free period products in Northern Ireland. The Committee will be aware of some of the initiatives delivered at a local level that are largely driven by voluntary and community organisations such as The Homeless Period, the Period Poverty Action Group and the likes of the Red Box Project.

Some local councils have recently commenced pilots to provide free period products in some public buildings. For instance, in 2019, Derry City and Strabane District Council began a pilot scheme to provide free sanitary products in its venues. The products are available free of charge in six of the nine leisure centres in the area and in the Guildhall. In April this year, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council announced a pilot scheme to provide free sanitary products in leisure centres across the borough. Information requested by RalSe revealed that free products are available in three larger leisure centres in the borough. In October 2021, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council announced the launch of the Pink Present programme, an initiative to provide free period products to post-primary schools in the area. The initiative commenced in four post-primary schools, with the expectation that it would be rolled out to others in the district in the months following the launch. It is not clear how the scheme might operate alongside the wider school pilot scheme led by the Department of Education.

I will briefly touch on the definition of a public service body as proposed by the Bill. Some of the considerations at Second Stage were about specific bodies that might fall under the scope of "public service body" as defined in clause 8. The definition of a public service body in the Bill is consistent with the Scottish Act, and refers to:

"a statutory body (i.e. a body constituted by or under an enactment) that either provides services to the public or otherwise serves the public interest".

It might be helpful to note that no public service bodies had been specified at the time that the Scottish Government issued initial guidance to responsible bodies, including local authorities and education providers, on the exercise of their duties under the Scottish Act. The guidance was issued in September this year. In the light of the Act's similarities to the Bill, much of the commentary in the RaISe paper refers to the Scottish context and the guidance issued to support responsible bodies in the fulfilment of their duties. Consideration is also given to the provision of free period products in the rest of the UK.

I will briefly turn to the Bill's other clauses and some potential considerations that are reflected in the RaISe paper. Clause 3 sets out the requirements that must be met by the Department of Health and the specified public service bodies in fulfilling the duties in clause 1 and clause 2, which are that products are accessible with reasonable ease; that a reasonable choice of types of product are available; and that there is respect for dignity. Given the parallels with the Scottish Act, it might be helpful to touch on how the requirements are proposed to be taken forward practically, as per guidance issued by the Scottish Government to responsible bodies. For example, the Scottish guidance notes that, to ensure that products are available with reasonable ease, there should generally be no forms to complete or other information required before products can be accessed. It also notes that, to provide reasonable choice, the full range of products does not have to be available in all locations or through all delivery methods; responsible bodies are also advised to consider the most appropriate way to make reusable period products freely available for those who may wish to use them. On respect for dignity, the Scottish guidance notes that individuals should not have to justify why they need products or justify the amount that is needed.

Consideration might be given to how the requirements might be fulfilled by the Department of Health and public service bodies in Northern Ireland. It may be worth noting that the DFE period poverty pilot programme in higher education allows each institution flexibility in its model for providing period products. However, it requires each institution to demonstrate that it has met similar principles to those proposed by clause 3, which are: that a variety of products are made available, giving students choice about the products that they want to use; that products are easily accessible and sufficient to meet individual needs; that the scheme enables gender equality, ensuring that anyone who menstruates can access products; and that the language used in awareness raising is gender neutral. There may be merit in further consulting with DFE on how the requirements are being practically fulfilled by the institutions.

Clause 4 requires Departments to issue guidance to the public bodies specified in clause 2 as soon as is reasonably practicable after the body is specified. The body must be consulted before the guidance is produced. Clause 5 requires each specified public service body to publish a written statement, as soon as is reasonably practicable after it has received the guidance under clause 4, describing how it has had regard to the guidance and consulted on and developed its arrangements for the provision of free period products.

The format of the statement and where it should be published are not mandated in the Bill. Rather, the public service body has flexibility to include any other information in the statement that it thinks appropriate and to publish the statement in such a way as it thinks appropriate. In light of earlier references to the needs of particular groups in accessing period products, consideration might be given to the flexibility granted to public service bodies in preparing and publishing statements, whilst ensuring that the accessibility of the statement is maintained for all product users.

Once the arrangements are established, clause 6 requires the Departments to publish the locations where free period products are available one year after the making of the regulations under clause 2 and on, at least, an annual basis thereafter. Responsible bodies have the flexibility to choose how to make that information available. Consideration might be given to whether the requirements of the Bill ensure timely and accessible dissemination of the information to all potential users, including those identified in the literature as facing additional needs.

Clause 7 provides the key definitions that are used in the Bill. “Needs” at clause 7(c) is defined as menstruation by a person, ensuring that the Bill applies to anyone who menstruates, including transgender and non-binary persons as well as women and girls. The definition of “period products” at clause 7(b) allows for the provision of sustainable options. It is worth noting that CCEA’s recent school survey found that almost a quarter, 24.4%, of pupils believe that eco factors are important when choosing period products. Furthermore, recent years have seen increasing attention being given to sustainable menstruation, which refers to practices where environmentally friendly alternatives to period products are used. Amongst the sustainable development goals are responsible consumption and production. One of the targets is that, by 2030, there will be a substantial reduction in waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse. Consideration might be given to the role of sustainable period product options in contributing to that goal.

On a more general point about the sustainable development goals, the Global Menstrual Collective notes that investment in menstrual health and hygiene can contribute to achieving that. The literature further suggests that addressing menstrual health and hygiene may enable progress across the sustainable development goals, particularly those related to education, gender equality, health and well-being, and water, sanitation and hygiene. However, some suggest that further research is required to fully understand how menstrual health and hygiene can contribute to the sustainable development goals.

I have been speaking for quite some time. I hope that the briefing covered most of the salient points. I also recognise that it is a bit of whistle-stop tour, as there is an array of matters to cover. In conclusion, I am happy to take questions, but please note that there are some aspects on which I am waiting for further information, which will be shared with the Committee as soon as it is received. Therefore, if I cannot answer your question this morning, I will make sure that I come back to you. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Niamh. I really appreciate that briefing. I will move to member's questions.

Mr Sheehan: I do not have many questions because the briefing was very comprehensive. Thank you very much for that, Niamh. You mentioned the school holidays. Is no provision being made for the supply of period products to schoolchildren during the school holidays?

Ms Devlin: Sorry, Pat. Are you referring to the Bill or the current DE pilot scheme?

Mr Sheehan: Tell me about both.

Ms Devlin: Yes. The guidance for the current DE pilot scheme suggests that provision is predominantly to meet the needs of pupils who are in school. As I understand it, that is how the costings have been derived. However, a school can identify pupils who may require free period products over the school holidays, and, if their budget allows, they may extend provision into the holidays.

Clause 2 of the Bill sets out the public service bodies that will provide products for use on the premises. As such, it is not proposed that clause 2 of the Bill will provide for free period products for pupils and students over the holidays. However, the universal scheme in clause 1 does propose to provide period products to meet all needs, and that will be over the holidays.

Mr Sheehan: OK. Thanks. That is all I want to ask. Thanks for your work, Niamh.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am conscious that Robin and Diane have to leave. If we are brief, we can, I hope, get to them. I will bring in Robin Newton MLA, unless you want to defer to Diane, Robin.

Mr Newton: I thank Niamh for the briefing. It is up to her usual very high standards. As you suggest, Chair, I will defer to Diane on the matter.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Niamh, for the interesting briefing. How will clauses 1 and 2 work together?

Ms Devlin: My understanding is that clause 1 proposes to provide for the majority of a user's needs. As such, products are expected to be provided on the premises of public service bodies, under clause 2, essentially to fill a gap in need. My understanding, certainly from the Scottish context, is that, if somebody were to get their period unexpectedly or were to come into premises without their own

products, period products would be available on the premises as a means of ensuring that their needs are met.

My understanding of the costings is that some calculations and adjustments were made to the cost of the universal scheme to discount for the cost of providing period products on the premises of educational settings. As such, it is expected that the majority of a pupil or student's needs during term time will be met through the provision of free period products in educational settings, as proposed in clause 2.

Mrs Dodds: OK. I may go back and ask Pat Catney some questions on that as well just so that I am clear on how they interact with each other.

I may have missed this, Niamh. If I have, forgive me. What has been the uptake of the DE and Economy pilots that are under way? I am trying to figure out whether there are things that we need to learn in order to help people overcome the barriers to asking for free period products. I know that it is really early days for those pilots, but there is bound to be some indication of how they are going.

Ms Devlin: Thank you for that, Diane. Some data was provided to RaISe on request on the uptake of the DFE pilot at higher education institutions. It was deemed to be highly variable at this stage, given the early stage of the pilot.

Mrs Dodds: Are there reasons for that? Some of the other witnesses who have briefed the Committee indicated that it was due to where the products are placed or the fact that you have to go and ask for them. Are barriers being created? If the scheme is there, and the money is there for it, you want people to be able to access it. Are there barriers? Maybe the institutions do not even think of them as barriers.

Ms Devlin: As I understand it, there is a review ongoing to establish what the barriers might be and what may be impeding the uptake of the higher education pilot. I have requested some information on the uptake of the DE pilot scheme, but I have not yet received that. I will provide that as and when it comes in. Certainly, a review is planned by CCEA. As I understand it, it is administering a survey, which is due to be facilitated in December, so it should be any time now, and that will provide further information on roll-out and uptake. I imagine that it will explore any barriers and the learning more generally. It would be helpful to have that conversation with the Department of Education and CCEA, recognising, as you noted, that the initial roll-out of the pilot is at an early stage.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you very much. Chair, would it be possible for the Committee to request some updates from both Departments on those schemes, so that we are all knocking on the door to look for the information? Of course, Niamh can pass on what she knows when she gets it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Absolutely. Can the Clerk make a note of that action? Thanks.

Mrs Dodds: Yes. It would be worthwhile doing that. For me, there are some issues with the Bill, but its principle is absolutely right. You want to get it correct, and gauging what goes on at the moment might be useful.

Ms Devlin: Yes.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you.

Mr McCrossan: Niamh, thanks very much for taking questions from us on the Bill. I will go straight to it, Chair. I may have missed this question being asked, so you can keep me right.

Niamh, you referred to research that was conducted by CCEA, which reported that 11.8% of respondents indicated that their parents could not afford period products. The report also suggested that 6.5% of respondents said that they could not afford period products. Therefore, are we noting that a total of 18.3% of respondents had difficulty in accessing period products, or is the 6.5% part of the 11.8%?

Ms Devlin: Thank you, Daniel. My understanding is that the 6.5% and the 11.8% are part of a further figure that relates to general difficulties. Unfortunately, I do not have it to hand, but there is a figure that indicates the percentage of those who found it difficult to access period products. The

proportionality in terms of the percentage of parents and of pupils who were unable to purchase or afford products is part of that broader ratio. I can get that further information for you.

Mr McCrossan: OK. That is grand. Thank you.

In your research, you mentioned groups that face particular barriers in accessing period products, including homeless people — we heard from a few homelessness representative groups — and those with disabilities. In your research, did you come across examples of schemes to support such groups that we could be made aware of?

Ms Devlin: Sorry, when you referred to schemes, were you talking about schemes for free period product provision?

Mr McCrossan: Yes.

Ms Devlin: OK. I just wanted to clarify that.

The available international evidence is fairly limited. Scotland was the first country to pass legislation of this kind to ensure the universal provision of free period products. As such, there is not a great deal of information to draw on for international comparators or, indeed, national comparators. A lot of the information in the paper is drawn from the Scottish guidance. To get a further understanding of some of the barriers that those groups may be facing, it would be critical to consult with those groups directly or, indeed, to ensure that there is consultation and engagement with representatives of those groups in the local area. I recognise that, as part of the Bill, it is proposed that there is consultation with product users on how their needs would be met. It is anticipated that that will be built into the Bill requirements.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Thank you.

In clause 3, there is a reference to ensuring:

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

In your research, did you come across how that was defined or administered in other jurisdictions?

Ms Devlin: Again, it is recognised that it is very much a matter of individual preference and choice, and consultation and engagement with users will be critical. The CCEA survey highlighted that almost a quarter of pupils felt that eco factors are important when it comes to considering period products, but, overall, there is no hard and fast rule. Generally, it is deemed to be important to ensure that a choice of products is available, including sustainable options and the likes of tampons and pads, but it is very much at the discretion of users.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Chair, I will be very brief. The effective and successful operation of the Bill will no doubt require different Departments to cooperate. In your research, did you note how other jurisdictions did that?

Ms Devlin: Again, as yet, there are not very many similar schemes to draw upon. The Welsh Government, however, are consulting on a period dignity strategic action plan and proposing to take that forward as a cross-government initiative. Various actions have been outlined, and I can provide the Committee with further information on them. At the core of the plan's design, consultation and implementation is an expectation that Departments will work together on taking the action plan forward.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Finally, the Bill requires extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, as did the Scottish Act. Did you come across any information from the experience of others about how time-consuming the consultations might be or how much they might cost?

Ms Devlin: That did not come out of the literature. There are some suggestions about the best means to engage with, in particular, future product users in a school setting. The resource and time required to engage in that consultation are not written into the more widely available literature that I have come across.

Mr McCrossan: That is grand. Thank you, Niamh.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is Robbie still available to ask a quick question?

Mr Butler: Yes, Chair. Can you hear me?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, thanks.

Mr Butler: Excellent. Technology is absolutely wonderful. Thank you, Niamh, for that fantastic research and for the delivery of it. A lot of the questions have been asked, but one is running about in my head, and I am not sure whether it has been picked up in the legislation. It might be picked up in good practice elsewhere. Is there anything to ensure that the quality of the products that young girls will have available to them will be the same, no matter what establishment the products come from? In areas, for instance, where there may be other pressures on finances, will there be, for whoever is procuring the products, a minimum standard so that everyone gets access to a high standard of product?

Ms Devlin: Robbie, I am afraid that you have stumped me on that one. I could look into the procurement arrangements that have been established in Scotland, England and Wales to obtain products. There may well be some learning in what has been set up there and also through the DE pilot scheme, but I cannot speak to how the quality of the products is maintained, depending on the arrangement.

Mr Butler: Obviously, the product and its usage are intimate. The quality of the product is important not only for safety but for dignity. It is important that there not be a sliding scale and that, when young people across the Province, regardless of where they are from, avail themselves of the products, they can be assured that the standard is the highest that can be achieved. Apart from that, if it is possible for you to get a little bit of information on it, the other questions that I had in mind have already been asked by other members, so I am happy enough.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Robin, do you want to come back in, or are you content with Diane's questions?

Mr Newton: I am trying to understand the budgeting, but maybe that is a question for a later stage.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): No problem, Robin. Thank you.

Ms Brogan: Hello, Niamh. Thank you very much for the briefing. It was very detailed, with lots of good information, and it will certainly help us when we go through the Bill.

My first point is about the DE pilot scheme. Additional information on that would be helpful, because we heard evidence from a group, last week, that suggested that 30% of schools in the North had taken up the pilot scheme, which the group considered to be a low proportion. I am not sure what year it started here, but, I think, you said that, based on experience in Scotland, you would normally expect 15% of schools in the first year and then for that to increase by 5% in the following years. In that case — I think that it started this year, here in the North — 30% is not too bad. We said that principals may have overlooked the scheme because of COVID and all the other pressures that are on them at the minute. It would be really helpful if we could get the figures on that, so we can publicise the fact that the scheme is available to schools.

Ms Devlin: I will come in there, Nicola. My understanding is that the costings are based on a 15% uptake in the first year of the pilot scheme, a 20% uptake in year 2, and a 30% uptake in year 3. As you suggested, that is based on projections from other jurisdictions including England and Scotland.

The budget that is provided to schools for the English scheme is capped at 35% uptake. That means that 35% of pupils of menstruating age avail themselves of the scheme. Perhaps it is notable that there is that cap in place around the 35% mark in the English context.

Ms Brogan: Thanks for that, Niamh. It would be helpful to have more information on that, so that we can all get our heads around it. As you know, those numbers are quite detailed.

The other big issue that I came across when looking at period poverty and the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill is attendance at school and the negative effect that period poverty has on children's educational achievements. Do you have any evidence that shows that a Bill such as this will decrease levels of absence at school?

Ms Devlin: There is a range of evidence that suggests that menstruation needs not being met leads to absenteeism. There is a variety of national and international studies about that, and there is a lot of self-reported data at a local level. It is worth noting, however, that there is not as much information available from the evaluation of schemes in which free period products are provided in schools to show how it impacts on attendance. That might be due to the fact that many schemes are fairly new and that, in the UK context, it has only been within the last few years that free period product pilot schemes have been delivered in a school setting. There is evidence that suggests that not having period products leads to absenteeism, but not much evidence is readily available for a direct causal link between the provision of period products and improved attendance.

Ms Brogan: OK. I suppose that common sense would say that, if not having the period products is a barrier to getting to school to get an education, if they were there, hopefully the evidence would show that it decreases absenteeism. Hopefully that will be the case.

You made another very important point about environmentally friendly products. I brought that up in our evidence session on the period products Bill with Homeless Period Belfast. The response that I got, which I completely understand and agree with, was that we should get the period products out there before we start worrying about how environmentally friendly they are. As I said, I totally understand that argument. What is your opinion on that? Do you think that it is better to approach it that way and to make sure that we get good quality products? Robbie made a really important point about having the right quality of products. Is it more about having those available and not having to focus too much on how environmentally friendly they are?

Ms Devlin: The literature suggests that you should ensure that a period poverty scheme, or any legislation or policy, places the learner at the centre and that the future product user should be involved in the discussions about and the decisions made on the type of products that are made available. It is critical that users' views and experiences are built in to decisions about the products that are made available. Certainly, there is some local data: the CCEA survey suggested that around a quarter of pupils felt that eco factors are important and should be taken into consideration when it comes to deciding on period product types.

That was a very roundabout way of answering your question, but it would be important to consult product users on the types of products that could be available through a universal scheme or an educational scheme.

Ms Brogan: That is fair enough. We should consider how to incorporate all types of products as we go through the Bill. Thanks very much for that, Niamh. It was great to hear from you.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Niamh, for a very detailed and comprehensive briefing; well done on that. What feedback are you getting, if any, from young people on the provision of free period products? Has there been any?

Ms Devlin: There are different ways of looking at feedback. Some of it could be around expectations about what might be made available, or the appetite for that. It might be about the pilot scheme that is being delivered by DE at the moment.

Mr McNulty: What is the general sense from young people across the board?

Ms Devlin: I refer you to the survey findings from the self-reported data. The largest local survey was conducted by CCEA in June. There is a very high appetite and interest, and agreement around the fact that a free period products scheme should be made available. Over 95% of respondents to that survey were in agreement and saw the benefits of having a pilot scheme in school settings. There is a lot of self-reported data on how not having access to period products has an impact on young people. Respondents reported feeling embarrassed and not wanting to attend school. There is a range of negative impacts on young people if their period product needs are not met.

Mr McNulty: Absolutely, yes. You are over the detail of this much more than I am. What are the challenges for the Bill, as you see it?

Ms Devlin: Speaking from a research perspective, in the absence of more than several similar schemes having been implemented in other jurisdictions — nationally and internationally — there is not a great deal of evidence, as it exists, on how those types of schemes might be delivered, either universally or as an educational scheme, or certainly in relation to the provision of products in the buildings of public services. There is limited existing information about cost and about how a scheme could be operationalised. However, there is information from the pilot schemes in Northern Ireland that could be drawn on.

Relatively limited data is available on the number of people who experience period poverty. When it came to the costings, my understanding is that a range of estimates were drawn on with regard to potential target groups, recognising that the universal provision, which clause 1 provides for, would allow for needs to be met in a variety of ways and would not just be for those who may require free period products due to financial reasons.

That is a long-winded and roundabout way of saying that, from a research perspective, there is potentially a lack of evidence on how schemes work in other jurisdictions. Scotland was the first to pass legislation to provide free period products on a universal basis.

Mr McNulty: OK, so Scotland has a trailblazing scheme, but the anecdotal evidence is that it is very important for children and young people, and women in general, and we should go full steam ahead. Do you agree?

Ms Devlin: I would not like to give an opinion either way, but there is a lot of very positive feedback and available evidence on the importance of this type of scheme.

Mr McNulty: Thank you very much, Niamh.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Some charities that are doing great work in period product provision told the Committee recently that the Bill ought to go further and specify that toilets and bathrooms in schools should be the locations for period product provision and, indeed, that that should be the case for all public buildings. Do you know whether the Scottish legislation specifies toilets and bathrooms in schools?

Ms Devlin: It does not. My understanding is that, at the earlier stages of Bill development, it was much more prescriptive. One of the objectives of the Bill in Scotland at stage 1 was that products in educational settings would be provided in toilets. At stage 2, however, amendments were made to the Bill to provide for flexibility to ensure that it was not so prescriptive and to ensure that the needs and wants of individual users were built in.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is interesting. We will maybe try to find out more about why that was changed. I can understand that if it was for the purpose of providing greater flexibility. I think that there was a concern that, if toilets and bathrooms were not specified, they might not be provided there. We maybe need to look into that in a bit more detail.

I appreciate that answer, Niamh. That is helpful. Indeed, as everyone has said, thank you for your extremely helpful briefing.

Ms Devlin: Thank you.