



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill:
Department for Communities

12 January 2022

design groups made up of key stakeholders from the voluntary and community sector and cross-departmental working groups with representation from across all Departments.

Period poverty was raised in the context of the gender equality and anti-poverty strategies. It was raised more prominently in the context of the gender equality strategy, but it was raised in both contexts. Stakeholders raised issues relating to the provision and availability of period products for all who may need them. In the development of the anti-poverty strategy, the expert advisory panel did not include any specific recommendations to target period poverty. However, it was raised by the anti-poverty strategy co-design group, which recognised that, whilst it is a real and pressing issue, it obviously affects only a proportion of those who face poverty. It was also noted that ongoing work to address period poverty has rightly focused on universal provision, rather than being specifically targeted at those who are experiencing poverty or are at risk of it.

The expert advisory panel for the gender equality strategy recommended that we should be brought into line with all the other UK jurisdictions by providing free period products in all schools as a priority. It also recommended that the Government should work to extend the free provision of period products to anyone who needs them, as is the case in Scotland; it specifically cited Scotland as an example. The co-design group for that strategy supported those recommendations.

We continue to work on the development of the strategies. Their final content will, of course, be subject to public consultation and Executive approval in due course. However, it is anticipated that the actions that Government have taken or plan to take to address period poverty and to provide access to free period products to all who need them will be appropriately reflected in the strategies and, in particular, in the gender equality strategy.

That concludes the introductory remarks that I wanted to make about the relationship between the social inclusion strategies and the free provision of period products. I will pass to Nichola, who can provide an update on the Department's practical contribution to addressing period poverty.

Ms Nichola Creagh (Department for Communities): Thank you, Tracy. Thank you, Chair.

Picking up from what Tracy said, I thought and hoped that it would be helpful for members to hear a wee bit about the practical input that the Department has had to tackling period poverty. As Tracy indicated, some of those issues came forward as part of the work on the anti-poverty strategy. With that in mind, members will probably recall that, last year, our Minister provided additional funding to community food providers to tackle some of the COVID-related issues of difficulty in accessing food and other poverty-related problems. We recognise the fact that those who are in poverty obviously suffer a range of problems, not just around food but around other essential products, period products being one of them. In running that scheme, which gave community food providers across the North the opportunity to access a range of products, including food and hygiene products, we introduced the opportunity to access period products to tackle period poverty.

That was a really successful initiative. From our analysis of those who used the scheme and ordered period products, we know that 83% of those who participated ordered period products. It involved a fairly small amount of money overall. Around £20K of the £1.5 million budget was spent on the period products. The feedback demonstrated that there was a definite need. Those accessing the community food providers had a need for period products, and it was difficult for them to afford and access them.

That was a time-bound scheme. It ran only from January to March of last year. Although it was successful, it was linked to the emergency funding provided under COVID, so it was not something that we would normally undertake. In the current situation, we are not funding community food providers. That opportunity to access period products is not there at the moment.

From our focus groups with those who used the products and our surveys, I will pick up on an aspect that you mentioned, Chair, and that is the associated need for greater education on accessing period products and the stigma and the social issues around it. Even those who were coming in to community food providers and accessing food and other products could be reticent in asking for those products. A lot of our community food providers do a great job in difficult circumstances, but it is not a situation where you can go in and discreetly lift the product. You may have to ask for it. People are reticent, worried and conscious of a stigma. All our community food providers highlighted that as a societal issue. It comes back to the need to deal with that issue and not just provide the product. From our experience, the opportunity to have more universal availability of product, so that those who need it can access it with no questions asked and no difficulty in a wide range of public venues, would be regarded as very beneficial.

Hopefully, that summary of the practical issues that we encountered last year is helpful. Thank you, Chair.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Thank you, Nichola and Tracy. There seems to be a problem with my sound. Can you hear me OK?

Ms Creagh: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): I am getting a lot of feedback, but, in any event, I will persevere for now.

Thank you for that, Nichola. You mentioned the issue of education. I was going to ask this about your view of the Bill: is there anything missing from it or anything that you would add if you had the chance? Is there anything in it that you would take out, for example? That is a general question that I want to ask. Feel free to go ahead and answer it, one or both of you. Who will go first?

Ms Creagh: I will pass to Tracy in a second. I have mentioned that, in working with community food providers and having discussions with the Scottish Executive on how they took forward their Bill, the issue of education is really important. Simply providing product is, obviously, a good thing, but you need to wrap that up in some form of wider societal approach, so that it is not just for young people.

On a practical level, one of the things that we have heard from community food providers is that, a lot of the time, as you can appreciate, it may be older people or men working in those situations. There is definitely an issue — it probably comes down to age — because, in the past, people were not as open about those things, and it can be difficult for people to engage in giving out a product that they are maybe a wee bit embarrassed or worried about. There is a good opportunity to say, "How do we destigmatise the issue around periods, providing products and making those freely available?". From my point of view, that would be beneficial. As I said, I know from talking to colleagues in the Scottish Executive that they found that to be of importance. From my point of view and practical experience, that is the one thing that would be very useful.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Thanks for that, Nichola. Tracy, do you want to add anything to that?

Ms Johnston: Just a couple of observations. The evidence that we have seen during our work on developing the social inclusion strategies certainly supports the need for the provision of free period products. In terms of inclusion and the comments that Nichola made about the avoidance of stigmatisation, it seems to be appropriate for those products to be made freely available to all who need them, without them having to request them.

In terms of the availability of free period products in, for example, government buildings and the NICS estate, it is right that the focus should be on buildings that are accessible to the public. That will mean that that provision is as wide as possible, and anyone who requires products can walk in and avail themselves of that provision.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Thank you, Tracy. I will move to members' questions.

Mr Harvey: Nichola and Tracy, it is lovely to meet you. Thank you very much for coming today. I am sure, going by some of the comments that you made a minute ago, that you listened to the excellent presentation that we had from Deidre and Roisin on the pilot scheme and how well it is going. They have learned a lot from that. I support anything that helps our ladies at all ages and stages.

Nichola, you mentioned that you are more practical, which is great. The quality of the product is important. It is also about having simple access to it. Do you agree?

Ms Creagh: Definitely. The quality of the product is important. In the practical intervention that we had, the opportunity was there for community food providers — you probably know a lot of them in your constituency — to choose from a range of products, but it is still limited, to some extent. There is such a wide range of product out there, and, obviously, there are a load of innovations nowadays, with reusable products and all of those things. That is worth considering. At the end of the day, a reasonable range is all that we could ever have. You will not have every product available in every circumstance, but good quality and some choice are essential.

Mr Harvey: It is about expense as well; it needs to be kept reasonably simple while still being adequate.

Do you have anything to add to that, Tracy?

Ms Johnston: No, Mr Harvey. Nichola is the practical side of things. What she said covered it well.

Mr Harvey: No problem. I appreciate it. Thank you very much for your good answers.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Our next member is Justin McNulty. Are you there, Justin?

Mr McNulty: Yes. Thank you, Nichola and Tracy, for your presentation. How important is the Bill?

Ms Johnston: If Nichola is content, I will lead off. As I said, from our stakeholder engagement on the anti-poverty and gender equality strategies, the evidence that has been presented to us suggests that there is a requirement for the provision of free period products. The evidence suggests that the need is there. The need for equity of provision across the neighbouring jurisdictions and here was also raised. There is clearly a differential between the products that can be accessed in other jurisdictions and the provision here. It appears that the Bill will go some way towards levelling that playing field on the basis of the information that stakeholders have presented to us. Nichola, do you have anything to add to that?

Ms Creagh: No. I agree with you, Tracy. Again, from our experience — this applies more generally — a universal provision of essential items such as period products is a really good way to tackle the poverty problem at the same time. It means that people are able to access products easily in all sorts of environments, and it removes the stigma of having to go to a designated community food provider with all the difficulties and embarrassment that that presents. The universality of the provision is really helpful in tackling the problems for those who cannot afford to buy the product.

Mr McNulty: For that reason alone, it is a very important Bill. The sooner it is enacted, the better. It is incredible that a stigma is accepted in today's society. Hopefully, the Bill will do something to address that stigma and the taboo that was discussed earlier. Thank you very much, ladies, for your time today.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Do Nichola or Tracy have any knowledge of the procurement of the products?

Ms Creagh: From my point of view — this is not a general knowledge of procurement, because I claim no skills on that side at all — our intervention was taken forward through our normal procurement route with a supplier that happened to be Lynas. Lynas supplied the product directly to the community food providers using an ordering system. Obviously, when setting that up, we progressed through the normal central procurement unit route. I claim no particular skills or knowledge of procurement as an issue in itself.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Thank you.

Mr Butler: Thank you for your presentation, Nichola and Tracy. I do not have any questions. It has been particularly useful to get an oversight of the different strategies that are being undertaken at the moment. You have demonstrated the usefulness of the cross-departmental approach and the learning from the community food provision. I thank you for coming along today. I have now seen you face to face; I have emailed Tracy before. I am not sure whether I have emailed Nichola, but I will have to get my finger out and see what awkward questions I can send you. Thank you so much for your participation today.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Nichola and Tracy, for your presentation this afternoon. Again, it has been a really interesting discussion about the topic. It is really important that, first, there is that cross-departmental work to tackle the issues because it affects so many. Obviously, we on the Committee are looking at it from an educational perspective, but it is really important that we hear your side of it as well and about the strategies that you are bringing forward. We heard from Homeless Period Belfast, and the work that it is doing to tackle period poverty is incredible. I was really impressed by the work that it is doing, and it reinforced my support for anything we can do to support the ending of

period poverty and to encourage that period products be readily available. That is a really positive thing.

One of the issues that Homeless Period Belfast raised was the location of period products. Again from an educational perspective, one of the concerns that schools raised was about period products being available through reception and through the school nurse and not being available in toilets, where they should be. One of the questions around that was whether girls or boys would mess about with the products and waste them instead of using them in the way that they are meant to be used. Clause 1 of the Bill discusses the requirements on the Department of Health to consult on locations where products should be made available. In your Department, the Department for Communities, where do you think the most important places are for products to be made available to tackle period poverty?

Ms Johnston: Again, looking back to evidence that has been shared with us in the development of the social inclusion strategies, what stakeholders said to us in that regard supports some sort of methodology where products are made available to whomever may need them without them having to be requested. I appreciate that that comes with issues of practicality like the ones that you have just outlined around people who perhaps do not have the same need taking them and messing with them, but, if we are talking about creating an equitable field and allowing anyone who might have a need to access them without stigma and without embarrassment or worry, the way to address that is to make them available in a public space where anyone who has a need can go in and access them.

Ms Brogan: I suppose that doing that removes that taboo around it. To answer my question, you have not made any specific recommendations or suggestions on where they should be, as long as they are made readily available.

Ms Johnston: In the context of the social inclusion strategies, we have not gone down to that level of detail. We are looking at it from a strategic perspective, and those general points have been made. There is probably more work to be done on the practicalities of how you would make that provision available. The evidence that has been presented to us definitely suggests that free access in public spaces is the preference for the way to go.

Ms Brogan: That is fair, Tracy. Thank you.

Nichola, you touched on the environmental issues around period products. In the evidence session with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), I talked about our youth really driving forward the climate change campaign and action against climate change. I want to seek your views on providing or making available environmentally friendly period products. Is there scope for us to do that? Is the real priority making sure that girls and women have the correct access to period products, whatever they are, or should we put a priority on environmentally friendly products?

Ms Creagh: From our perspective at a practical level and on the basis of discussions with colleagues in Scotland and so on, that is definitely a direction that it would be beneficial to move in from an environmental point of view and from the point of view of choice, which was mentioned earlier. However, the standard traditional products were available in our scheme; there was nothing of an environmentally friendly nature. Before you would go down that route, you would go back to the education side of things. A growing number of people are keen to use those products or already use them, but, to make it financially viable to provide them, you would need to have a larger number of people who genuinely want them and are keen to use them. From our experience, it goes back to the education aspect of the products: how to use them and what they are for. I know that that type of work has been done in Scotland across a range of areas. From a practical point of view, you would probably need to do some of that type of work before making the product available.

Ms Brogan: That is fair, Nichola. At the minute, we need regular period products to be readily available. In the conversation that we had with CCEA, its representatives outlined the practical barriers to providing environmentally friendly products in schools, such as shared bathrooms, for instance. Perhaps, it is something that your Department, rather than the Department of Education, could focus on a bit more, because it is not directly affected in schools. Do you know what I mean? You have a wider scope. However, I take your point; you are right. It is something that we should look into in the future when the programmes are being developed. Thanks, Nichola and Tracy. It has been good to talk to and hear from you.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Sheehan): Thanks to Nichola Creagh and Tracy Johnston for coming in today. It has been a useful discussion.