



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill:  
Northern Ireland Commissioner for  
Children and Young People

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afford the basic necessities of food and heating, and it is unsurprising that many struggle to afford period products.

In 2021, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) conducted a survey examining period poverty and other issues. The results show that over a quarter of pupils surveyed had difficulty accessing period products, mainly because they did not have what they needed in school. A small number had difficulty because they or their parents could not afford to buy products. It is concerning that 8% had missed school because they did not have access to sufficient products, and nearly 10% of those had missed school many times. A recent survey by Plan International UK found that period poverty escalated during the pandemic. More than a third of girls aged between 14 and 21 in the UK struggled to afford or access period products during the pandemic, which is an increase of one fifth on previous years and is equivalent to over 1 million girls in the UK.

I move on to period stigma. Period stigma can cause feelings of embarrassment and shame, which highlights the need for better education about menstruation and the importance of designing period poverty schemes in a way that respects the dignity and privacy of children and young people. The stigma often lasts a lifetime, as we can see from recent campaigns to bring menopause issues into the open. CCEA's survey reported that over half of young people in schools and FE colleges felt embarrassed when buying period products. Research highlights the fact that period stigma is a common issue for young people that has an impact on their education and involvement in activities including sports and acts as a barrier to accessing the products that they need. The stigma also feeds into wider societal challenges around gender equality.

In recent years, measures have been implemented in jurisdictions across the water to ensure the provision of free period products in schools, colleges and other public buildings. As members will be aware, two pilot schemes operate here: a period dignity pilot scheme that provides free products to all schools and a period poverty pilot project for higher education institutions. As yet, Northern Ireland does not have a permanent scheme in place to tackle period poverty or to provide products in education or health settings.

I move on to the Bill. Although its scope is focused on providing universal access to period products, NICCY highlights the importance of ensuring that consideration be given at a policy level to actions required to reduce period stigma and eradicate child poverty. A related and concerning issue that contributes to shame and stigma around periods is the lack of education that children and young people receive in schools. Teaching all children in primary and post-primary schools about periods as part of mandatory sexual and reproductive health education is fundamental to addressing period stigma and promoting respect and understanding about what people may experience when they menstruate.

NICCY has consistently highlighted the right of all children to access inclusive and evidence-based relationships and sexuality education (RSE). I am concerned by the current DE policy that enables grant-aided schools to develop their own policy on how they will address RSE in the curriculum. That is contrary to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recommendation that meaningful sexual and reproductive health education should be part of a mandatory curriculum for all schools in Northern Ireland. Members will also be aware that the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 placed into law the implementation of paragraph 86 of the CEDAW report, which endorses the CRC's 2016 recommendation.

I move on to specific clauses. As you can see from our written evidence, I strongly support the Bill, notwithstanding that it tries to address more fundamental issues. NICCY supports the introduction of a universal scheme as outlined in clause 1. It is inevitable, however, that children will face additional barriers given their age, their relatively limited access to facilities and period stigma, which may result in some being too embarrassed to access products via a physical scheme. Noting paragraph 3(b) of clause 1, I ask that all methods of delivery be considered, including online, and that delivery through the post should be free of charge for children and young people. Whilst clause 2 stipulates that period products should be made available to persons in its premises, it does not specify arrangements for the provision of period products to children who are homeschooled or who access education remotely or during school holidays. The implementation of an online and postal scheme should be considered as a measure to ensure that period products are fully accessible to all children and young people, as and when needed.

Clause 3 sets out principles that should underpin arrangements for providing period products free of charge. Arrangements for the provision of period products should ensure that they are reasonably easily obtainable and are provided in a way that respects dignity and that a reasonable choice of

products is given. NICCY welcomes those principles but notes the discretion given to Departments for specific arrangements. I am concerned that such flexibility will not ensure that period products are made available to children and young people in a way that is discreet, ensures that they are freely accessible and respects their right to privacy. In educational settings, therefore, we stress the importance of ensuring that a sufficient supply and variety of period products are made available in girls', gender-neutral and disabled school toilets, which should be freely accessible to young people throughout the school day. That will ensure that children and young people's right to manage their periods with dignity and privacy is respected and will help to reduce instances of children missing school due to period poverty.

Beyond educational settings, we recommend that period products are made available in public facilities used by children and young people, such as recreation and activity centres, youth centres and other community facilities. It should go without saying that any advertising or other measures to promote awareness of the scheme should be child- and young person-friendly.

Clauses 1, 2, 4 and 5 include provisions that require consultation with product users and specific public bodies, which, in turn, will inform the guidance required at clause 4. NICCY highlights the importance of consultation with a wide range of children and young people — in particular, trans and non-binary children, those with physical and intellectual disability, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, and families known to be living in or at greater risk of poverty — to ensure that their views and preferences are reflected in guidance and that the proposed period poverty schemes fully and sensitively meet all of their needs.

Finally, I reiterate my support for the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill and its importance for children and young people. As I said at the beginning, I express my deep frustration and regret at the need for such legislation. It simply acts as a sticking plaster for systemic failure to address the issues of child poverty and the deficiencies in our relationships and sexuality education in Northern Ireland, and, as such, is an indication of the work that is still to be undertaken to ensure that children here experience their rights.

Thank you, Chair. As always, I am happy to take questions.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** Thanks, commissioner. That was a powerful summation at the end around systemic failures to address child poverty and the deficiencies in RSE. A key issue that the Committee felt, could be added to the Bill is around menstruation education and empowerment for all children and young people in school. It is something that the Committee will definitely look at and will keep you informed if and when we draft a specific amendment on that. I am keen to get through as many members as possible this morning.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks, Koulla, for coming in this morning. I listened to what you said about the educational aspect to all of this. The problem is not just that period products are not fully available but that there is still a stigma of sorts attached to menstruation. It is kept quiet, and, even if there is discussion in class, girls are talked to separately. The stigma is probably attached more to the male population than the female population. Girls are made to feel in some way inferior because they menstruate or that they should stay out of the road. There is a long historical context to that. That is as big an obstacle to get over as the lack of provision of period products, if not bigger. I doubt that it will be possible in this mandate to get some educational component into the Bill; Aoibhinn could maybe give us more advice on that. It might be just too difficult, but it certainly should be picked up on during the next mandate. There should be some compulsory educational component around it. You mentioned that an element of sexual and reproductive education should take place in schools that would cover menstruation. Do you want to comment further on that, Koulla?

**Ms Yiasouma:** As you say, Pat, I made it clear that the Bill addresses a particular need. As I said in my concluding comments, it responds to poverty and the fact that we do not have good relationships and sexuality education. Girls having periods is part of their being sexual beings. I will tell you a personal story. I started my periods at 11, and I was told, "That means you can have a baby now". That was way over 40 years ago, but it is all part of that process.

As I said in my oral and written evidence, it would be great if the Committee could remind the Assembly and the Department of Education of the importance of addressing the deficiency in the relationship between sexuality and education. However, the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act puts in place the two paragraphs of the recommendations of the CEDAW report. One of them

is about abortion and reproductive rights for women. However, there is in Northern Ireland law a provision to the effect that the Government must:

*"Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory curriculum component for adolescents, covering early pregnancy prevention and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation".*

Some of the language in that, I accept, is controversial. Nevertheless, it talks about a compulsory component of the curriculum for adolescents. We have in law the need to have a mandatory curriculum for relationships and sexuality education. There is work to be done to get that piece of law implemented on a range of issues. It is an issue for girls, trans young people, non-binary young people and boys. We need it addressed. We need to remove any shame that anyone feels because they have periods. As I say, it is a lifelong thing. We see it at the other end of the spectrum, when women enter the menopause. It is part of who we are, and we should not feel ashamed of it.

That was a long-winded answer. I accept that you may not be able to have an amendment, but what I say is that it is already in the law. We just have not implemented it in the two and a half years since it was passed.

**Mr Sheehan:** I absolutely agree that it should be implemented, Koulla. It is an ongoing problem that needs to be dealt with. That is all I have to ask you. Thanks for your comment. It was not long-winded at all.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Thanks Pat.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Children's Commissioner for being with us this morning. I have no specific questions for the commissioner. I agree with her on the need for communication and education on the matter, and I agree on the need to address poverty in its wider sense, not only on this issue.

I am somewhat concerned at this stage that, in this area, I have heard nothing more than guesses at a budget for the matter. I have not heard whether it will fall within the Education, Health or Communities budget. Maybe it is a matter for the Executive, but we need to make strides in that area. That is all.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** Koulla, you may want to have a think about that. One issue that arose in our evidence session last week was the Department of Health's declaration that, from an operational or a budgetary point of view, it did not consider itself to be the lead Department. That may become a significant issue for the progress of the Bill. We understand —.

**Ms Yiasouma:** *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** Yes, I know that that is an understatement. You have similar experience to mine of the difficulty that an issue faces if it needs cross-departmental cooperation. You will also be aware of the law that requires cross-departmental cooperation.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Exactly.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** It is an issue that we may need to overcome. Do you want to speak to that, Koulla, before I bring the next member in?

**Ms Yiasouma:** Robin is absolutely right to say that the scheme needs to be costed. It is not a cost-neutral initiative, albeit a very important one. You are absolutely right: I sighed heavily when I heard what you said about Departments saying, "It is not our remit". The initiative speaks to article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is about a child's right to good healthcare. It speaks to articles 27 and 27 of the UNCRC, which are about the right to education. This is a cross-departmental responsibility, and, as you rightly pointed out, there is a law unique to Northern Ireland that says that all government Departments and public bodies have to cooperate to achieve outcomes for children and young people, including the two that I have just mentioned. There is a provision in that legislation to allow for a pooled budget. Saying, "It is not ours" shows a simple lack of imagination. The Assembly makes the legislation, and it is incumbent on Departments to implement it. I do not see anything in our laws that will hinder such implementation. However, Robin Newton is absolutely right to say that it will be possible only if we have a properly costed scheme, which is difficult because uptake is unknown. It is a cross-departmental issue because of where the products will be made

available. Those buildings and services are owned by different agencies that belong to different Departments, so responsibility should be across the Executive, and there is a lot of scaffolding in place to make that happen.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** OK. I thought that it was worth flagging that with you.

**Mr Butler:** Good morning, commissioner.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Good morning, Mr Butler.

**Mr Butler:** How are you? Thank you for your input. Your ever-present passion for young people is hanging clean out of you, as we say in Northern Ireland. You will have heard that a few times. Thank you.

I will get straight to it. Last week, as the Chair said, we had a fantastic session — I do not know whether it was open or closed — with a range of people, including young people. There were also some excellent — I hesitate to use the word "older" — teachers who were, perhaps, of our generation. Some of the content was incredibly honest and open. We learned that, in some instances, the lack of knowledge and ability to teach — I am not contradicting the Deputy Chair here — does not lie only with male teachers. In some instances, women who taught did not facilitate, for whatever reason, the needs of some pupils. Some of the women teachers had experienced that themselves, so they were not necessarily talking about people whom they worked with.

You talked about RSE. Obviously it is all interconnected. What, in a common curriculum, do you see as the best vehicle for teaching about these subjects, given that, according to the unions, our teachers are under huge pressure? We are throwing lots of stuff at schools at the moment: mental health, behaviours, RSE and all of those things. Do you have an opinion on whether teachers are best placed to impart that knowledge? I think that we all agree about supplying free products, although we need to nail down how we do that. The bit that will bring the greatest long-term value, however, is knowledge impartation, destigmatisation and so on.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Absolutely. RSE is in the curriculum. Every child gets some form of RSE. I note that the Committee will talk about the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022 later today. The issue is the scope that schools have regarding what that contains. The Belfast Youth Forum did a piece of work for which it surveyed 700 young people. You cannot see the flyer that I am holding up, because I am not on-screen, but anyway —

**Mr Butler:** Yes, I can.

**Ms Yiasouma:** — the report is called 'Any use?'. It was done by the Belfast Youth Forum and supported by Queen's University, so I am content that it is robust. I cannot find the figures, but it talks about the fact that most of those who received RSE had often had one-off talks and that the subject in which they learned about it was biology. Looking at the minimum content order and other places, RSE is often found in learning for life and work. That is the second most prevalent area in which it is found, and it is probably better that it is based in learning for life and work.

It is a formal part of the curriculum, but the curriculum is not mandatory, and that is the problem. We know that it belongs there. CCEA has published a couple of really good curriculum guides: one for primary and one for post-primary. There is a conversation to be had about what a mandatory curriculum should be.

Children and young people have said — particularly through this survey, which is very good and which I commend to the Committee — that they want to learn about relationships and sexuality in school in a continual way, rather than through one-off talks, so that they can follow it through. At the moment, children get information from friends and peers and from social media. Nobody wants kids to learn things on social media; I certainly do not. It absolutely belongs in the mainstream curriculum. Space needs to be made for it — probably in learning for life and work — and teachers of all genders need to be supported in educating about it. This is not about male teachers, female teachers or trans teachers; it is about teachers feeling confident to teach and support their children. This is not as straightforward as maths, but neither is it so complicated that we cannot have a curriculum and support our teachers to do it.

**Mr Butler:** OK. I have two questions, Koulla. Thank you so much for that. That was useful. I appreciate that. *[Pause.]* I know what my last question is, but my middle question has left my brain. I have a wee bit of brain freeze.

**Ms Yiasouma:** It will come back to your brain.

**Mr Butler:** OK, I will maybe message you with the question.

This is not to be flippant, but maths was not my strength in school. You said that you took your period at 11 and that that was over 40 years ago. For accuracy, how many years over 40 was that?  
*[Laughter.]*

**Ms Yiasouma:** That was 46 years ago.

**Mr Butler:** Fair play for fronting up. Thank you, Koulla.

**Ms Yiasouma:** I am on the other side of the menopause.

**Mr Butler:** You are on the other side.

That other question will come to me. If you do not mind, I will communicate it to you. Thank you so much.

**Mr McCrossan:** How are you doing, Koulla? It is good to see you again. Thanks very much.

I will just skip straight to it. You said that you would like to see a child rights impact assessment (CRIA) done for the proposal. Can you tell us more about that and about why you think that that is particularly relevant to this circumstance? In particular, can you tell us what advantage a CRIA would give us when looking at issues around period products?

**Ms Yiasouma:** NICCY has been working with Departments on how to introduce a CRIA — a child rights impact assessment — at the beginning of developing a policy, although, in this case, it will be in the guidance. It would look at how children are affected. Which rights are we talking about? As I said, we are talking about children's rights on poverty and their rights to have a higher standard of living, healthcare and education. It would then look at how children are impacted by the policy and how to overcome the negative impacts, if there are any. It is about how to make sure that you hear the views and experiences of those groups of young people. I identified some of them in my evidence: trans and non-binary young people, girls, children living in poverty, those from the BME community or those with a disability.

A CRIA is a tool by which we make sure that we reach all the children whom we need to reach in a rights-compliant way through the policy and legislation that we seek to implement. There is a template, and we have been working with all Departments. No Department should claim ignorance of that, though I do not think that they would, because we are really pleased about the reception that the CRIA tool has had.

**Mr McCrossan:** Thank you; that is helpful.

You mentioned that Northern Ireland is alone in not having a permanent scheme in place to tackle period poverty. How would you compare the visions of my colleague Pat Catney's private Member's Bill with permanent schemes elsewhere? Have you come across evidence in other jurisdictions that suggests that their provisions have gone a long way in meeting the identified needs? For instance, has school attendance improved?

**Ms Yiasouma:** I have not done that work, Daniel; I am sorry. However, if just under 10% of our young people in Northern Ireland say that they miss school, that shows the need for a permanent scheme. It is too early to say what the impact of the permanent schemes across the water is on attendance, particularly because of COVID. However, it is not just about getting those young people into school; it is about their ability to engage with education while they are there, if they are anxious about their periods or about where they can access a bathroom so that they can change whatever product they use. It is complicated. I have not done comparisons with what is going on across the water. All I know

is that Pat's Bill is needed in Northern Ireland whilst we work on addressing the more fundamental issues.

**Mr McCrossan:** Thank you. Finally, Koulla, you are critical of the lack of education on periods that children and young people receive in schools. What do you see primarily as the problem in primary schools, and how widespread is it? Similarly, what is the nature and the extent of the problem with period education in post-primary schools?

**Ms Yiasouma:** The issues in primary schools are a little more difficult to quantify, because we have not surveyed those children and parents. Again, I draw your attention to the curriculum guidance for primary schools that CCEA drew up in 2015. That is very much about children understanding not only their bodies but their right to say no and children recognising when somebody is infringing on that right and behaving inappropriately towards them.

Also, let us not forget that children are having their periods younger. We talked about the age that I was, but there are girls, trans young people and non-binary young people who are having their periods when they are younger than 11. They are having their periods when they are in primary school. We talk about the challenges of the transition in P6 and P7. We need to remove any barriers. We cannot quantify it, but, from what I hear anecdotally, the curriculum issue is just as important in primary schools as it is in post-primary schools.

On the extent of the issue in post-primary, I refer you to the only survey that I have seen in Northern Ireland, which is the one that I just mentioned to Robbie Butler. It is called 'Any Use?', and it was undertaken by the Belfast Youth Forum, as it was then. In that survey, young people said that they feel that the curriculum is not adequate to meet their needs and that they want a curriculum that is designed in partnership with their schools, with their parents and, primarily, with them. There is no way that I could say, hand on heart, that we have good or even adequate relationships and sexuality education in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McCrossan:** Thank you very much, Koulla. I appreciate that.

**Ms Yiasouma:** OK, Daniel.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** I will bring Robbie Butler back in briefly.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Has he remembered his question?

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** He has remembered his question, which sounds like a pertinent one.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Good.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** Robbie, you have the floor to ask your question and nothing else. Go ahead [*Laughter.*]

**Mr Butler:** He literally just texted me saying, "No fluff, Robbie. No jokes".

Commissioner, a pilot project is under way. Have you been tracking it? Have you had a chance to look at it? It is early days, but it would be useful to put down a marker. Were you consulted about that, or did you have any input?

**Ms Yiasouma:** No. Sorry, finish your question, Robbie. Go on.

**Mr Butler:** If you have not been consulted, it would be good to get eyes on it and be alive to it, because there will be value in what comes out of that.

**Ms Yiasouma:** I agree that the pilot project and its outcome will be incredibly important in developing what comes out of the Bill. No, we were not consulted on it when it was set up. It is too early to track it, but, when the guidance is published — should the Bill pass, and I hope that it does — we will carefully examine the pilot to make sure that the lessons are being learned.

**Mr Butler:** Thank you, Chair; I appreciate that. Thanks, guys.

**Mrs Dodds:** Good morning, Koulla. It is good to see you again

**Ms Yiasouma:** Good morning, Diane.

**Mrs Dodds:** I want to say a couple of things as a preamble. We all want young women and girls to feel confident, to feel able to participate, to feel that nothing can stop them and to feel that everything in the world is theirs by right. That is massively important. Openly addressing issues like periods and period poverty is really important, because those are important issues for all girls and they are about confidence. However, it is also really important that we get the Bill right and that we understand that we are targeting our help in days of limited resources. I support the principle of the Bill, but some aspects of it worry me ever so slightly, particularly clause 1(2), which states:

*"The period products obtainable free of charge by a person under such arrangements are to be sufficient products to meet the person's needs while in Northern Ireland."*

Under that, we would be meeting need for people who do not live in Northern Ireland. I can understand meeting need in an emergency, but I genuinely do not know how to quantify meeting need on an ongoing basis. Some aspects of the Bill, like that, concern me.

I read your proposal about a postal service. Have you thought about how much that would cost? It is an interesting concept. Were girls to have that, they may well come back to school. It may help to address a specific issue. I had not thought about that. Have you been able to quantify that?

**Ms Yiasouma:** Obviously, no, we cannot, because we do not know how many will prefer uptake by post. That is about reaching young people outside school hours and those who do not attend school. It could be children who, like I said, are home-educated; children who, for whatever reason, are absent for long periods; or children who are anxious about going to places to access those products. I fully appreciate that there is a cost. We raised the issue because clause 1(3)(b) states that any postal cost would have to be met by the person. That gave us cause for anxiety because we need to make this as accessible as possible in a way that helps to remove the stigma, which, we know, is particularly heightened among young people.

No, we have not costed it because we do not know what the uptake will be. We do not know how many will need it and how many will not feel sufficiently comfortable. You are right to raise it, as Robin did in his question; this needs to be costed. However, if we are serious about providing free period products for those who need them, we need to be inclusive in how they can access them. A postal scheme has to be one of the ways that are considered. If a CRIA is undertaken in the way that I have just discussed with Daniel, that would be one of the considerations in it. I accept that, sometimes, things are too costly, but a postal scheme needs to be in the mix in the considerations. When we looked at the Bill, that is one of the barriers that we saw to girls being able to access the products that they need.

**Mrs Dodds:** There are many inequalities in how people access education, and that access is one of them. Education is everything; it improves life chances so much. However, I am concerned that we seem to be putting into law things for which we have either not done any calculations or done them on the back of a postage stamp.

**Ms Yiasouma:** It is difficult to know.

**Mrs Dodds:** Yes, it is. I see that the Chair is getting angsty —

**Ms Yiasouma:** That does not normally stop you.

**Mrs Dodds:** — so I will leave it there. Chair, I will raise other issues as we go through the clauses.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** Diane, I never get angsty with you [Laughter.] Thanks very much for those questions, Diane.

**Ms Brogan:** Good morning, Koulla. Thanks so much again. How are you doing?

**Ms Yiasouma:** OK.

**Ms Brogan:** Good. It has been a really interesting discussion. I find it fascinating that most of it has been dominated by relationships and sexuality education. We, as a Committee, have focused on that. As we have gone through the Bill, it has been highlighted that we need to ensure that children are educated from an early age about periods, relationships, sex and everything else. In my time on the Committee, I have mentioned a number of times the need to remove the taboo about talking about periods, in this instance, and about violence against women and girls and consent, which you mentioned. We need to teach children to say no, about what consent is and about what a healthy relationship is.

**Ms Yiasouma:** It is all connected.

**Ms Brogan:** It is all connected.

As the Chair and Robbie mentioned, we had an engagement with youth groups about the Bill last week. As the Chair said, they seem to be well ahead of us on these topics. In my closing remarks, I said that I had learned so much from them. As a 34-year-old woman, I thought that I knew what I needed to know about periods and that, so it was really interesting to have that discussion with them.

Yesterday, in the Chamber, I brought up again with the Education Minister the issue of making RSE mandatory, consistent, age-appropriate and inclusive. Maybe you can comment on her answer, which was that it already is mandatory. Last May, we got a briefing on the 'Any Use?' report. I reference that report a lot because the statistics are there. Thirty-four per cent of kids said that they have never received any RSE. It does not add up that it is mandatory in the curriculum but so many children say that they do not receive any RSE. Would you like to comment on the fact that, while it should be mandatory across schools, it does not seem to be?

**Ms Yiasouma:** The Minister is right, in a way, in that it is covered in the curriculum. What is mandatory is having RSE in schools. We know that some young people will say that they did not receive it because, as it was in the form of one talk, for example, they have forgotten about it. What is not mandatory is what is taught in schools. People like me who talk about something being mandatory need to check our language. We are talking about a compulsory curriculum, as you have for maths, biology and geography. We are talking about a compulsory curriculum, whereby what is taught is clearly identified in legislation and guidance. I accept that an RSE curriculum is not as straightforward as a maths curriculum, although it was easier for me to learn than maths, but that does not mean that we cannot do it. We have seen it happen across the water, where they are looking at introducing a compulsory curriculum.

We need a compulsory curriculum. It needs to be taught as part of what all children learn. It needs to be age-appropriate. It needs to be inclusive. Periods are part of it. The fact that young people have periods should never be a source of shame, but it is because we do not enable our boys, girls, trans young people and non-binary young people to feel comfortable with the subject, nor support our teachers and school staff to be confident in teaching it. Whilst the Minister is right that RSE is a mandatory curriculum, what is taught is not compulsory. That is what we need to remedy in Northern Ireland.

**Ms Brogan:** Thanks, Koulla. I completely agree with you. The big thing is being standardised. Of course, it will be different in primary schools and post-primary schools; it will be age-appropriate. However, we need to ensure that all children are offered the same opportunity. We also need to make sure that teachers are qualified to teach it and that a PE teacher or somebody with free time is not dragged in to take it on.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Or a biology teacher.

**Ms Brogan:** Exactly; any type of teacher. Historically, that is what has happened. I am glad that there is that focus. Even in this session, there has been a real focus on it. We will keep putting pressure on in that area.

I have one other question, Koulla. It is about girls' uniforms and flexibility on uniforms. It is an issue that has been raised with me. Should girls be allowed to wear trousers? Should how they want to dress and wear the uniform be at their discretion?

**Ms Yiasouma:** I despair. Uniforms have been a consistent feature of my work and NICCY's work since I became commissioner in 2015. I see what is happening in other places. The idea of a gender-

neutral uniform policy is that, instead of having what girls should wear and what boys should wear, we have the uniform of the school — skirt, trousers and jumpers, for instance — and the children can pick whether they want to wear a skirt or trousers. The days should be long past when we say to girls, "You have to wear a skirt"; I do not understand it. As an ex-girl, I know what I felt comfortable wearing when I had my period, and it was not a skirt. There are other reasons why many girls do not like wearing a skirt to school. A lot of it is about their ability to be protected from inappropriate behaviour by others. We need a one-uniform policy for all children that allows young people the flexibility to choose between a skirt and trousers.

**Ms Brogan:** Thanks, Koulla. Again, I agree with you. It is great to have your view as the commissioner; I appreciate that.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** Thanks for those questions, Nicola, particularly on the minimum content order.

Koulla, the minimum content order is being debated more and more, particularly because of the hinterland, which you and Nicola have identified, between what is mandatory and what happens in practice. I recently accessed the minimum content order to see exactly what it says. For Key Stage 2, under "Personal Development" and on mutual understanding, it says:

*"Pupils should have opportunities to ...*

*Explore the implications of sexual maturation."*

However, the word "menstruation" does not appear in the minimum content order. As far as I can see, the word "consent" does not appear in the minimum content order.

**Ms Yiasouma:** No, it does not. It does not deal with it at Key Stages 2, 3 or 4.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** I will not take us down that road because that is a different matter, but I am trying to find references to this. The minimum content order for Key Stage 3 says:

*"Explore the concept of Health as the development of a whole person ...*

*physical and emotional/mental personal health ...*

*the effects of change on body, mind and behaviour."*

It seems to be inadequate and unspecific on some of those key matters.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Absolutely. I must admit that the minimum content order had passed me by, but I have had a look at it. It is from 2007. Even for Key Stage 4, it talks about developing:

*"their understanding of relationships and sexuality and the responsibilities of healthy relationships".*

There is a lot in that, but all of it is subject to —

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** Interpretation.

**Ms Yiasouma:** — interpretation, yes. I agree that the minimum content needs to be more clearly codified. Of course, it will include what happens to our bodies for boys as well as girls or people who were born with those genetics. What happens to our bodies as we grow into sexual beings is incredibly important. Understanding all those issues, including consent, is incredibly important if we are to have a safer world for everyone. The minimum content order is not adequate for those purposes.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** I hope that I am not misrepresenting the Minister, but, in her recent answers, I have not detected an urgency about reviewing the minimum content order. Yet, there seems to be a degree of consensus on some of the issues, such as including more specific and less high-level reference to menstruation education and specific reference to consent. That is something to look at in a bit more detail.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Absolutely.

**Mr McNulty:** Thanks, Koulla. This has been a refreshing conversation. It has been well informed by you, as always. I hope you are keeping well.

**Ms Yiasouma:** I am, thank you, Justin.

**Mr McNulty:** I agreed completely with Diane Dodds when she said:

*"We all want young women and girls to feel confident, to feel able to participate, to feel that nothing can stop them".*

Those are powerful words.

I was out around Newry on Saturday morning, and I stumbled upon the Cathal Fegan Schools of TaeKwon-Do. There were young girls and boys in the class, and they were all buzzing. They were all really engaged and feeling powerful from their participation in the sport. I met Aoife Loye, a young lady from Silverbridge — a taekwondo world champion who is under-celebrated. It took the lights out of my eyes seeing what that young girl has achieved. She is an unbelievable role model and example for her friends and peers and her community. She gives an unbelievable lift to her community. I speak for Aoife Loye and for Caroline O'Hanlon and the Armagh Ladies footballers. I am just reflecting on the fact that, in an under-12 match against Crossmaglen, I marked a girl — Patricia Hughes, I think her name was. The reason that I marked a girl is that there were no girls' teams; there were only boys' teams in those days. It is amazing how far we have transitioned and positively so.

How much does period stigma prevent girls' further participation in sport? It is sad that not enough girls get to experience the joys and benefits of sport because of period stigma. What is your view on that?

**Ms Yiasouma:** It is difficult to know. Research from Plan and others shows that sporting activities are hindered by period stigma. If we take that further, we know that periods can be a painful experience for girls — I speak from personal experience. What needs to be put in place to improve their participation? Is it about having a safer and more comfortable place in which to say, "I'm on my period today, so I'm not feeling right", without being dropped from teams or missing a training session being a big deal? You are absolutely right, Justin, particularly when it comes to really physical sports. I was a rugby player as a young woman. I can see Robbie Butler completely losing his mind at that information. Periods play a big part in your ability to participate in a sport such as rugby. I was part of an all-girls' team that was coached by women, so we were comfortable with talking about it. We need to find ways of making it OK to talk about it. We need to identify what the barriers are for those girls. What do the coaches need to know? What do their teammates need to know? The barriers need to be removed. Period stigma prevents them from fully participating in some sporting activities. We need to understand what those barriers are and remove them. You are absolutely right: there is work to be done in that regard.

**Mr McNulty:** Does the Bill go part of the way towards helping that?

**Ms Yiasouma:** It will do. It brings it out into the open. It makes it easier to have those conversations.

**Mr McNulty:** Excellent.

I am going to go off-piste, Koulla.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** Justin, if that was not slightly off-piste, you have just frightened me.  
[Laughter.]

**Mr McNulty:** I mentioned something that I feel strongly about to the Education Minister yesterday, and I may have mentioned it to you before, Koulla: acronymising children and young people. Terms such as "LAC" and "SEN" are used to describe children. What are your views on acronymising children? Do you feel that it dehumanises them? Should acronyms be removed from the lexicon of the Department of Education? I was speaking to my mum, who has a lifetime of teaching: some of the acronyms that were used in her day were criminal.

**Ms Yiasouma:** This is not off-piste, Chair; it is a really important point about how we view children and young people. I, of course, use acronyms such as SEN, but I try hard to say "children with special educational needs" rather than "SEN children". I hate the fact that we call children "learners" and "pupils" and that we put what we view as their problem in front of the term "child". We say "LAC", which is "looked-after children". A lot of work has been done by Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) and children who have care experience. They have come up with a dictionary of language that we should use. Always put the child first, because the fact is that they are a child first. Saying "special educational needs" can sometimes be a chore, but I absolutely agree that we always need to see the child. They are so much more than the barriers or the disabilities that we see in them. If, when you see a child in a wheelchair, you see the wheelchair rather than the child, you need to stop doing that. See the child, and then look at their other joys.

I really welcome your question. I use acronyms, but I try hard not to. We need to mind our language a lot more around the use of acronyms. We need to ask the child how they want us to see them. That is a really important point. It is an important point about how business is done in our Parliament. I commend Justin for that question, Chair. It is a really good one, so do not tell him off.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** You can commend each other. As someone who chaired the all-party group on children and young people for many years, I agree wholeheartedly with your principles, but I cannot do anything about it in the Period Products Bill that we are talking about today. I have the unenviable task of chairing you all to get through that. The point has been well made by Justin on a number of occasions. Justin has committed to stay the course on that important issue. We can absolutely do that as an Education Committee as well. It was worth hearing the Children's Commissioner's view on that issue today. I appreciate those questions. Thank you.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you, commissioner, for your attendance today. I will finish on a comment rather than a question. It is not only good but right to make provision, and, in fact, it would be wrong not to, especially when we think of the one in four who lives in poverty and the 8% who have missed school. If we can reduce that — preferably to zero — that will be a good thing.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Yes.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you.

**Ms Yiasouma:** I completely agree. Thank you for that.

**The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle):** Thanks, commissioner. Thanks, members. That brings us to the end of our session with Koulla. Thanks so much for your time today. We look forward to staying in touch with you about this important matter. Thank you.

**Ms Yiasouma:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you, everyone.