**Period products (Free Provision) Bill - Oral Evidence**

**Education Committee - 26th January 2022**

**Introduction**

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to give evidence today on provision of free Period Products. I would also like to commend Pat Catney, MLA for proposing this bill.

As outlined in our evidence the Bill proposes to address 2 issues - period poverty and period stigma. Both very real and impact on outcomes for too many and can affect all who menstruate, including girls, transgender and non-binary young people

**‘Period poverty’** is when individuals are unable to afford or access suitable period products. We know that children are more likely to be living in poverty than any other age group in society. Prior to Covid, around 1 in 4 children in Northern Ireland were living in poverty. While more recent poverty statistics are not available, for many families the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced in meeting basic needs. Indeed, the number of households in receipt of Universal Credit almost doubled from February to July 2020, and it has remained at this level ever since. Families struggle to afford basic necessities in terms of food and heating and it is unsurprising that many struggle to afford period products.

**Prevalence of period poverty**

In 2021, CCEA conducted a survey examining period poverty and other related issues. Results showed that:

* Over a quarter of pupils surveyed (27.5% N=382) had **difficulty accessing** **period products**, mainly (83%) because they didn’t have what they needed in school.
* For a smaller number they had difficulty because they or their parents couldn’t afford products.
* What is very concerning is that 8% (N=113) had **missed school** because they didn’t have access to sufficient period product and nearly 10% of these had missed school many times.[[1]](#footnote-2)

A recent survey by Plan International UK found that period poverty escalated during the pandemic. More than a third (36%) of girls aged 14-21 in the UK struggled to afford or access period products during the Coronavirus pandemic - **up a fifth** on the previous year.[[2]](#footnote-3) That is equivalent to over one million girls in the UK.[[3]](#footnote-4)

**Period stigma**

‘Period stigma’ can cause feelings of embarrassment and shame, highlighting both 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.

On this issue, CCEA’s survey in 2021 reported that over half of pupils (53.0%) and FE college students (54.1% N=40) felt embarrassed buying period products.

Evidence therefore highlights the prevalence of period poverty and period stigma and the significant negative impacts. Research highlights period stigma as a common issue for young people which impacts on their education, involvement in activities, including sports, and acts as a barrier to accessing period products. This stigma also feeds into wider societal challenges around gender equality

In recent years, various measures have been implemented in jurisdictions in GB to ensure the provision of free period products in schools, colleges and other public buildings.[[4]](#footnote-5) As you will be aware there are two pilot schemes are currently operating here – the Period Dignity Pilot Scheme which provides period products free of charge to all schools, and the Period Poverty Pilot project for higher education institutions. Northern Ireland does not have a permanent scheme in place to tackle period poverty or provide products in education or health settings.

**The Bill**

While the scope of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill is focused on providing universal access to period products, NICCY highlights the importance of ensuring that **consideration is given at a policy level to actions that are 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 children and young people receive on periods in school. **Teaching all children about periods in primary and secondary school, as part of a mandatory sexual and reproductive health education, is fundamental to addressing period stigma** and promoting respect and understanding what people may experience when menstruating. NICCY has consistently highlighted the right of all children to access an inclusive evidence-based Relationships and Sexuality Education. I am concerned by current DE policy which enables grant-aided schools to develop their own policy on how they will address RSE within the curriculum and is contrary to the UN Committee’s recommendation that meaningful sexual and reproductive health education is part of the mandatory school curriculum for all schools in Northern Ireland.[[5]](#footnote-6) Also as members will be aware the NI (Executive formation etc) Act, 2019 placed into law the implementation of paragraph 86 of the CEDAW Report[[6]](#footnote-7) which in endorses the CRC’s recommendation, part of which states:

(d) Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation;[[7]](#footnote-8)

Moving on to specific clauses. As you can see from our written evidence I am in support of the Bill.

**Clause 1: Provision of free period products - Department scheme**

NICCY supports the introduction of a universal scheme as outlined in Clause 1 however it is inevitable that children will face additional barriers, given their age, relatively limited access to facilities and period stigma, which may result in some feeling too embarrassed to access products provided via this scheme. Therefore, I ask that all methods of delivery and considered including accessing period products online with delivery through the post.

**Clause 2: Provision of free period products - public service bodies**

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 home-schooled, children who access education remotely or to children during school holidays. Again **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: Provision of free period products - public service bodies**

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, are provided in a way that respects dignity and that a reasonable **choice** of period products is given. NICCY welcomes these principles, but note the discretion given to Departments in terms of specific arrangements and 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 discrete, ensures they are freely accessible and respects their right to privacy. Within educational settings, therefore, **we stress the importance of ensuring that a sufficient supply and variety of types of period products are made available in girls, gender neutral and disabled school toilets, which should be freely accessible to students throughout the school day**. This will ensure children and young people’s right to manage their periods with dignity and privacy is respected and help to reduce instances of children missing school due to period poverty.

Beyond educational settings, **we recommend that period products should be made available in public facilities that are used by children and young people, such as recreation centres, activity centres, youth centres and other community facilities**.

It also goes without saying that any **advertising or other measures to promote awareness of the scheme should be child and young person friendly, to include easy read format and inclusive language**.

**Clause 4: Guidance**

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**, this includes **trans and non-binary** **children and young people, 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 their needs.

The learning from existing pilots in Northern Ireland provide a sound basis from which to develop a regional based universal scheme(s) and the views of children and young people accessing these schemes is vital to informing the scheme as it expands.

**Conclusion**

So finally to reiterate my support for the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill and it’s importance for young people. But, I do want to express my frustration and regret at the need for such legislation which is a sticking plaster for systemic failure to address the issues of child poverty and Relationship and Sexuality Education and, as such, an indication of work that is still to be undertaken to ensure that children experience their rights in Northern Ireland.

1. [CCEA (2021) Period Poverty Survey Findings Report](https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Resource/Period%20Poverty%20Survey%20Findings%20Report.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [Plan International UK (2021), ‘Over one million girls in the UK struggled to afford or access period products during the pandemic’](https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/over-one-million-girls-in-the-uk-struggled-to-afford-or-access-period-products-during-the-pandemic) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Based on 2019-2020 ONS estimate population data for girls in the UK aged 14-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. In Scotland, the Period Products (Free Provision) Scotland Act 2021, which will come into force by January 2023, places duties on education providers and local authorities to make period products obtainable free of charge to anyone who needs them.
In England, the Period Product Scheme for Schools and Colleges was launched in January 2020 to provide free period products to learners who need them in their place of study. NHS England provides free period products to every hospital patient who needs them.
In 2020, the Welsh Government committed to a £3.3 million period poverty fund to share amongst schools and colleges. Each local authority was also allocated budget to provide products in community spaces. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. [NICCY (2020) Statement on Children’s Rights in Northern Ireland 2, November 2020, p29.](https://www.niccy.org/media/3691/niccy-socrni-2-main-report-web-nov-20.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. [Letter to Peter Weir, Minister for Education, on 23 June 2020.](https://www.niccy.org/media/3832/letter-to-peter-weir-minister-for-education-rse-curriculum.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. [https://undocs.org/en/CEDAW/C/OP.8/GBR/1](https://ecni.sharepoint.com/sites/PolicyandParticipation/Shared%20Documents/General/PM%26EF) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)