

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill

Call for Evidence

Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

Introduction & General Comment

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council welcomes the opportunity to respond on such an important issue, and this has been discussed within Council by Elected Members on numerous occasions dating back to 2018.

Over the past number of years, there has been a significant increase in the discussion, analysis and understanding of 'period poverty', not just in Northern Ireland but worldwide. 'Period Poverty' is a term used to describe the phenomenon of people being unable to afford sufficient sanitary products to comfortably manage menstruation. This can then prevent individuals from being able to fully and equally participate in daily activities and public life.

The term itself entered into public consciousness following reports of girls missing school because of a lack of access to sanitary products as well as the increasing requests for these products at foodbanks. Menstruation can impact on people as young as 10 years of age and, given that this is a natural bodily function, it is believed that quality sanitary products should be made available within the rest rooms of all public buildings, sporting facilities and educational institutions. Sanitary products are becoming increasingly more expensive and given the potential impact of the pandemic and UK Exit on the economy and local jobs, the issue of period poverty could be significantly increased over the next number of months and years.

Given that it is a normal bodily function, and the fact that businesses and organisations allow for free access to products for other bodily functions, it is only fair that these products are made as available as others such as: toilet roll, soap and hand sanitiser.

The Council supports the aim of providing everyone in Northern Ireland with sufficient, quality, sanitary products. The Council notes that some organisations, colleges and work places are already doing this voluntarily, however a legislative duty for public and local authorities would ensure that expectations could be met in a reliable manner across all organisations.

At the Council meeting in December 2018, the Council unanimously passed a motion to support the On the Ball campaign, the aim of which is to provide free sanitary products in as many sporting grounds and public buildings as possible to combat the ever growing issue of period poverty.

Following this, the Council made sanitary products available within its Civic Buildings, Arts Centres and Leisure Centres. Feedback on this has been positive – both from employees and from customers.

A report on the initial pilot scheme was presented to Elected Members stating that the pilot programme was implemented without significant additional costs and subsequently the pilot scheme was approved to be mainstreamed into these facilities going forward.

A further discussion took place at a meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee in January 2020 relating to encouraging local schools to implement a similar type initiative – providing free sanitary products to anyone who needs them. Following this meeting, the Council made representations to all of the Post Primary Schools within the District, advocating for a Period Poverty Policy to be adopted.

Impact of the Pandemic

There is significant research and analysis which shows period poverty as a specific indicator for a lack of an adequate standard of life, alongside issues such as ‘fuel poverty’ and ‘food poverty’.

New research, undertaken in 2020 by Plan International UK, revealed the true extent of period poverty across the UK – particularly during the pandemic. The research revealed that almost a third (30%) of girls aged 14-21 years have had issues either affording or accessing sanitary wear during lockdown.

More shockingly, over half (54%) of these people have used toilet paper as an alternative to period products. However, for some even that hasn't always been an option during lockdown, as one in five (20%) said their periods have also been harder to manage due to the lack of toilet roll available.

The report also mentioned the fact that the Government made period products freely available in schools across the country which was a welcome move to alleviate period poverty. However, during the

pandemic, with most schools and youth centres closed, young people were left not knowing where to turn.

Additionally, 17% of the respondents stated that they were unable to, or struggled to, afford sanitary wear in lockdown and of these individuals:

- 37% did not try to access any free sources of products.
- Two fifths (42%) of those said they did not know where to go to get them.
- A third (30%) felt too embarrassed to seek out a source of free products.
- 30% did not know who to ask.

As Northern Ireland prepares for the arrival of another COVID variant, potential additional restrictions as well as the potential to emerge from the pandemic when restrictions are finally lifted, it is vital that ground breaking progress is made on tackling period poverty - building on the progress already made and not allowing any progress to be disregarded.

The Department also needs to be mindful that, if restrictions are reintroduced, there are many individuals with underlying conditions and may be classed as being 'at risk'. If these individuals are advised to isolate/cocoon as per previous restrictions, then they will have no access to sanitary products if they cannot afford to buy them and have them delivered. The aforementioned research also raised these concerns with:

- 17% saying they feared catching coronavirus if they left the house
- 15% having been unable to leave the house to go shopping during lockdown

The pandemic, and successive lockdowns, has exacerbated the problem of period poverty across Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a substantial amount of information reported on the availability of toilet roll. However, very little was reported in relation to people being left without sanitary products, even though they are also essential.

This should therefore act as an eye-opener to the problems that people face across Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, in relation to period poverty and dignity.

Clause One

As mentioned above, the Council fully supports the aim of providing everyone in Northern Ireland with sufficient, quality, sanitary products. Organisations which already do so should be commended.

In terms of Clause One, there also needs to be a commitment from other Executive Ministers (such as the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Education) as well as the Minister for Health. The ideal implementation will only be achieved if all Ministers and Departments work together to ensure a parity of approach and message.

The Council supports the factors listed within Clause One that needs to be taken into account, namely:

‘...dignity, accessibility, choice, differently abled people, travel arrangements and advertisements of arrangements...’

However, there is concern that lacking from that list is ‘discreetness’. Individuals must overcome an enormous stigma in relation to periods and sanitary products so there must be an element of discreetness. For example, Elected Members have been contacted with concerns that within some schools, pupils must request the products. This would seem to go against the aim of the Period Dignity campaign which aims for products to be made freely available within toilets allowing people to just pick the items up as needed.

The Council believes that the principles of discreetness and the Period Dignity campaign should also be included as part of any legislation or guidance.

Clause 2

In terms of Clause 2 (provision of free period products), the Council would have concerns to the wording of point 6:

The period products obtainable free of charge by a person under the arrangements established and maintained under subsection (3) are to be sufficient products to meet the person’s needs while the person is in the premises.

In this point, and indeed throughout the documentation, the sanitary products are referred to as having to be ‘sufficient’. The Council believes that the legislation and guidance should ensure that any products being provided to individuals are of a good standard and quality. In this matter,

sufficient products may not be enough for all individuals depending on their particular circumstances. Therefore, to ensure that no person is not catered for, it is important that good quality products are sought and offered.

Clause 3

The Council supports the principles outlined within Clause 3 including: easy access, dignity, choice and publicised arrangements.

However, further information should be included for people with differing needs. Nowhere does the documentation mention the needs of people with disabilities (some of whom already live in poverty as referenced in significant research and consultation responses).

It is also important that the varying needs of people are not forgotten about when undertaking any future consultation. Everyone should have the opportunity to feedback on this important debate on an issue that impacts each person regardless of their background, whether they have disability, etc.

Clause 4

The Council would welcome any guidance from the Department in relation to the legislation and any revisions that are undertaken.

The Council would also encourage the Department to ensure that guidance is received regularly and to include information on:

- Updates to legislation or guidance.
- New, or innovative, approaches.
- Good practice.

The Council is of the belief that this legislation is of the utmost importance and that its implementation should not be slowed down by organisations awaiting guidance. Therefore, the guidance should be ready for when the legislation is introduced.

Clause 5

The Council would also welcome any guidance from the Department in relation to consulting with those likely to use these products within our facilities.

In particular, the Council would like some clarity on:

- Whether this should be a formal consultation process (i.e. 12-weeks)?
- How it could be undertaken in a discreet and dignified manner.

Clause 6

The Council understands that Clause 6 relates to publication and as discussed at various Council meetings, there is a need to better promote the good work already undertaken and progress made.

The aforementioned research clearly demonstrates a need for better promotion to ensure that everyone is aware of where they can access these free products.

This promotion should not just be undertaken by the organisation (i.e. Council), but it should also be done at the Department/Executive level to ensure a consistent regional approach. It is also important that the message being communicated by the Executive Departments is the same as each organisation that is implementing Period Poverty Policies.

Clause 7

The Council appreciates and supports the fact that the Bill applies to anyone who menstruates – including transgender, non-binary persons, women and girls. It is important that this message is understood by everyone as it is vital that no one in need is left behind in terms of provision.

Furthermore, in terms of definitions, it would be worthwhile for the documents to be made available in easy read format. This will ensure that more people who should have an input, has the ability to understand the Bill and its implications before providing feedback.

It would be most useful to engage with local disability organisations and advisory groups, and each Council will be able to advise on these for their District.

Other Relevant Input

The Council believes that it is vital that this legislation mainstreams the provision of sanitary products across all public facilities, sporting facilities and educational institutions.

The Council would also like to encourage all private sector organisations to provide free sanitary products within their buildings. It is important that the stigma associated with sanitary products is broken and that they are as freely available as toilet role, soap and antibacterial hand wash.

Sanitary products are required for a normal bodily function and as a result they should be as freely available and accessible as any other product.

Concluding Comments

The Council supports the aims of providing everyone in Northern Ireland with sufficient, quality, sanitary products. The Council feels it is important to acknowledge the organisations, colleges and work places that already do this.

Over the last number of years, the full extent of period poverty and period dignity has started to be realised. Furthermore, the impact of the pandemic has exacerbated many issues relating to period poverty and period dignity.

Some of the issues which this legislation needs to address include:

- Embarrassment / stigma.
- Lack of knowledge and/or understanding about periods and their impacts on individuals.

It is vital, especially given the financial uncertainties which exist, that anyone who needs access to free sanitary products know where exactly that they can find them.

A similar scheme was introduced in Scotland recently (2018 for students and 2020 for anyone that needs them) and this has largely been acknowledged as successful.

The Department should also be mindful that as with any implementation plan, it is vital that there is an adequate amount of funding allocated. Additional costs should not be placed on organisations that are already carrying out period poverty policies and strategies. Investment from central government should be secured for all organisations to increase their current provisions.

The Council, as outlined throughout this document, believes that barriers to accessing these essential products can, and will, have a negative impact on people accessing education, work and leisure activities.

Overall, this will also harm their physical and mental wellbeing. We believe that the provision of these free products will:

- Increase, and maximise, participation in education and work.
- Eliminate the need for people to rely on inappropriate (and sometimes unsafe) products (e.g. toilet roll, newspaper, socks, etc.).
- Reduce the stigma experienced by those forced to rely on charity donations for sanitary products.
- Start a much needed public dialogue on menstrual care. There is a poverty on the understanding of menstruation which needs tackling, and stigma which needs challenging.

In conclusion, the issue of period poverty is significant and has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Now, as Northern Ireland recovers and emerges from the pandemic, presents an ideal opportunity to address period poverty in a dignified and accessible manner.