



A proposal for a Bill to ensure free access to sanitary products,
including in schools, colleges and universities.

Consultation by

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FOREWORD

Period poverty is a very real problem in Northern Ireland.

A period is something that almost every woman and girl of reproductive age has every month. It is a natural bodily function of women and girls, yet it continues to be a taboo subject, generally discussed in hushed voices or behind closed doors, if even at all.

Access to sanitary products to absorb the flow of menstrual blood is essential for health, hygiene and active participation in everyday life. Yet, throughout the world, millions of women are excluded from society during their monthly period. Some are forced to sleep in huts, miss school and made to feel dirty, inferior and ashamed.

Here in Northern Ireland, we are lucky that these extreme attitudes and customs do not exist. However, it is *our* shame that menstrual healthcare and hygiene is not embedded in our health and education systems. Despite the necessity of sanitary products in maintaining the health and wellbeing of women and young girls, their accessibility and affordability are variable, and menstruation can create financial and practical challenges.

During different stages of their life, women and girls may find it difficult to afford or access sanitary products for many reasons. They may have no money or income of their own, and even if they do, sanitary products may still be inaccessible, particularly in an educational setting. Access to sanitary products is also an issue for trans men and this community often experiences barriers that are unique to them and must be overcome. I am very interested to hear their experience and develop legislation that will meet their needs.

Similarly, low wages can make it challenging to manage menstruation. Poverty ultimately leads to period poverty, and no one should be forced to decide between feeding their family or managing their menstrual health and hygiene. Menstrual care can also be made difficult by other circumstances such as homelessness, abusive relationships and health conditions such as endometriosis (affecting 1 in 10 women) which can make periods extremely heavy and painful and makes menstruation a generally problematic experience.

However, we can stop period poverty in Northern Ireland. Over the preceding two years, the Scottish, English and Welsh governments have all started to address period poverty by introducing free access to sanitary products in educational settings. Scotland also recently passed the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill, which will enshrine free access to sanitary products into law.

I believe that Northern Ireland must join the rest of the United Kingdom in tackling period poverty, and that's why I intend to introduce a legislative duty on Ministers in the Northern Ireland executive to develop a universal system in Northern Ireland which will provide access, free of charge, to sanitary products for those who need them. My proposal will also place a statutory duty on schools, colleges and universities to provide sanitary products on their campuses for students.

In doing so, Northern Ireland can end the silence and stigma that surrounds menstruation and will go some way in removing gendered barriers. This is an important step towards the creation of a fairer and more equal society.

I look forward to hearing your views on the proposal.

The closing date for responses is 5pm, 29th January 2021.



Pat Catney MLA
November 2020



How the consultation process works

The consultation process relates to a draft proposal I have lodged as the first stage in the process of introducing a Private Members Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

At the end of the 8-week consultation period, all responses will be analysed and a final proposal will be put forward to the speaker. I will then leave with a drafter for the Bill and it will be introduced into the Assembly. The Bill will face a scrutiny process during which it may be amended. In the end, if the Bill is accepted, it becomes an Act. Thus, at this stage, there is no Bill, only a draft proposal.

The purpose of this consultation period is to gather a variety of views on the proposed Bill. This allows for any potential issues to be brought forward, improvements suggested and general refining and developing of the policy. Hence, the consultation period plays a vital role in ensuring the legislation is fit for purpose.

Details of how to respond to this consultation are provided at the end of this document. If you would like to receive more copies or have any questions, please contact my office by email at pat.catney@mla.niassembly.gov.uk or call us on 028 92 528203.

AIM OF THE PROPOSED BILL

The proposed Bill aims to ensure that all those who menstruate have access to free sanitary products, including in all schools, colleges and universities in Northern Ireland. This will help prevent people from experiencing period poverty. To achieve this, the proposed Bill will include a series of measures to improve the accessibility of sanitary products in Northern Ireland.

BACKGROUND

What is Period Poverty?

'Period Poverty' is the lack of access to sanitary products and having insufficient knowledge of menstruation due to financial constraints¹.

Low wages or a limited income can make it very difficult to manage menstruation. Poverty inevitably leads to *period poverty*. It reaches far and wide, having a negative impact not just on girls and women, but on society as a whole².

Period poverty affects people all over the world. Before now, it was seen as a problem that mostly existed in developing countries, but more and more people are beginning to talk about period poverty as a problem that exists even in some of the wealthiest countries, including the UK and the Republic of Ireland³.

The average woman will be affected by menstruation for 3,000 days of her lifetime, which equates to more than eight years⁴. Recently, there has been some concern about the relationship between period poverty and school attendance.

Plan International UK (a children's charity working to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world) recently published research based on focus groups in England and Northern Ireland. In their publication "Break the Barriers: Girls' Experiences of Menstruation in the UK"⁵ they identified a 'toxic trio' comprising of the cost of sanitary products, a lack of education about periods and shame, stigma and taboo.

¹ <https://www.bodyform.co.uk/our-world/period-poverty/>

² <https://yoppie.com/pages/period-poverty>

³ <https://spunout.ie/health/article/how-to-help-people-in-period-poverty>

⁴ <https://www.compassionuk.org/blogs/period-poverty/>

⁵ <https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-break-the-barriers-report-032018pdf/download?token=Fs-HYP3v>

Period Stigma

Even though menstruation is a shared experience among all females, it is a widely stigmatised issue. It is a topic that people aren't typically comfortable talking about and is often only discussed behind closed doors. Understanding this underlying cultural attitude about periods is crucial to understanding why access to menstrual sanitary products remains an issue in Northern Ireland in 2020.

As a result of the taboos surrounding menstruation around the world, there is often a lack of health education resources available to people about the menstrual cycle. It is this lack of knowledge that fuels myths which ostracise and humiliate women during menstruation. For instance, in Venezuela⁶, women are often forced to sleep in huts for the duration of their menstruation. In rural Ghana⁷, menstruating women are not allowed to enter a house with food cooking or a man present.

While such extreme customs may not exist in Northern Ireland, a 2018 survey conducted by Plan International UK on young people found that there were several gaps and misunderstandings around basic female anatomy⁸. They found that this lack of awareness of one's body can create distress when menstruation is presented in class. A school nurse in Northern Ireland described the extreme reactions some girls had to the period talk:

"It was amazing the number of young girls who started to cry. And two girls fainted one day, just at the thought that blood would come from there. It happened to me several times, even in first year. It was just too much. They hadn't a clue; nobody had ever hinted to them that something like this could happen."

In a 2017 YouGov poll conducted by Action Aid on 2,140 women and men in the UK, aged 16 and over about their attitudes towards periods uncovered that one in five women under forty years old said they felt uncomfortable talking about their periods with their female friends, mums and partners⁹. The embarrassment around discussing periods contributes to the shame and secrecy that many girls feel about their period. This has meant that many girls know nothing about menstruation before their first period, or dreading its arrival.

The squeamishness which can accompany the discussion of women's bodies is an undeniable part of why menstruation and period poverty has never before been such a widely discussed issue at a decision-making level in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

⁶ <https://iridescentwomen.com/2020/03/06/ditching-the-shame-around-our-periods/>

⁷ <https://edepot.wur.nl/274128>

⁸ <https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-break-the-barriers-report-032018pdf/download?token=Fs-HYP3v>

⁹ <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/blog/news/2017/05/24/1-in-4-uk-women-dont-understand-their-menstrual-cycle>

Cost of Sanitary Products

The average period lasts approximately five days and, in the UK, it can cost up to £8 a month for tampons and sanitary towels depending on how heavy the bleeding is. As a result, females will pay around £5,000 on products over their lifetime¹⁰. Some women struggle to meet this expense. A similar study conducted in 2015 analysing 2,134 women between the ages of 18 and 45, found that the average woman can spend up to £18,450 on her period throughout her lifetime¹¹. This cost included not only sanitary towels, cups or tampons, but also pain relief medication, new underwear, and toiletries. All of the women surveyed responded that feminine hygiene products should cost less and suggested that the Government should remove its tax on products for female menstruation¹².

Tampon Tax

Even though women have no control over their menstruation, sanitary products continue to be classed as a "luxury, non-essential item". As a result, there has been a long-running campaign to end the 5% VAT on sanitary products, including tampons, pads and towels¹³. However, European Union rules meant that the so-called tampon tax could not be taken away or reduced and in 2015 the UK government announced it would try to change EU law so that it could zero-rate sanitary products. While an ongoing review of VAT law made various proposals in 2018, to date there is no firm timetable for these proposals to be agreed.

¹⁰ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/period-poverty-uk-scotland-free-a4373981.html>

¹¹ <http://www.globalwomenconnected.com/2017/11/5-facts-period-poverty-uk/>

¹² <https://borgenproject.org/top-10-facts-about-period-poverty-in-the-uk/>

¹³ <https://www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/2019/09/05/free-periods-period-poverty-its-impact-on-education-and-policy-responses-to-the-issue/>

IMPACT OF PERIOD POVERTY ON EDUCATION, HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

The potential impact of young people missing school, or facing difficulty managing their menstruation while they are in education, has worrying implications for the long-term effect on attendance rates, educational outcomes and their physical health. No one should be disadvantaged because of menstruation anywhere in the world, and it is a scandal that this is occurring in a developed country like Northern Ireland in 2020.

According to the United Nations Human Rights Council¹⁴, a lack of menstrual health management and the stigma associated with menstruation harms gender equality and female enjoyment of human rights, including the right to education and the right to health. Furthermore, the UN Committee on Rights of the Child stated: “All adolescents should have access to free, confidential, adolescent-responsive and non-discriminatory sexual and reproductive health services, information and education... [including on] menstrual hygiene”.

A significant finding from Plan International¹⁵, the only UK-wide quantitative estimate of the extent of period poverty of girls aged between 14 and 21 in the UK, found that one in ten girls have been unable to afford sanitary wear, one in seven struggled to afford sanitary wear and more than one in ten had to use an unsuitable alternative. At the same time, almost three quarters felt embarrassed about buying sanitary products. Their findings also highlighted that 49% of girls had missed an entire day of school because of their period, 68% were unable to pay attention in class, and 64% missed PE because of their period.

Periods and Education

Period Poverty has a significant impact on young people. In 2017, Nursing Standard reported growing incidents of school nurses buying sanitary products to keep pupils in school, as well as finding that foodbanks were being heavily relied on for sanitary products for women and girls¹⁶.

According to a poll commissioned by hygiene services provider PHS Group¹⁷, schoolgirls take an average of three days off per term because of period-related issues, with girls more likely to miss school for reasons linked to their periods than cold, flu or holidays. A third of those surveyed admitted that they or someone they knew had been impacted by period poverty in the last 12 months, while around four per cent admitted they were unable to access

¹⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24258&LangID=E>

¹⁵ <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/plan-international-uks-research-on-period-poverty-and-stigma>

¹⁶ <https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/womens-health/promoting-menstrual-wellbeing/period-poverty>

¹⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/period-poverty-girls-school-absent-phs-group-menstrual-a8922246.html>

sanitary products entirely during the previous 12 months. This has led to nearly one in five girls wearing sanitary products longer than they should and one in ten using unsuitable alternatives or spending their lunch or travel money on products.

Many girls face increased feelings of shame and embarrassment when on their periods or discussing their period in an academic setting. This has resulted in some pupils feeling less able to pay attention in class¹⁸, greater absences and female students struggling to keep up with their schoolwork¹⁹. The stigma surrounding periods has shown to affect a child's potential to succeed. The knowledge of effective treatments for period pain is low, and girls with period pain experience reduced classroom performance and a lower level of class attendance²⁰.

The campaign group 'Bloody Big Brunch' conclude that this results in around 137,000 girls missing school each year, which has a lasting impact on girls' education, especially if days are missed each month²¹. Their research also found that out of those who'd experienced period poverty, 68% had used makeshift period products, almost half wore menstrual products longer than they should have and a quarter of women and girls had missed school or work because they couldn't afford sanitary products.

The reasons for girls missing school are completely preventable²². Access to good hygiene facilities can make a big difference to whether or not girls attend school during their period. If girls don't have access to sanitary pads, they may be forced to leave school early or stay home altogether. This puts girls at an immediate disadvantage and can result in lower grades; some may eventually drop out of school altogether.

Health and Emotional Wellbeing

Period poverty can have a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of women. Physical Education is affected, with 64% of girls having missed PE or sports lessons because of their period. This means girls aren't getting the same level of physical education or regular physical activity that boys are. Of the girls who said they had missed school or PE lessons because of their period, half admitted to making up a lie or alternative excuse because they were embarrassed to say they were on their period²³.

¹⁸ <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/plan-international-uks-research-on-period-poverty-and-stigma>

¹⁹ <https://borgenproject.org/top-10-facts-about-period-poverty-in-the-uk/>

²⁰ Banikarim C, Chacko MR, Kelder SH. Prevalence and impact of dysmenorrhea on Hispanic female adolescents. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2000;154(12):1226-1229; Chiou MH, Wang HH. Predictors of dysmenorrhea and self-care behaviour among vocational nursing school female students. *J Nurs Res.* 2008;16(1):17-25; Khamdan HY, et al., The Impact of Menstrual Period on Physical Condition, Academic Performance and Habits of Medical Students, *Journal of Women's Health Care*, 2014; Chia CF, et al., Dysmenorrhoea among Hong Kong university students: prevalence, impact, and management. *Hong Kong Medical Journal.* 2013;19(3):222-228

²¹ <https://www.heygirls.co.uk/bbb-post/>

²² <https://www.compassionuk.org/blogs/period-poverty/>

²³ <https://www.compassionuk.org/blogs/period-poverty/>

Anyone menstruating should be able to partake in a sport if they wish and not feel embarrassed about being on their period. However, the pressure to 'carry on as normal' as though they aren't affected by their menstruation is often the wrong message. It implies a lack of understanding that not all girls and women have the same experience of menstruation. It also undermines the importance of taking time for rest and self-care, and not feeling guilty about doing so.

Limited access to menstrual health products can also force women and girls to use makeshift solutions that are uncomfortable and unsafe as well as the repeated use of menstrual products which can lead to infections and even death. Leaving a tampon in for longer than advised can increase the risk of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)²⁴, a life-threatening condition. TSS is defined by the US Food and Drug Administration²⁵ as “a disease caused by a toxic substance that is produced by certain kinds of bacteria. The toxic substance can cause organ damage (including kidney, heart, and liver failure), shock, and even death.”

In addition to these hugely problematic reasons, research from Always shows that the implications of period poverty can be far-reaching²⁶. Their study indicated that 6 in 10 women who went without sanitary products were bullied in school and now lack confidence as a result. Out of these women, 39% revealing that they also now suffer from anxiety and depression. Likewise, 39% who suffered from period poverty said that they do not have many friends and continue to find it challenging to socialise. More than half of the women surveyed who have experienced period poverty believe it has had a direct effect on their success, confidence and happiness as an adult.

Period Poverty

Poverty in Northern Ireland is a growing problem. Statistics from the Department of Communities illustrate that poverty levels in Northern Ireland are slowly rising, with 27% of children living in poverty after housing costs are taken into account in 2018-19²⁷. As the cost of living increases and wages stagnate, it's unsurprising that families on low incomes are struggling to afford necessities – which includes the cost of sanitary products as well as food and heating.

Figures from the Trussell Trust show that foodbank use in Northern Ireland is rapidly rising, with 45,008 emergency food parcels handed out between 2019-20 compared to 11,832 between 2013-14²⁸. The role of foodbanks has never been so necessary in our communities and many are now specifically asking for sanitary products. However, the reliance of

²⁴ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/toxic-shock-syndrome/>

²⁵ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/toxic-shock-syndrome/symptoms-causes/syc-20355384>

²⁶ <https://www.always.co.uk/en-gb/about-us/campaigns-and-initiatives/end-period-poverty/>

²⁷ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/ni-poverty-bulletin-201819.pdf>

²⁸ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/#total>

foodbanks on goodwill and generosity means that they are not always a guaranteed source. The implementation of a universal system of sanitary products would ensure that anyone who needs them is guaranteed reliable access to free products at participating centers such as foodbanks and community hubs.

Period Poverty and Lockdown

While period products are available in schools in Scotland, England and Wales, the closure of many schools and youth centres as a result of the coronavirus lockdown, girls have been left not knowing where to turn. As a result, the number of people facing period poverty has significantly risen, with new research from Plan International UK (May 2020) highlighting the full extent of the issue, citing a third (30%) of girls aged 14-21 had issues either affording or accessing sanitary products during lockdown and shockingly, over half (54%) of these girls used toilet paper as an alternative to period products, which also proved problematic, with one in five girls (20%) saying that their periods have been harder to manage because of a lack of toilet roll available²⁹.

²⁹ <https://plan-uk.org/period-poverty-in-lockdown>

CURRENT REGULATIONS ON SANITARY PRODUCTS – NORTHERN IRELAND, UK AND ROI

Northern Ireland is currently the only place in the United Kingdom lacking legislation or active initiatives to combat period poverty. It is also the only area in the UK where girls do not have access to free sanitary products in educational settings³⁰.

Since the beginning of the 2018-19 academic term, all schools, colleges and universities in Scotland have provided access to free sanitary products. In November 2020 Scotland became the first country in the world to provide free and universal access to period products. In England, since January 2020, all students in primary, secondary and colleges were provided with access to free sanitary products³¹. Wales also followed suit, and in 2020 announced that sanitary products would be available in all schools, libraries and community hubs³².

Northern Ireland

There is currently no legislation in place in NI relating to the free provision of sanitary products³³. Whilst there is no NI-wide provision, there are some local initiatives in place. For example, in September 2019, Derry City and Strabane District Council³⁴ piloted an initiative which made free sanitary products available in public buildings. Likewise, the Red Box project³⁵ (a UK-wide campaign) was introduced into Northern Ireland in January 2019, in a Bangor primary school. In June 2019, the Red Box project commenced a pilot in Northern Ireland involving 11 schools (from all sectors, both primary and post-primary) under the guidance of a cross-departmental steering group, with initial indicators from the survey suggesting that the cost of providing sanitary products would not be that expensive³⁶.

Similarly, the Tampon Tax Community Fund³⁷ offers grants of up to £10,000 to run service and projects designed to tackle issues related to girls such as period poverty, sexual and mental abuse. However, there is no indication of what impact these grants have had on tackling period poverty.

I was grateful to receive correspondence from Peter Weir, the Minister of Education, about his intentions to bring forward an initiative that will make free sanitary products available in

³⁰ Williamson, C, 17/05/19, Belfast Telegraph, 'Northern Ireland behind as rest of UK signs up for free sanitary products in schools'

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/period-products-in-schools-and-colleges/period-product-scheme-for-schools-and-colleges-in-england>

³² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-50975035>

³⁴ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/periodpoverty>

³⁵ <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/red-box-project-provide-sanitary-15732842>

³⁶high <https://www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/2019/09/05/free-periods-period-poverty-its-impact-on-education-and-policy-responses-to-the-issue/>

³⁷ <https://www.ukcommunityfoundations.org/our-programmes/tampon-tax-community-fund>

secondary schools in Northern Ireland. This is a very welcome step in the right direction, and I hope to work with the Minister in developing his policy to ensure that girls and young women in primary schools, colleges and universities are not excluded. It is also important that this fundamental right of girls and women is enshrined into law.

Why Legislate?

Access to sanitary products is a fundamental human right which must be secured through legislation. Providing free sanitary products for all those who need them, particularly in schools, colleges and universities will go some way in ensuring that the rights of girls and women in Northern Ireland are being met. This legislation will also act to reduce the number of infections, serious health issues and deaths from students reusing sanitary products or using unsuitable alternatives such as newspapers, socks or toilet paper which can lead to life-threatening conditions such as Toxic Shock Syndrome. Thus, this legislation has the opportunity to save lives.

Given the glaring absence in Northern Ireland's legislation when it comes to mandating the provision of sanitary products, I believe that legislation is required to rectify this omission.

Scotland

The Scottish Government introduced a pilot scheme in July 2017 where free menstrual hygiene products were given to 1,000 women and girls from low-income families in Aberdeen³⁸. Then in 2018, a survey by Young Scot³⁹ found that approximately one in four students from school, college and universities in Scotland had struggled to access sanitary products. From August 2018, the Scottish Government announced a new scheme that would make sanitary products free and readily available to students in schools, colleges and universities across Scotland. The Scottish Government also made sanitary products universally available to all those who need them⁴⁰. Projections determine that it will reach approximately 18,800 low-income women and girls in an attempt to combat period poverty⁴¹. Then, in 2019, the Scottish Government⁴² announced £4 million in cash for local councils to provide free sanitary products in public buildings.

³⁸ <http://www.globalwomenconnected.com/2017/11/5-facts-period-poverty-uk/>

³⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-45295743>

⁴⁰ <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/27/809990550/scotland-poised-to-become-1st-country-to-make-period-products-free?t=1602499459275>

⁴¹ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/scotland-free-menstrual-products-low-income-women/>

⁴² <https://www.itv.com/news/2019-02-18/more-than-a-quarter-of-females-have-suffered-from-period-poverty-survey-finds>

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill (Scotland)

In April 2019, Monica Lennon MSP introduced a Private Members Bill to tackle period poverty in Scotland. The Period Products (Free Provision) Bill, proposed different ways to make period products more accessible. It introduced a Scotland-wide scheme, offering period products free of charge to anyone who needs them. It also placed a duty on all schools, colleges and universities to make a range of period products available for free in their toilets.

Monica Lennon's consultation document suggested using a system similar to the C-card model currently used by health boards to distribute free condoms⁴³. In the Greater Glasgow and Clyde area, for example, anyone who wants free condoms can ask for them in locations including GP surgeries, pharmacies and colleges and universities – or they can fill out a request on a card, so they do not have to ask verbally. The proposal also suggested that those who want to access free products must show proof of identification or produce a free voucher for products. Products should also be available for delivery or collection⁴⁴.

Despite initially opposing plans, all parties backed the Bill in its first test on 25 February 2020⁴⁵. The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill was passed unanimously on 24th November 2020 and requires local authorities to ensure that period products are generally obtainable free of charge. Schools and colleges must ensure period products are freely available to students, and designated public places must also make the products available. In the interim, a number of individual businesses – restaurants, pubs and even football clubs – started providing products independently. It has also become increasingly common in Scotland to walk into a women's toilet and find free products by the sinks, or with an honesty box⁴⁶.

England

In England, the Government has a task force whose aim is to raise awareness and reduce stigma surrounding periods. In March 2019, Government funding⁴⁷, for free sanitary products in all English secondary schools and colleges was welcomed as a "huge step" by campaigners. Free sanitary products were also introduced in English primary schools since January 2020 and local authorities have also started to offer free sanitary products to staff and those in the building. Moreover, the Period Products Scheme (published in January

⁴³ http://www.parliament.scot/S5MembersBills/FINAL_Ending_Period_Poverty_consultation_document.pdf

⁴⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-51629880>

⁴⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-51618103>

⁴⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/nov/24/scotland-becomes-first-nation-to-provide-free-period-products-for-all>

⁴⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-47553449>

2020)⁴⁸ also stated that free period products will also be available in all state-maintained educational settings for 16 to 19-year-olds by the end of 2020.

Wales

In April 2019, the Welsh Government announced funding of over £3.36 million to combat period poverty and period dignity in Wales. It included funding awarded to local authorities to provide free period products to students in Welsh primary and secondary schools as well as Further Education Institutions with as many as 141,000 girls benefitting free menstrual products⁴⁹. All local authorities were also allocated £220,000 in funding to help them provide free period products to women and girls who may otherwise be unable to afford them, making them available in community-based locations such as libraries and hubs.

Republic of Ireland

In March 2019⁵⁰, the cross-party Women's Parliamentary Caucus proposed a motion on period poverty. The motion called for the provision of free sanitary products, including environmentally friendly products in all public buildings, from schools and universities to hospitals, prisons and refuges as a way to tackle period poverty.

This motion was passed in the Dáil and the Seanad in March 2019⁵¹. Amongst other things, these called on the Government to provide a range of free, adequate, safe and suitable sanitary products to be distributed throughout all public buildings. Following the Oireachtas motion, the matter was passed to the Strategy Committee for the National Strategy for Women and Girls (NSWG). An NSWG Period Poverty Sub-Committee was established to progress this further. Terms of reference were agreed, and it was envisioned that the Sub-Committee would present its preliminary findings and conclusions to the full NSGW Strategy Committee in 2020. This process is currently on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/period-products-in-schools-and-colleges/period-product-scheme-for-schools-and-colleges-in-England>

⁴⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/apr/13/period-poverty-wales-schoolgirls-to-be-given-free-sanitary-products>

⁵⁰ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2019-03-13/30/>

⁵¹ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2019-12-17/439/>

DETAIL OF THE PROPOSED BILL

The principle that underlines my proposed Private Member's Bill is to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland who is menstruating can access sanitary products for free. To achieve this, my proposed Bill will create a right of access to sanitary products, for those who need them, in addition to explicitly introducing a duty on schools, colleges and universities to provide these products in their toilets.

What the Bill will do

My proposed Bill will introduce:

- A duty on Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive to introduce a system of free access to sanitary products for those who need them
- A duty on primary and secondary schools to provide free sanitary products in school toilets.
- A duty on colleges and universities to provide free sanitary products in campus toilets.

Access to sanitary products for those who need them

The proposed Bill places a requirement on Ministers in Northern Ireland to establish a system which will make sanitary products more accessible to those who need them. The implementation of a scheme similar to the distribution of free condoms would be most effective. It would allow anyone who needs sanitary products to access them, at no cost, at participating services such as community hubs, youth centres, pharmacies, GP surgeries or health clinics.

Free sanitary products in schools, colleges and universities

All schools in Northern Ireland would be required to provide sanitary products, for free, in female toilets. The vast majority of young people are required to be in education up to the age of 16. During school, students have less opportunity to access or purchase sanitary products if they begin to menstruate. They're also less likely to have their own source of income, either because of their age or simply because they are not in full-time employment.

The implementation of legislation to ensure sanitary products are available for free, particularly in educational settings will improve the health of girls and young women. It will also reduce the anxiety felt among students about the accessibility of sanitary products, and

if they can afford them when they're needed. Making these products available in school bathrooms and not just at central collection points also grants students the best possible access to sanitary products while preserving their privacy and dignity.

All colleges and universities in Northern Ireland would also be required to provide sanitary products, for free, in female bathrooms and gender-neutral toilets on campus. While students at college and university are not legally required to attend these institutions the same way that school pupils are, they are still expected to attend classes and cannot be in full-time employment. Thus, they face restrictions similar to those in school in terms of affording and accessing sanitary products.

Potential impacts of the Bill

- Access to sanitary products for all who need them without having to ask or depend on the goodwill of others.
- Opportunity for increased school attendance and therefore educational attainment in schools, colleges and universities, subsequently leading to better prospects and opportunities to get out of poverty.
- Women having to take less time off work because they can't afford sanitary products and the subsequent benefit to the economy through fewer lost working days.

Health implications and potential savings

Providing access to sanitary products for all those who need them will reduce the number of health complications and infections which can arise when there is a lack of access to sanitary products. In addition to the benefits of the individual, it will also have cost-saving benefits to the NHS by reducing hospital admissions, other medical appointments or prescriptions to treat infections related to poor access to sanitary products.

Equalities

Gender

Making sanitary products widely available, free of charge, for women and young girls who need them will reduce gendered barriers and aid the creation of a fairer and more equal society. No-one chooses to menstruate – yet products cannot be accessed free of charge. I believe that the proposed Bill will reduce the inequality and discrimination faced by girls and women, by making sanitary products more accessible to those who need them.

Age

Girls and young women attending school are unlikely to have their own source of income. This is also the case for students at college and university who are unable to work full time and often live on a low income, putting them at an unfair disadvantage under the current arrangements. By making the proposal specifically related to schools, colleges and universities, the proposal can help reduce this inequality.

Disability

It is likely that women or girls unable to work and on a low-income because of their disability will be further financially disadvantaged by having to buy sanitary products. The proposed legislation may also help reduce this inequality.

Sustainable Development

The consultation document highlights the impact of women and young girls not attending school, college or university because of the inaccessibility of sanitary products. The proposed Bill has the potential to increase attendance, improve educational attainment and have a general positive impact on the life of women and young girls. Thus, by the same logic, if women are taking days off work because of being unable to access or afford sanitary products, the proposed Bill will help by allowing them to attend work. This will improve the standard of their life, particularly those on zero-hour contracts who will not get paid if they are not in work.

QUESTIONS

SECTION ONE - ABOUT YOU

1. Are you responding as:

- An individual
- On behalf of an organisation – in which case go to Q3

2. Which of the following best describes you?

- Politician (MLA, MP, Councillor)
- Professional with experience in a relevant subject
- Academic with expertise in a relevant subject
- Student (at school, college or university)
- Another member of the public

If you are responding as an individual, please go to section two.

3. Please select a category which best describes your organisation

- Public sector body (NI/UK Government or local authority)
- School, college or university
- A commercial organisation (company, business)
- Representative organisation (trade union, professional association)
- Third sector (charitable, campaigning, social enterprise, voluntary, non-profit)
- Other (e.g. club's local groups, groups of individuals, etc.)

4. Please choose one of the following: (Any data collected will only be used for the purpose of this consultation and will not be held when it is over).

- I am content for this response to be attributed to me or my organisation
- I would like this response to be anonymous (the response may be published, but no name)
- I would like this response to be confidential (no part of the response will be published)

Please provide the name of the organisation as you wish it to be published

Please provide details of a way in which we can contact you if there are queries regarding your response. (Email is preferred but you can also provide a postal address or phone number. We will not publish these details)

SECTION TWO – YOUR VIEW ON THE PROPOSAL

1. Which of the following best expresses your view of the proposed Bill?

- Supportive
- Neutral (neither support nor oppose)
- Opposed

2. Do you believe that sanitary products should be free for those who need them?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

3. Do you agree that there should be a specific obligation on schools, colleges and universities to make sanitary products available for free?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

4. Would you support a universal sanitary proposal that would ensure that those in need of sanitary products are given them?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

5. Which best expresses your view concerning a free universal provision of sanitary products?

- Free products available to anyone
- Limited use of the system (e.g. limiting the number of products that may be claimed each month)
- Available only to those on low incomes or in receipt of benefits
- There is no need for a universal scheme

6. Do you have a view on which locations would be most suitable for dispensing free sanitary products?

- GP surgeries
- Health centres
- Community hubs
- Women's refuges
- Homeless shelters
- Libraries
- All of the above

Other (please specify)

7. Where will the Bill have the biggest positive impact?

- Equality of women and girls
- Relieving pressure on the NHS
- Schools (e.g. attendance rates)
- Workplaces (e.g. less women taking time off)
- Reducing the stigma of periods and period poverty
- All of the above

7. Do you think the coronavirus pandemic has made period products harder to access?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

8. Would you support a delivery scheme for those unable to leave their home (e.g. isolating, disability, etc.)

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

8. Do you think local councils should be involved in the management and distribution of sanitary products?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

SECTION THREE - PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

If you are responding on behalf of an organisation please go to section 4.

1. Have you struggled to access or afford sanitary products during menstruation (e.g. financial barriers, unexpected circumstances, health issues, etc.)?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable, this does not apply to me.

2. Have you ever used sanitary products for longer than advised or used an unsuitable alternative (e.g. toilet paper, newspapers, cloths, etc.)?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable, this does not apply to me.

3. Have you ever missed school or work because of your period or limited access to sanitary wear?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable, this does not apply to me.

4. Do you know anyone who has been affected by period poverty?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

5. If sanitary products were available for free, which of the following would apply to you?

- I would expect to claim free products regularly.
- I would expect to claim free products occasionally.
- I would not expect to claim free products.
- Not applicable I do not need or use sanitary products
- I prefer not to say

6. Do you think that period poverty is discussed openly enough?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

SECTION FOUR - GENERAL

1. Do you have any other comments or suggestions on the proposal?

2. If you do not agree with the proposed Bill can you provide an alternative that would address the issue of period poverty?

How to respond to this consultation

Responses prepared electronically should be sent by email to:

pat.catney@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

Responses prepared in hard copy should be sent by post to:

Pat Catney MLA
12-14 Smithfield Square
Lisburn
BT28 1TS

The survey can also be filled in online:

<https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/42VQVX/>