

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill

Written submission to the Education Committee

January 2022

Introduction

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella organisation for the children's sector providing policy, information, training and participation services to our 150 members across Northern Ireland. Our vision is to create a society where all children are valued, treated fairly and are able to flourish. To achieve this, we campaign for changes to legislation, policy and practice to promote and protect the rights and needs of children. We also provide advice and support directly to parents and carers through [Parentline](#) - our free, confidential and multi-channel regional parenting support helpline.

General comments

CiNI welcomes the opportunity to provide written evidence in support of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill. Beyond its scope, the need for this piece of legislation is an indication of the deep and persistent levels of extreme poverty. Specifically, it is reported that 370,000 people are living below the poverty line in Northern Ireland – that is one in every five persons; with nearly one in every three of these 370,000 people living in poverty a child.¹ The figures are stark and the need for action is urgent. In the immediate, we ask Members to maintain pressure for the Anti-Poverty Strategy to be published and actioned. Further, the Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel have recommended that the Northern Ireland Assembly pass an Anti-Poverty Act which would include a duty to reduce child poverty. CiNI strongly support this recommendation and we ask members for support in securing political will for its creation.

Every child deserves equal opportunities to thrive and the Bill offers a progressive and practical call to positive action to ensure the universal provision of essential healthcare products for women and girls. The legislation builds on the positive steps already taken by the Government to address period poverty in education. Expectedly, the learning from existing initiatives will inform the roll out across all departments.

¹ Data taken from The Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel: [Recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy Report of the Expert Advisory Panel](#) (2021) p17

We commend Pat Catney MLA for introducing the Bill and the Education Committee for coordinating the Committee Stage. Clearly the composition and nature of the Bill is cross-cutting, requiring cooperation across Assembly Committees and cross-Government Departments, both in the development and application of the law. We welcome this joined-up approach which is clearly underpinned by the principles of the Children's Services Co Operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

Comments on the Bill

CiNI broadly supports the principles of the Bill and we agree with its three main policy objectives. In particular, we welcome the intent under Clause 1 that enables a parent or carer etc. to obtain free products for a child in their care (Clause 1(3)(a)); and obligations for the delivery of period products, which is an important measure for those who have mobility issues and live with a disability (Clause 1(3)(b)). We are pleased that these approaches have been taken.

The Bill gives the Department of Health discretion on the operational elements of the law but requires consultation on the proposed future arrangements, including where products should be obtainable; which types of products should be obtainable; and the ways in which free products should be obtainable (Clause 1(4)). This legislation is an important opportunity to destigmatise menstruation, deliver equal opportunity and period dignity for girls. Consultation on the arrangements is key to ensuring the most effective scheme possible and children should be considered key agents in the design and delivery of it. Their feedback is vital in making the application of the law fit for purpose.

Clause 2 places a duty on each department of the Northern Ireland Executive to specify via regulations which of the public service bodies within its functions must make period products free of charge in its premises. Accordingly, '*public service body*' is defined as a body '*constituted by or under an enactment; having functions that consist of or include providing public services or otherwise serving the public interest*' (Clause 8). It is unclear if the scope of the legislation includes the provision of sanitary products within voluntary and community settings; and sports and leisure facilities, CiNI ask that the scope is explored and further defined.

Conclusion

We hope our comments are useful to the Committee. Please contact Orla O'Hagan at orla@ci-ni.org.uk for additional information on anything raised in this response.