OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 18 December 2019

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 18 December 2019

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
32nd Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
*Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Gail Anderson (Orkney Partnership)
Nicola Bristow (Plan International UK)
Erin Campbell (Scottish Youth Parliament)
Eilidh Dickson (Engender)
Councillor Alison Evison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Celia Hodson (Hey Girls CIC)
Carolyn Hope (North Ayrshire Council)
Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Siobhan McCready (Unite)
Erin Slaven (On the Ball)
Sheena Stewart (Universities Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Peter McGrath

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 18 December 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (James Dornan): Good morning, and welcome to the 32nd meeting in 2019 of the Local Government and Communities Committee. I remind everyone to turn off their mobile phones.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of whether to take in private agenda items 3 and 4. Item 3 is consideration of the evidence that we will hear today on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill, and item 4 is consideration of our work programme. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

09:45

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is evidence from two panels on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill. I welcome Monica Lennon, who has introduced this member's bill. She might wish to ask questions of the witnesses in each panel, once committee members are finished with their questions.

For today's first panel, I welcome Nicola Bristow, who is the community and grants co-ordinator at Plan International UK; Eilidh Dickson, who is the policy and parliamentary manager at Engender; Erin Campbell, who is the member of the Scottish Youth Parliament for Midlothian North and Musselburgh, and deputy convener of the SYP's equality and human rights committee; Siobhan McCready, who is equalities stand-down officer for Scotland at Unite the union; and Erin Slaven, who is co-founder of the "On the ball" campaign.

Thank you all for attending and for your written submissions. We will move straight to questions from members.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): It is great to see everybody here today. Thank you for the evidence that you submitted in advance. My question is about the extent of period poverty in Scotland. Some of the written submissions provide quite bald statistics about the number of women and girls who experience period poverty. I would like a reality check on the extent of the issue and what it means for young women.

I do not know who would like to start, because you have all given some evidence on that.

Nicola Bristow (Plan International UK): In 2017, we surveyed more than 1,000 young women, and the broad statistic that we found, which has been widely used, was that one in 10 had struggled with affording period products. We know from work that we have done in England—we also have projects in Scotland—that a lot of localised information and data are missing. Councils that have done surveys have found variance.

There is need: the broad understanding is that the problem exists. When we work at local grass-roots level, we find that the products are being used and education is being accessed. The reporting reflects the findings of our survey.

Erin Campbell (Scottish Youth Parliament): In the Scottish Youth Parliament consultation before the bill was introduced, 80 per cent of

respondents aged 12 to 25 agreed that free sanitary products should be available to everyone. We asked people why they thought that. One thing that really stuck with me was someone saying that because buying sanitary products is very expensive they had gone through times when they were forced to use just a rag, rather than sanitary products.

The SYP agrees that everyone who menstruates deserves dignity; unfortunately, they are not all getting that. Young people also highlighted that people at school are at a particular disadvantage because the lack of flexibility in the school day means that they often cannot nip out to get period products, especially when their period comes unexpectedly.

The SYP agrees that there is a large problem.

The Convener: Are you suggesting that if someone's period comes on suddenly, they could not leave the class to get products, even though they would not have to say what it was for?

Erin Campbell: The issue is not necessarily that people are not allowed to leave the class. Many would just choose not to leave, perhaps due to embarrassment or stigma. That is a large part of the problem.

The Convener: How would the bill change that?

Erin Campbell: Having free sanitary products in public buildings—especially in schools—would normalise menstruation. It is a normal process that people go through and cannot change. If it were normal to be able to nip out and get period products, a lot of people would be much less embarrassed by it.

Eilidh Dickson (Engender): I add that we do not have a lot of localised statistics about period poverty, but we have an incredible wealth of knowledge about women's poverty generally. It is important that we understand the phrase "period poverty" as a useful device to enable us to intervene in the specific problem of lack of access. For example, we know that one parent in 10 has sent a child to school knowing that they do not have with them the period products that they need.

We also know that 20 per cent of women experience poverty. This comes down to lack of income and the requirement on women to make very difficult choices about what they will spend the bare minimum provision that they have on. For example, will they choose to feed themselves or to feed their families? We know that women are poverty managers within their families, so might they be going without period products in order to ensure that their families have the sustenance that they need to get through the day?

Nicola Bristow: We have anecdotal evidence from a project in Newcastle that young people—including young men—are going there to collect products from the free period product scheme to take home for their families. We are finding that younger people have become a bit of a shock absorber. Availability of products in schools means that they can collect the products for their families. Broader provision will therefore tackle a much bigger issue.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): When we talk about period poverty, we focus on the word "poverty", which suggests that a person does not have much money and/or that items cost a lot—or too much. I do not think that I have seen mentioned in any evidence the cost of products or what a woman or girl might have to pay per month. I know that there will be a range. Could you tell us a bit about the actual costs?

Erin Slaven (On the Ball): The cost varies—it depends on the brand. However, from our experience from the campaign that we run, the issue is not affordability, but accessibility. For people who are in severe poverty or are on the living wage, period products are necessities. They are as essential as toilet roll and soap and should, as a general principle, be accessible to anybody who needs them.

Siobhan McCready (Unite): The general principle is that period products should be free. From talking to members of Unite and working with people in the Unite community who are largely unwaged or on low incomes, the cost of period products for the average family is anywhere between £10 and £20 for the monthly shop—depending on the size of the family. That is a lot of money to a person who is already on a very low income.

Obviously, one can get cheaper products, but sometimes cheaper products are not as helpful; they do not serve the purpose for which they are needed. We find that a lot of women are making the choice not to buy period products for themselves because they are looking after their girls. They are buying for them and making do for themselves, or are simply not buying the products and choosing to buy food instead. It is a real problem.

Nicola Bristow: The issue is also about people having an informed choice about the products that they use. We found that through the "Let's talk. Period" project, in which people received education about reusable products, plastic-free disposable products and other disposable products. People were making choices that were based not just on cost: we acknowledge that people should have the option to make informed choices.

Sarah Boyack: We have a lot of questions to follow up on accessibility, which Erin Slaven

mentioned, and the question of what people need. They might need or want completely different types of products.

I will go back to the point that Siobhan McCready made about cost and the terminology that we are using, because the issue is framed as "period poverty". There is the wider issue of how that relates to people's dignity and whether it is the right phrase to use. Do we need the word "poverty" in there in order to shock people out of complacency? I would like to explore the extent to which you think that "period poverty" is the right phrase. Does it help your agenda? Unite argued that "period dignity" would be better. I am interested to hear a range of views on the best way to describe the issue that you want to tackle. What is the right phrase to use for people who experience lack of access to something that most of us take for granted? What phrase would help us to address the issue?

Siobhan McCready might want to start, because she has challenged use of the term "period poverty".

Siobhan McCready: As a union, Unite deals with women who can work in heavily male-dominated industries such as construction, in which there might not be access to a toilet, let alone one that is comfortable to use for a woman who finds herself suddenly having to go to the toilet. For the union, the issue is very much about employers providing dignity for women workers, which is something that we are campaigning on.

Although we totally support the notion that we are talking about a fundamental human rights issue for people on limited incomes, we wanted to highlight dignity as another layer, because when our members reported back, they told us that what was important was quick access to products when they need them, and being able to change their clothing and so on in a situation in which employers are sometimes pretty unforgiving.

For us, it was a case of raising awareness of the situations that women find themselves in—in particular, women in workplaces that women were not traditionally in. Also, many women are now working later on into their lives: the menopause brings into play another slate of related issues.

I absolutely get why the phrase "period poverty" has been used. It gives people a bit of a shock to realise that a lot of women are making quite undignified choices; they find that idea uncomfortable and deeply unpleasant. For us, the term "period poverty" resonates. As somebody who was working in the community until this week, when I started this job, I know that the pilots that have been rolled out in the community are about raising awareness of the situations that some people are living in at the moment, in which they are having to make horrible choices.

The "period poverty" tag resonates with people—people get it—and it starts a dialogue about the much wider issue of poverty. That is really helpful, but the union is focused on dignity. We want to improve access and reduce stigma. For us, it is a dual approach.

The Convener: I will let Eilidh Dickson in shortly, but I point out that we have a lot to cover and have only another hour or so, because another panel is coming in. It is not the case that everybody has to answer every question, so if we can have slightly shorter answers, that will help us to get through. I do not want us to miss out on important points.

Eilidh Dickson: As I said in my first answer, the phrase "period poverty" is a useful device: we should not ignore the fact that we are talking about poverty. The fact that we are talking about women being unable even to afford £15 a month for their families is quite an indictment of the state of women's budgets and the choices that they have to make. The issue is about dignity and poverty, but it is also about equality and sending out the message that the natural fact of being a woman should be taken care of by our employers and our public services in the same way that the fact of being a man is.

It is also important that we do not lose sight of the fact that some women do not have control over the choices about how money is spent within their family. We know that financial abuse is a serious part of domestic abuse and of how domestic abuse is understood, but control of reproduction is also something that we see.

In addition, we should not forget that many women are simply caught short; they might plan to take stuff with them but forget to do so. It is a question of ensuring that women have dignity when moving around in the world.

10:00

Nicola Bristow: Our research uncovered the fact that access to products is one factor, but also that a lack of consistent education about bodies is significant. There is huge stigma, and there is a taboo in society. We call that situation the toxic trio of issues that sit around period poverty.

One of the surveys that we did talked to girls and other menstruators about stigma and taboo, and it found that one in five was being teased or bullied at school about their period, which was quite shocking. People not leaving the classroom could have much to do with the lack of normalisation in society. Access is very important, and it is also important to focus on poverty, but

there is a range of issues around menstruation that can be supported and covered. Universal access and exposure to products in the same way as we are exposed to toilet paper would go a long way towards solving some of the bigger issues.

Sarah Boyack: Thank you for that. It is useful because we do not have to agree with use of the term—it is about the discussion that it takes us into.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): I note that the term "period poverty" does not appear anywhere in the bill. It is a background policy issue.

I want to explore one of the tensions in the bill. It is designed to develop a scheme for universal provision by making provision mandatory in certain places. I note that, as part of that, ministers may make provisions whereby individuals may get products.

The financial memorandum envisages take-up at 5 per cent, 10 per cent and 20 per cent, with the figures focused on those who are living in relative poverty. Is it important to have a universal scheme whereby everyone who needs it has the easiest possible access, or should we focus either on those who are in relative poverty and need, or on certain places? Some of your evidence suggests that where you find toilet paper, you should also find period products. There are various ways in which the provisions could be implemented, and the bill gives ministers complete freedom in that regard, but I am interested in your views.

Erin Slaven: Speaking from experience, we believe that the scheme should be universal and that the focus should be on people who are really struggling. Our campaign is based on football grounds, so we can only speak from that standpoint. We feel that the products should be made available in public spaces for everyone.

Not everybody who struggles to access period products would identify as being in poverty; Eilidh Dickson talked about people being caught short. I did not get a chance to come in on that question, but I would say that "period dignity" is probably the best term to use.

The scheme has to be universal because the products are a necessity. I know that they are often taxed as a luxury but they are essential and we believe that everybody should have access to them, which may mean focusing initially on those who are in relative poverty and then rolling the scheme out further. That would be reasonable.

Siobhan McCready: From my experience of working in the community, I know that the services that are already out there are not abused. People take the products when they need them. Most women still go and buy their own, but the services mean that there is a dignified choice for people who are caught short or who need to use those services because they are struggling. The majority of women will probably still go and buy things, so I do not think there is a huge cost implication as a result of everyone suddenly going to their local community centre or wherever to access products. The reality is that the scheme will give a lot of women a dignified choice.

Erin Campbell: The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that provision of free period products should be universal. I stress that we believe that they should be available in all public bathrooms, not just women's bathrooms. They should be available in men's bathrooms and any gender-neutral toilet facilities.

One of SYP's key values is inclusivity, so we want to make sure that transgender and non-binary people are also included. That relates to the point of making provision universal. As has been said, at the end of the day, people will take only what they need and it is a big misconception that the service will be abused. That is why we are also against a registration scheme or a card-based scheme. We do not want to put up additional barriers that would prevent people from accessing what they need.

Graham Simpson: On that point, you have probably read the bill, so you will appreciate that it actually says that the products should not be in toilets that are for use only by males. I presume that you disagree with that.

Erin Campbell: On a personal level, yes, I disagree. SYP policy is that people who menstruate should be given dignity. We also have a policy for the creation of gender-neutral toilets, so we really believe in including trans and non-binary people in that experience.

Andy Wightman: I suppose that what I am trying to get at is the witnesses' view of the importance of the provisions in section 3. Those provisions are not mandatory—ministers do not need to include them in any scheme, so under the bill they could proceed with a scheme that focuses on making period products freely available in a wide range of places, such as public buildings. How important are the provisions in section 3? There are cost implications for what is proposed, which are highlighted in the bill's financial memorandum. The expectation is that the uptake of the provisions in section 3 would be focused on those in relative poverty and that, hence, uptake would be a maximum of 20 per cent.

Eilidh Dickson: We have to acknowledge that there is a range of different access needs and that this is about making it as easy as possible for people who menstruate to access the products that they need in a variety of ways, such as via

postal delivery or in public bathrooms. To add to Erin Campbell's point about having products in men's bathrooms, we should not forget that men will have women at home who menstruate and who might not be able to get out and about to access the products that they need. We should therefore not forget that some men might need to access the products on behalf of somebody else. People will have a host of different reasons when trying to access products. They might need just the one product because they have not brought it with them that day, or it might be more systemic and be about accessing products for their family.

Andy Wightman: Engender's written evidence talks about the c:card scheme for condoms. Are you basically saying that you do not approve of having that kind of scheme for period products?

Eilidh Dickson: Our concern would be that such a system would be used to move away from some of the universal provision schemes that we have seen, particularly if budgets became narrower. Some people will want to access products via a postal service or vouchers, and we should not ignore that. Research from Plan International UK, for example, demonstrates that the most successful schemes are those that are developed with the users. We noted the evidence from the Aberdeen pilot scheme, which suggested that most of the women who accessed the products preferred that approach to getting a voucher or money. We are not ruling out a c:card-type scheme, but it would be a real tragedy if such a scheme was used as a justification for not providing the universal access that has made, and is making, such a difference.

The Convener: There seems to be a bit of confusion here about whether the bill is a period poverty bill or a period dignity bill and whether the bill should be universal or should focus on those who need its provisions most. It would be very difficult to work out the potential financial implications of those different approaches. Kenny Gibson wants to ask a question along those lines.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Eilidh Dickson said that it costs women £15 to £20 a month, or about £200 a year, for period products. The Scottish Government is spending £5.5 million in the current financial year to make products available. If the cost to a woman is £200 per year, that means that there is provision for only 25,000 to 30,000 women. However, we are talking about up to 20 per cent of women potentially requiring products. Are the resources that are being put into the bill adequate? If not, what should actually be put in?

We are also looking at the range of products that are available. What kind of products are we talking about? People say that a variety of products should be made available, but I think there should be more detail about that, given the obvious cost implications. For example, should there be just one type of product in a toilet, or should there be three types, or five? This goes to the nub of the bill. It is one thing to pass a bill, but if it is to be effectively delivered for the people we want it to be delivered for, it has to be adequately resourced. Does anyone on the panel want to comment on those issues?

The Convener: Before anyone comments, I would like Annabelle Ewing to come in.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I have listened carefully to all the comments and I understand the desire very well; I am just trying to pick through some of the practicalities. The point was well made by, I think, Siobhan McCready that whatever scheme is ultimately in place, a lot of women will not see it as being for them, for whatever reason. That begs the question what kind of scheme legislators are seeking to provide. Obviously, public resources are very tight and we want to ensure that the women who most need the scheme get it.

If we are going to have a scheme with a universal approach, together with all the delivery mechanisms that will need to be put in place, which we have still to discuss, mechanisms will also need to be put in place for the enforcement of the right. That all costs money. However, if we are saying that, within certain parameters, a certain percentage of women will be the main recipients of the scheme—and rightly so—we are putting a whole mechanism in place for a different outcome. That, too, costs a lot of money.

I want to get to the heart of what it is we are seeking to do here. I do not think that the financial memorandum really stacks up, if we take into account the actual cost. That is another issue. What are we seeking to do here? We all have very worthy aims, but we need to ensure that we come up with a piece of legislation that is practical and affordable.

Erin Slaven: To answer Mr Gibson's question about what is available, we do not want to overcomplicate things. On a much smaller scale, we get football clubs to make sanitary towels and tampons available, and that is it. We can go into environmentally friendly options, menstrual cups and so on, but for us, the main aim is to make sure that people can access products—full stop. After that, we can look at making environmentally friendly products available.

On Annabelle Ewing's point, I can speak only about public places and from my own experience, or even anecdotally. When I was at university—I graduated earlier this year—the Scottish Government's plans for higher education were just being rolled out and there was an excess of

products in the toilets. I have photographs of that on my phone. We are talking about easily 20 large boxes of products lying in the toilets. In the summer, when we were working with youth groups in the east end and in Royston, it was the same—there was an excess of products. We saw their back rooms and they had boxes upon boxes that the Government had given them. If distribution was a wee bit more efficient and proportionate, that could save money.

Siobhan McCready: On the cost, the figure I quoted of between £10 and £20 is for somebody who goes to Tesco, Asda or wherever and buys a good-quality product. The reality is that the stuff we have been buying for the community is cheaper—it was bought in bulk and unbranded. In pure economic terms, the more you buy, the cheaper you are going to get things. That will also rule out people lifting things, because people tend to like brand names. The reality is that economics have a part to play here: you get what you pay for, I suppose. Given the product's very nature, people will come in and use it because they really need it. They need to access it and they are using it.

In some of the communities I talk to, there is an issue about targeting, with things not necessarily being done in an accessible way, but there is also an issue about stigma, dignity, embarrassment and almost a feeling of worth—that you are not worthy of helping yourself to the products. I know that, in my community, we had to actively encourage women to come in, because they were embarrassed about asking for basic products.

There is a job of work to be done around building awareness and ensuring that people access the help that is already out there, let alone increasing the number of people who do so. I do not think that you will be inundated by thousands of women expecting a certain brand of product to be delivered to them the next day. That is not the case. We are talking about dignity, access to products and reducing stigma.

10:15

Nicola Bristow: There is a need to work with the local experts who work in communities. For example, there is a mobile library service that delivers products in rural communities, because they have identified who is in need and have developed relationships and trust in the community. Needs assessments can be done at a local level, and those local experts will know best how to serve those communities in the most efficient way with the resources that are available, because that is what they are already doing.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Government has measures in place at present, and we are having this discussion today because of the inadequacy and failure of those measures. If they were effective, they would be playing a bigger role in the process. However, because that does not seem to be happening, we find ourselves considering putting legislation in place. Does anyone have any views on that?

Erin Slaven: As I said in my previous answer, at present there is a focus on higher education. That means that there is a class issue at play, because, as we know, a lot of working-class people do not go to university. We are providing products for people who get into higher education, but what about everyone else? We think that the provision should be expanded. Our primary gripe about the existing measures is that the distribution is not proportionate and could be improved on. I do not think that that is the Government's fault, because it maybe wanted to roll provision out quickly and did not look at it in a manner that would have ensured that it was proportionate.

Regardless of what happens with the bill, we are concerned that the idea of period poverty or period dignity should not be commercialised. In the past year or so, we have seen that, as the discourse around period poverty has increased, brands have capitalised on it. For example, Always put out a message that, for every new follower that it gets on Instagram, it will donate a tampon. The company should just donate that tampon anyway. It is important that the provision of the products is not seen as a brand deal. It should be visible but discreet, rather than being a big commercial thing. It is a sensitive issue, and the approach should be kept simple—no fouls, no fuss.

The Convener: Could you catch my attention the next time you want to speak, Erin? It is just that you have spoken first the past couple of times, and I want to make sure that everyone gets a chance to come in.

Erin Slaven: Okay—sorry.

The Convener: They were very good interventions, right enough.

Erin Slaven: Thank you.

Erin Campbell: From consultation that we have done with young people, we have found that they are being let down by the current legislation. They raised with us that there are few or no sustainable products available among those that are provided. I do not know whether you know this, but our current campaign is about the environment, which is very important to young people right now.

A lot of our members who participated in our workshop said that the products that were provided in schools were often of poor quality. Obviously, not everyone experiences menstruation

in the same way, and they found that there was not a wide enough variety of products.

In my local area, we created period poverty packs to cover the Christmas break, which consisted of enough sanitary products for one cycle. A lot of people came up to us to say that that was helpful, because they were getting to a point at which they could not afford these products. That goes to show that the problem is more common than you might think. A lot of people cannot afford these products and are being let down by the current scheme. It is not always the people who you would necessarily think would be unable to afford the products that find themselves in that situation.

Eilidh Dickson: The focus on places of education was largely because of the evidence base. You can understand why the Scottish Government targeted its initial steps at addressing period poverty in that space. We need more localised data and more data about other groups of women, particularly women for whom English is not their first language. Once we have had a year or two of the Scottish Government's existing provision, we will be able to better assess where the gaps are and respond to them.

The bill establishes a right for anyone who menstruates to be able to access the products that they need when they need them. That need will differ. Sometimes it will involve only one tampon, which will not cost very much, and sometimes it will involve providing products for the whole family. The monetary costs will differ, but we must not forget that there is also a human cost when we do not tackle the issue of the provision of unsuitable period products—a cost to the wellbeing of women and girls and a cost to their health, through toxic shock syndrome from using the wrong product for far too long because they have had to make what they are using last longer than it is meant to. We should not forget that in these discussions.

Nicola Bristow: The learning from the "Let's Talk. Period" project that we have been running has shown that, although the scheme has been successful in providing products in mainstream education settings, some of the areas of biggest need—and the biggest successes—were in places such as mother and baby units and sheltered accommodation, where there where drop-in sessions to inform people about products. It was found that, before the sessions, there was just a box in the cupboard, and no one had any education or support, so no one was using the products. However, when people were given the skills and knowledge to use menstrual cups, for example, they did so. There is now a whole group of young mums who only use menstrual cups as a result of those sessions, and support each other to do so. There is a bigger issue there, relating to long-term savings from using such products rather than disposables. There is a range of solutions that have different costs at different times, but the important point is that simply putting boxes of products into places is not always going to work. There might be a different up-front cost, but the issue is not simply about the cost of the products because, in the long term, the non-disposable products will be more efficient.

Siobhan McCready: Some of the best evidence that we have for what works comes from working in community centres, when the local communities have been made aware that such products are there and can be accessed. In our area, we have food banks and clothes banks and there is also provision of nappies. We have found that, where things are accessible somewhere, people find their own way there in order to access them. We have also had situations in which young carers have come in and taken stuff home to their mum, for example, who might not be able to get out of the house, for a variety of reasons.

That model is definitely working. We are in the early days of the approach, and all things take time, but, from my experience in my local area, the model is working and the information is getting out to the right people, through the food banks and so on, and people are becoming aware that the products are available at their community centres. That is a way of getting the information to people that ensures that there is dignity in the process and reduces the stigma. Women in the younger generation feel that stigma less but, for women in my generation—let alone men—it is an uncomfortable thing to talk about.

There is a job of work to be done, but the approach is working. I would not like you to think that the scheme as it stands is not working, because it absolutely is.

Alexander Stewart: You have identified many areas in which the scheme has the potential to be successful. However, the issue also comes down to quality and cost, which have been big considerations in the process.

You have identified the need for the legislation, and have said that it will give us an opportunity to take on board many of the areas that you have identified. The crux of the matter seems to be that the products have been delivered in the wrong place or they have not been of a good enough quality or have been the wrong ones. There are opportunities there.

You talked about the commercialisation of this area. That is a crucially important consideration and we must think about how we manage that, because there is a potential for that to become a problem if the bill goes through.

Graham Simpson: Following on from the response to Mr Stewart's question, it sounds to me like the scheme that is being rolled out across Scotland, funded by the Scottish Government, is largely working and is getting better, and that the products are becoming more widely available in public buildings. If we accept that—I do not know whether you do—is there a need to legislate?

Siobhan McCready: Yes, because the programme could be stopped tomorrow. If it is in legislation, it has to be continued, reviewed and improved. Legislation is key to the policy. It should not be run just on good will. What we are doing is about improving women's health and giving them dignity, and making this country a better and fairer one for us all. I feel that this could be landmark legislation for Scotland. We all want better communities and a better way of life and, without legislation, what is to stop the programme being stopped tomorrow?

That was a bit clumsy, but you know what I mean.

Graham Simpson: You are trying to get to the point at which it is normal for these products to be available, as is the case with toilet paper—you would not expect there to be no toilet paper in a public toilet; it should be widely available. However, there is no law that requires toilet paper to be provided in toilets. You do not need a law to ensure that that happens; it is just done. If it can become normal for these products to become available, why do you need a law?

The Convener: Erin Slaven can answer that first, because she put her hand up.

Erin Slaven: Forgive me, Mr Simpson, but, although toilet roll is provided in toilets without there being a law that says that it should be, we are not expected to pay for it. Sometimes, there might not be toilet roll available, but we definitely do not need to pay for it. Period products are available in a lot of toilets, but we have to pay for them. That is not what this legislation is about. It is about making them free, whether that involves products being donated or being available from vending machines free at the point of use. There definitely is a need for legislation.

Earlier, we were talking about the products being provided in places of education and community centres, and I have experience of making them available at football grounds. I and the other two girls who work with me—Mikaela and Orlaith—have been doing this for nearly two years, and we absolutely adore it. It is the best use of our time, but we cannot do it for ever. We are a grass-roots, non-funded group—it is just three of us doing it in our spare time. I am sure that there are loads of other wee activist groups that are doing similar work with gig venues and other groups in the community. For us, our project was a means to an end, and the end was legislation, because the free provision of sanitary products should eventually be the norm. We work from the bottom up, so we work with fans to make the change, and that is where our focus has been. We want to keep this grass-roots movement going, but it cannot go on for ever—it should not, because, at some point, the free provision of sanitary products should be the norm. I hope that, in 10 years' time, I can say, "Back in my day, we used to have to pay for these, but it is now enshrined in legislation that they are free."

Graham Simpson: Your campaign is to be applauded. It applies to football clubs, which are not public bodies. This legislation applies only to public bodies. You have had tremendous success—according to your submission, you have managed to get 104 clubs on board in Scotland. You did not need a law to do that; it just happened.

Erin Slaven: That is right, but I would not have been asked here if I did not have insight that was welcome. I know that football clubs are not public bodies, but I have some insight to provide and I am providing it.

I definitely think that social inclusion is just as important as education. It is amazing that people who are living in relative poverty do not have to worry about period products at school, because they are available there. However, come the weekend, those people should not be cooped up in their house; they should be able to go to the football, gigs or their local youth group and get on with their life. They should be able to experience that social inclusion, which is vital for their wellbeing.

From our perspective, the provision of free period products should be universal, in public spaces and privately owned places such as football grounds.

The Convener: Mr Simpson's suggestion seems to be that we have the option of having legislation or, on the other hand, Erin. [*Laughter.*] That just seems to be how it works.

10:30

Eilidh Dickson: I want to underline the point that the bill establishes a right in primary legislation for anyone who needs period products to access them free of charge. That is sending a serious message to women and anyone who menstruates that their time and needs are just as valid as anyone else's. We have a mountain to climb in tackling stigma, as we have touched on, so we should not shy away from the fact that there is an important step to take just in making even talking about periods a normal fact of life. It is true

that the precise scheme and way of giving effect to the right might change, and the bill foresees that, but it is an important first stage in normalising periods.

Erin Campbell: At the end of the day, we absolutely need legislation for free period products. Scottish young people believe that access to free period products is a basic human right. We have SYP policy on the issue, which is based on consultation with thousands of young people across the country. One policy in particular, which was proposed by a previous MSYP in 2017, states:

"The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that access to menstrual hygiene products is a basic human right".

That policy was passed with 99 per cent agreement, which is the highest-ever agreement to date. I think that all the witnesses would agree that not having access to menstrual products is a breach of basic human rights. As I said, everyone who menstruates deserves dignity and, at the end of the day, they are not getting that, so they need to get it through legislation and law.

Nicola Bristow: I will say a little about the overreliance on donation schemes. The people paying for the products and making donations are women or others in communities. Since the issue hit the headlines, the response has been incredible and vast, but it is inconsistent. I believe that the Government has a responsibility to provide these products at a quality level. If we are working towards the sustainable development goals on gender equality and fighting against poverty, we have to take on that responsibility and accept menstruation and periods into that sphere. The bill would go a long way to doing that.

Siobhan McCready: We have come a long way on the issue in the past few years but, without legislation, things could stall. We cannot just rely on good will or charity or somebody having a change of mind. We need to push through the legislation, because we need to change our whole society's way of thinking on the issue. We expect to have our toilet paper, and we do not steal toilet paper from places and take it home. That has become perfectly natural. We need to get to a point where providing period products becomes a perfectly natural thing in society as well. Without legislation, that will not happen.

Graham Simpson: I want to ask about the voucher scheme that is mentioned in the bill. I think that Erin Campbell was at the session that I hosted at the Scottish Youth Parliament when we talked about that issue, so perhaps she can kick off on this. Pretty much all the members of the Scottish Youth Parliament at that session were against a voucher scheme. Will you explain your thoughts on that?

Erin Campbell: On the back of our consultation on the issue, we held a workshop that was attended by 24 MSYPs from across the country. We were overwhelmingly against a voucher scheme, mainly because it would make it much more difficult for young people to access the products. For example, somebody with a disability might be physically unable to access them. We believe that vouchers would create additional barriers that we do not need. If there was an online registration service, not everyone would be able to access that, because not everyone has access to the internet.

We believe that, to be as inclusive as possible, the scheme should be an opt-out rather than an opt-in service. Overall, we believe that the legislation should be universal and that everyone should have the right to access period products when they need to. That is why we are against a voucher scheme.

Graham Simpson: Basically, you are saying that people should not have to register and say, "Here I am—I need this," and then give the Government or whoever their details. The products should just be available. Is that what others think?

Nicola Bristow: The stigma around menstruation, which we have all mentioned and which has been identified in research, and the stigma that exists around poverty and people putting up their hand and saying that they are worried about it and cannot do certain things, will prevent those who are in need from accessing products.

Erin Campbell's point—that there should be open access and that people should not feel further stigmatised by their own need—is important.

Siobhan McCready: In my experience, those who most need the free products are the ones who are almost guaranteed not to ask for them. They are so embarrassed and depressed about their situation that they are the least likely to register. The bill is about changing society and culture and expectations. A registration scheme risks those who most need the products missing out, because they simply do not register.

Eilidh Dickson: In relation to the women who most need help, there is a risk that having to register online would exclude women for whom English is not their first language, women who are refugees and women who are homeless. Women make up a large percentage of the population that is referred to as "hidden homeless". It might exclude those who cannot get online or those who experience control within their relationships. As far as possible, we should avoid putting barriers in place.

Graham Simpson: It sounds like everyone agrees that section 3 should go. I will follow up on that. There has been a suggestion that the scheme could have a postal element. If women cannot get to the shops or a facility, we could mail the products out to them. Would you be in favour of that?

Eilidh Dickson: Yes, absolutely. There are those who menstruate who might not want anyone to know that they are menstruating. Women do the vast majority of unpaid care and might not be able to balance their caring responsibilities with nipping out to queue in a pharmacy or go to a public building to access the products that they need. There are a multitude of reasons that people might want to receive the products by post.

Siobhan McCready: In rural communities, people live far away from places where they can access anything.

Graham Simpson: In which case, they would have to say who they were and where they lived, so there would be an element of registration.

Siobhan McCready: It depends on how we do it.

Erin Campbell: I will reiterate those points. The Scottish Youth Parliament would be in favour of a delivery and collection scheme. That would be inclusive of people who have a disability or those who, as Siobhan McCready said, live in rural areas or cannot afford public transport. We believe that anything that we can do to make the service more universal and inclusive can only be good.

Annabelle Ewing: I will pick up on that issue. To provide for a scheme, there would have to be a mechanism in place and people to assess eligibility. The administration of that brings a cost. That goes back to my original point, which is that, if the bill is about period poverty, the women in that position need the product more than anyone else. We have a finite amount of money to spend on things that are good. Therefore, how do we best spend that money? On the issue of delivery, it is all very well to say that a scheme is great, but it has to be paid for. It is a question of efficacy versus the overarching aim of the bill. Would you care to comment on that?

Siobhan McCready: The layers of bureaucracy need to be stripped back as much as possible, so that we do not have to pay people to do things. If we make it an open and inclusive process that does not rely on all that and is not means tested or vetted, we strip away a lot of the costs involved.

I can give my own example. My daughter is severely disabled. When she was a child, she qualified for free nappies. We went to get them once; they were not good quality, so we never got them again. We just bought our own; that was a choice. We could go and use them or not; we chose not to. Had I been on a lower income, I probably would have taken them, because it would have saved us money. That was a choice. Nobody abuses that system either, and it works perfectly well. That is just one personal example.

Annabelle Ewing: I hear what you say, and I understand very well the point that you are making. However, I do not think that any member of the committee was suggesting that we need to guard against abuse. We do not think that there is likely to be any particular degree of abuse. Rather, we are concerned to get an efficacious scheme that gives value for money and delivers to the women who need it most. That is what informs my question.

Eilidh Dickson: You have to factor in the costs of girls missing out on days of education, and of women being unproductive at work because they are not feeling well or because they are not feeling particularly hygienic that day, as they have had to use something makeshift. You also have to factor in the cost of life-threatening illnesses if the wrong period product is used, or if a product is used incorrectly. There is a human cost, and there are further costs that we have to extrapolate. It is really hard to put a cost on what is essentially women's dignity.

Annabelle Ewing: I know, but the Government has to come up with the money, so someone has to put a cost on it.

Nicola Bristow: If we are talking about using means testing, we will not embed menstruation and women's needs into different services. For example, someone who suffers from endometriosis or heavy menstrual bleeding will go to a general practitioner, but would not necessarily get support for their period products, because that need is not assessed by the GP as something that they can prescribe for. There are other things that we need to unpick about how menstruation is not embedded in general community needs assessments, so we cannot factor in those additional costs. It is not just about the products, it is about embedding menstruation, and the needs of women and other menstruators, in a much broader spectrum of public life. Those additional costs will start to become apparent.

This is something that needs to happen without means testing for specific access schemes. We have really strong local community organisations that will be able to help us develop and deliver efficient systems and assess need.

The other point is that this is all happening very quickly: the conversation on periods started only about five years ago. There is scope to test, pilot, make assessments and really figure out what works, so that we can make the system as

efficient as possible without overburdening it at the start.

Andy Wightman: Following on from Annabelle Ewing's question about who pays, section 8 of the bill says that the Scottish ministers

"may make such payments as they think appropriate".

It does not mandate the Scottish ministers to pay for the scheme.

Following up Graham Simpson's question about toilet paper not being a legal requirement in public toilets, I have just looked up the Workplace Health, Safety and Welfare Regulations 1992 and find that it is a legal requirement—in workplaces—to provide a supply of toilet paper and, for female employees, a means of disposing of sanitary dressings.

Given that workplaces are obliged to provide toilet paper and a means of disposing of sanitary dressings, why should they not also be obliged to provide the sanitary dressings, just as part of what a workplace has to do?

Siobhan McCready: In every negotiation that we now go into with employers, Unite asks for that as part of the terms and conditions, and we promote it. Many other trade unions are doing that too; the Communication Workers Union and Unison have been very active on it. Certainly, from a trade union bargaining perspective, that is what we are asking from employers. A lot of employers have been really good and are already doing it; we have seen huge progress, even just in the last year.

Andy Wightman: Should there be a statutory obligation on workplaces to provide sanitary dressings? If so, they would have to pay for them. Perhaps you do not know; that is okay.

Siobhan McCready: Is it within the realms of the Scottish Government to do that?

The Convener: There are no other questions from committee members, but I believe that Monica Lennon has one or two questions.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, convener; it is great to be back at the committee. I thank the panel. There are a couple of points that I can come back on when I give my evidence, but for now I will stick to questions.

It is apparent that there has been fantastic progress in a short space of time and a whole range of people have contributed to that, including the Scottish Government, local government and our partners in education and in the third sector. However, what I have heard today is that unmet need exists, that there is a lot of hidden poverty and that there are fundamental issues about access. You were asked about the extent of that unmet need. Given that there is variability in how schemes are being delivered, does the panel agree that a universal scheme that provides for everyone by right is the best way to meet any gaps in provision?

10:45

Siobhan McCready: Absolutely. There is already good practice out there, which we have seen even just over the past couple of years. Going out there, talking to people to find out what the good practice is, and rolling out a scheme on that basis and constantly reviewing it, is the way forward. However, we need one scheme that works, that takes account of the various regional and geographical issues across Scotland and that runs without a hugely administrative or overly complex process.

The Convener: Is that the general consensus?

Witnesses: Yes.

Monica Lennon: We have talked a lot about people's daily needs—for example, being in the workplace, at the football, in school or education and being caught short. However, people also need a monthly supply of products at home. How are they accessing that? How is that need being met in communities?

Erin Slaven: Siobhan McCready correctly said earlier that a lot of that need is being met by community groups. That is certainly our experience of working in communities and youth groups in Glasgow. For example, Royston Youth Action has a supply at the front door and young people and their parents can come in and leave with what they need. However, putting that pressure on such groups is not really fair. Arrangements for access should be clearer. Products should be supplied in other public spaces, such as libraries and other local and accessible places, so that people do not have to travel far to get there. That would avoid putting too much financial or other pressure on smaller groups that are reliant on funding.

Nicola Bristow: It is also worth looking at existing distribution schemes and how they work. I gave the example of mobile libraries, which is a scheme that works in rural areas. The mobile libraries access communities and are able to distribute products.

There are other distribution schemes and smaller, commercial period product providers that often focus on reusable and plastic-free products. I can go online and register and have those products delivered to me every month and pay for them with my credit card.

Distribution mechanisms exist and people are running them successfully, but it is about how to do it at scale. If you are able to assess what

works, there is potential to embed period products in those schemes without overburdening smaller community groups.

Erin Campbell: At the workshop, one of our MSYPs mentioned that, particularly in sports clubs, she finds that the products that are available are often of really poor quality and hard to find, as they are not signposted. There is definitely huge room for improvement in how products are made available in local areas.

Eilidh Dickson: It is also worth noting that the use of food banks has increased over the past few years and that period products are increasingly requested at food banks.

Of course, there is a referral mechanism for most food banks in the United Kingdom, so people have to be able to access the food bank in order to access a month's worth of products for them and their family. That referral process misses huge groups of incredibly vulnerable women, such as refugees. Last month, Bloody Good Period produced a report that looked at the experiences of refugee women, and 75 per cent of the women to whom the organisation spoke had not been able to access period products.

Monica Lennon: I want to ask about the voucher scheme but, before I do, I will pick up on the point that Nicola Bristow mentioned about endometriosis. There has been a lot of discussion about dignity versus poverty, but it is about making sure that there is provision for everyone. We know that around one in 10 women have endometriosis and that it goes undiagnosed for a very long time, which does not help. If women who have very heavy or irregular periods and have additional costs to manage are not being referred to a food bank—they might not be on a low income—and are not in education, where do they access monthly supplies under the current schemes? Do you have any knowledge on that point?

Nicola Bristow: I came across a school scheme in which an individual had to sign for a single pad. Every time a person wanted a pad, they had to sign for it, which was overburdensome and had a huge amount of stigma attached to it for the young person who was accessing the product. Somebody might have to use two pads at a time to try and sit through a lesson or a workplace situation and it is critical that they are allowed to assess their need and access the number of products that they need. When GPs diagnose those conditions, there is no mechanism for them to offer support for products to women or young women or other menstruaters.

The Convener: I am sorry, Nicola—I did not mean to interrupt. Where do people have to sign for products? Was that example from Scotland?

Nicola Bristow: No, it was not. It was a unique example from a small school that developed a mechanism and then came to us for advice and support.

Erin Campbell: In my in local area, the main place where people access products is in schools. That is obviously a problem, because periods do not stop in school holidays, so where would people access products during the Christmas break and the summer holidays? They cannot always be accessed in schools, which is why we believe that there should be a legal requirement on other organisations to provide them.

Monica Lennon: My final question is on the bill's voucher scheme, about which there has been quite a bit of discussion. It is a framework bill and the scheme is a proposal that ministers might want to use if they feel the need for some trackability. The bill says that the maximum information in the scheme would be a person's name and the first part of their postcode. There is an appetite to keep the scheme really simple. Is the mood of the panel that there is no need for any kind of voucher scheme or registration, except where people want to opt in for a delivery service?

Erin Slaven: It is important that we keep the scheme as barrier-free as possible. As Erin Campbell said, the stigma can be really debilitating for people who come forward and sign up for something like that. People do not want a big song and dance about the fact that they cannot afford period products. They do not want to sign up for something and get a card and hand it across a desk, wherever that may be. It would be so much simpler to go and get products and leave and that is that—they could get on with their day. They do not want a big fuss to be made about the fact that they may not be in a position to access on their own terms.

Nicola Bristow: In our original Break the Barriers research, which was published in 2018, we identified the potential to test the c:card scheme, which would mirror a condom scheme for young people. In our initial consultation, a group of young people said that that would work. The scheme was implemented by Brook, the sexual health and wellbeing service, through the "Let's talk. Period" project, but it has found that access to education has been the most critical thing for young people. If they have the education access, they then access a range of products—it is not just about getting a card and going in. There is a much broader, bigger issue about access than whether it is a voucher-based scheme.

Andy Wightman: Erin Campbell made a point earlier about the Scottish Youth Parliament's approval of the policy that access to products is a basic human right. As you are aware, the Scottish Youth Parliament does not make human rights.

Are you claiming that it is a human right under any of the articles of the European convention on human rights or the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights?

Erin Campbell: I do not know enough about the details of that to comment fully. However, our consultation on our most recent manifesto was based on the views of more than 70,000 young people, so I can say with confidence that there is a clear consensus that young people believe that it is a basic human right.

Andy Wightman: Do you believe that it should be a basic human right?

Erin Campbell: Yes.

Andy Wightman: I just wanted to clarify that point.

The Convener: Andy Wightman has just opened a can of worms. [*Laughter.*] We have only a couple of minutes left, so please be brief.

Eilidh Dickson: I take the opportunity to point out that today is the 40th anniversary of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, so if we wanted to look for a basis for human rights for women and girls, that would not be a poor place to start.

Andy Wightman: I invite those who have views on that point to communicate them, because it is quite important in the context of making legislation that is in the human rights framework.

The Convener: I thank the panel very much for that helpful session. I will suspend the meeting to allow a witness changeover and to establish a video link for the next panel.

10:55

Meeting suspended.

11:05

On resuming—

The Convener: For our second panel, I welcome Sheena Stewart, university secretary of Abertay University, from Universities Scotland; Councillor Alison Evison, president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; Celia Hodson, chief executive of Hey Girls CIC; Gail Anderson, chief executive of the Orkney partnership, who is giving evidence by videolink; and Carolyn Hope, acting senior manager for facilities management with North Ayrshire Council. We will need to be mindful of the possibility of slight delays in the videolink during our discussion. Obviously, we will have to listen carefully as well.

I thank the witnesses for their written submissions. We will move straight to questions. Will you explain your organisations' roles in delivering the Scottish Government's existing programme of free provision of period products?

Councillor Alison Evison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): COSLA is the voice of local government in Scotland, and we represent all 32 local authorities. We have been supporting the local authorities to deliver the services that are currently available through the Scottish Government. The main point on that is that each authority and each community within each authority does things differently to meet their particular local needs—localism is important.

COSLA can bring people together to talk about good experience and good practice. In fact, a meeting is being held tomorrow involving people from across the country who are involved in the issue to discuss and begin to look at the data that has been analysed. Obviously, work has been done and it is important to evaluate and analyse the data to see how effective that is and to review how we go forward. Much of the information that I can give today will be based on an initial evaluation. Members should bear in mind that it is initial and that further work will be happening from tomorrow onwards.

The Convener: It is a shame that you did not have the meeting yesterday, and then you could have answered the next question, but I may as well ask it. How effective have the Scottish Government's measures been? I ask Alison Evison to answer that and then the others can answer both questions.

Councillor Evison: In some areas, the measures have been very effective and have made a huge difference. One important effect is to get people talking about the issue and seeing the potential of what can be done and how we can move the provision into other areas. The nature of the distribution at the moment means that the service is not available everywhere. There were comments earlier that the current system is not sustainable as it is based on money being given out. We need something that is set in legislation and is more long term and permanent. The money that has been provided has allowed lots of local areas to develop good practice. We need to look at how effective that work has been, learn from it and spread it elsewhere.

Carolyn Hope (North Ayrshire Council): A key part of my role as a senior manager in facilities management is to deliver the products to primary and secondary schools in North Ayrshire. North Ayrshire started delivery in August 2017, which was ahead of the funding from the Government. That was in recognition of the fact that North Ayrshire is the fifth most deprived area in Scotland and that there was real need in the area. It was difficult at first, because we were a bit

of a trailblazer and it was unknown territory. However, the funding the following year was welcome. It has allowed us to expand the number of products that we make available for schools, and we hope to continue to do that and to work with the schools on that.

Our delivery across the wider community has been well received. We now deliver to 29 community centres and 12 libraries in North Ayrshire, which expands the provision outwith schoolchildren and school hours and terms.

There is still a lot to do. We have had some feedback from local community link workers that they are experiencing problems out in the wider North Ayrshire community with people they are meeting through non-medical appointments, who are struggling to access products. We are working across services in North Ayrshire to see what we can do as a council to address that need. Funding is an issue, as we have a limited pot. However, we are trying to explore different ways in which we can fulfil everyone's needs.

We welcome this discussion today. It is a great step forward. The feedback that we have had from pupils in North Ayrshire has been excellent. We have had people telling us stories that will not be news to anyone in here. They feel more confident, they can go to PE without worrying about leaking, and they can come to school every day and not miss school at all. The impact of that is huge—I do not think that we will ever really understand what that impact is. I am very proud to be part of that in North Ayrshire and very pleased to be here today to help in any way I can. There is a keenness in North Ayrshire to support the bill and to take forward whatever we can do as a local authority too.

Celia Hodson (Hey Girls CIC): I am the founder of a Scottish social enterprise called Hey Girls. We are a buy one, give one menstrual product social enterprise. We sell our products online, in supermarkets—ASDA, Waitrose, the Co-op and Scotmid—and in small independent eco-stores and retailers. We supply to a lot of corporates, so we deliver business-to-business products to washrooms. Our turnover predominantly comes from supplying the Scottish Government and an increasing number of Welsh councils with period products. We donate for every box that we sell. We have a network of over 200 donation partners across the UK that receive parcels of mixed products every month.

We believe that it is not enough just to give away menstrual products. As you have heard from other witnesses, there needs to be education about what good menstrual health is and what a normal period is, and we need to tackle the stigma, taboos and myths around menstruation and get women to talk about their periods and access products without shame. At the moment, we are developing a finder app so that users can just pop in their postcode and find the nearest free product. We are developing that with the Scottish Government and COSLA. That will mean that all our councils, schools and universities can put in where product can be found and that community buildings such as libraries and leisure centres can mark where product is available.

Sheena Stewart (Universities Scotland): I represent Universities Scotland, which is the representative body for all 19 higher education institutions in Scotland, which range in size and type and have about 145,000 female students for whom today's topic is relevant.

We have been very keen on this. I was on the steering group that implemented the Scottish Government scheme, and we have been very positive about that. Students have been campaigning on the issue for a number of years. All the HEIs have collaborated in implementing the scheme.

Funding first became available from September 2018. We have had some feedback from the first, six-month, census point in February 2019. More recent figures for the first year of implementation are coming in now. To give you a flavour of those first six months, by February 2019 the 19 HEIs had purchased 2.3 million products; 64 per cent of those had been distributed across campuses in various ways, which we can probably talk about later; and about 85 per cent of those products had been taken by students. That is an average, and there is a range of experience underneath that. The sector is meeting regularly to discuss implementation, and we are working with student bodies to promote the availability of the scheme, which we welcome. I can talk about that later.

11:15

Gail Anderson (Orkney Partnership): Good morning. My role in the Orkney partnership—the community planning partnership—is that I am a member of it. I am chief executive of Voluntary Action Orkney, which is the Orkney third sector interface. My role, along with the partnership, is to provide focused joint working to address the causes of inequalities across our islands, which are often deep rooted.

We were very happy to take part in and be an active member of the scheme by ensuring the free distribution of period products not only in schools, libraries and our college but across our community organisations. Period products are now available right across the islands. By utilising the networks that we have established, we are making sure that those who are furthest from the main points of

access on our main island are able to access the products.

We have worked hard to create a delivery method that suits our local area, and I think that we are happy that we have begun to do that. To date, we have had very limited feedback, but I think that we are raising awareness, reducing the stigma that is associated with the issue and making sure that people's dignity and privacy are respected when they access the products that they need.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Sarah Boyack: It was great to get your introductory comments and the written evidence that you provided in advance. I want to explore the effectiveness of the existing schemes and where you think there is scope to improve them. A couple of you have mentioned funding, accessibility and reach.

I will start off by addressing who is currently missing out. I think that Sheena Stewart was here for the session with the previous panel, when the comment was made that the provision in universities is great, but we need to consider how people who are not at university could access such products. It is interesting that Sheena Stewart said that 85 per cent of the people who access the products in universities are students. Staff might be on low incomes. If you have information on this, perhaps you could say who you think is missing out in the current schemes. The witnesses have a good range of experience of service delivery that would help to give us a starting point on that.

Carolyn Hope: As well as offering free products in schools, community centres and libraries, North Ayrshire Council provides them for staff in council buildings. You asked about who is missing out. There is a restriction on people who cannot get to those buildings because they do not work or are not in education. We are not getting to people who are at home for whatever reason—they might be a carer or they might have a disability that prevents them from working—and people who, for whatever reason, cannot travel to those buildings.

Community centres will have limited opening times, and people could feel embarrassed to go into them just to go to the toilet to get free products, because people usually go to a community centre for a specific purpose—for example, because there is a club on. They might feel that they would draw attention to themselves if they simply walked in to get products and then walked out again.

We are certainly doing good things in North Ayrshire, but there is a lot more that we need to do, because a huge group of people are not being covered by our current provision. However, there is only so much that we can do as a local authority.

Sarah Boyack: I should have mentioned the debate that we had about poverty with the first panel, which dominated the first part of that session.

Councillor Evison: If we limit our understanding of poverty to financial poverty, we will miss out a lot of people who need access to period products. That is why it is important that the scheme is universal.

Schools are doing what they can—they are designing schemes, often in consultation with the pupils, to do things that are appropriate locally. In many of the discussions that have taken place in schools, it has come up that the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community has particular access needs that need to be addressed in the future. Another issue that has come up is that of cultural differences—some communities find it easier to access certain things than others.

Provision in public buildings is also important. It must be done at a local level so that people can access the products, but we are missing out people who cannot access those buildings.

If we look at poverty as being simply financial poverty, we will miss out people who are experiencing domestic abuse or financial abuse and people for whom there might be a cultural stigma around accessing such products. If we are looking to have a universal scheme, we need to give broader consideration to what that means.

Thanks in the main to the money from the Scottish Government, provision is developing in areas such as community centres. That is a limit in itself. We have been talking about rural areas and rurality—places that are not built up—and there is often no community centre in a rural area, which is immediately a problem for that kind of access. We need to look more broadly at where we can develop schemes.

Mobile libraries have been mentioned and, where they exist, that is very good but, given the pressures on council budgets, they are one of the services that could go, so they are not a sustainable way forward. Some areas are looking at links with local pharmacies. Often, pharmacies are more local than anything else. A scheme that involves partners such as pharmacies is a way of developing it as well.

That comes back to the key point for us in all this—we need locally designed services to improve access for all community groups, including the LGBT community, different ethnic groups, Gypsy Travellers, homeless people, people who access women's shelters from abusive circumstances and all those who need

access. To have access that meets all those groups, we need locally designed services by people who understand the needs of the local area. If we have legislation that becomes too prescriptive in what it is doing and how it is organising, we will have access problems. That localism is key to meeting our aims.

Sheena Stewart: I will follow up on that. Students are not a homogeneous group. We have students who are distance learners who do not come into buildings on a regular basis and students who go out on placement for extended periods, such as nursing students. Universities and higher education institutions have been adapting flexible approaches in implementing the scheme, because there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. In some cases, it might be a non-means-tested grant given to a distance-learning student, or it could be stocks of supplies being given to students before they go on placement. We will continue to have collaborative meetings to find out how the range of HEIs are working with the different scenarios. The variability of type of student and type of organisation requires different types of solution.

The Convener: Would it also work in schools—pupils being given a bundle to see them through periods when they are not at school? That was talked about in earlier meetings.

Sheena Stewart: I assume so. That may happen in some places. Others could probably comment.

Celia Hodson: It is fair to say that we have made a good start. There are some amazing examples of great practice, but some schools and councils have been slower to pick up the opportunity. Stirling, for example, made a campaign around period products. It has Pedro the period panda in a full mardi gras suit, who wanders around and gives out menstrual products in the corridor—there is no shame or stigma around Pedro.

The other extreme is where you still have to go and see Mrs So-and-so, who will get the keys, go to the cupboard and open it, take out your packets of pads and then lock the door and put the keys back. You can imagine the difference in the volumes of products that go out in those two different situations. The previous panel talked about stocks of product sitting in offices and stockrooms, all going out of date. They sit there because there has not been a campaign to make anyone aware that the products are freely available. You go from having posters saying, “Got caught short? Take what you need and take some home for mum,” to people still whispering that, “Someone’s got some product,” but being worried about the budget and just dripping them out as people ask for them. There is still a significant difference between those things. That plays out in communities. We provide 26 of the 32 local authorities across Scotland and some are putting product out in baskets, tubs and red boxes all over so anyone can freely pick them up. In others, you go to reception and fill in a form saying who you are and what product you need and you are given a pack of pads or tampons. There are huge differences.

There is still work to be done on procurement and making those things freely available. We have not been able to supply either public buildings or schools that are ringing up to ask for more products because we are still waiting for a purchase order. Although we have done a great job, it is still pretty sticky to manage all those systems.

The Convener: I will bring Gail Anderson in. I promise not to leave you until last the next time.

Gail Anderson: That is quite all right. It is interesting to hear from colleagues.

On the issue of access and poverty, our experience is that the role of the third sector and community organisations is hugely important. The way we have done it here is that my organisation acts as a distribution centre for third sector organisations and community organisations, including community halls and community schools right across the islands. The products are made freely available in those premises and through those agencies to those who need them. They are in baskets in toilets, they are in men’s toilets and we are looking at making them accessible on the ferries, because there are quite long distances between some of the islands and the mainland. We have tried hard to make them accessible right across the board.

There is obviously still some work to do, and part of that is about promotion and education, but we are slowly getting to the point at which people know where to access these products and are able to do so. Having them available in that way also enables young people who are not at school during the school holidays to access them quite freely.

That is our experience, and the third sector is a key partner in distribution and making the products available to those who need them most.

Sarah Boyack: I want to tease out the accessibility issue. It is about physical accessibility and the people who need support. Who is seeking support and whether there is a stigma around accessing period products came up with the first panel.

I want to tease out the point about physical accessibility. Alison Evison talked about the capacity to localise, and you are all talking about a

mix of universality and targeting in the physical sense and in respect of attitudes. What is the mix in terms of homeless people and refugees? Are we talking just about bathrooms, or is it wider than that? Are we talking about all bathrooms and discreet products in bathrooms? To what extent is this about attitudes and physical availability? To what extent have your schemes been designed with that in mind, to enable everybody who needs period products to access them without that lack of dignity?

I would also like to hear a bit of reflection on physical access. Your opening comments were great, but I just want to tease out who is still being excluded and how you are overcoming that.

Sheena Stewart: I will kick off on that from the point of view of the higher education institutions. We obviously have students across a range of ages—young people, peri-menopausal women and other older people, for example. We recognise that the scheme covers the whole range of menstruating individuals. The design principles that we have been applying reflect that and remove barriers by making products available in a range of places—in cubicles, toilets, campus shops, student associations and so on—to make sure that there is no stigma and that there is a variety of ways in which people can access the products.

This was coming from students anyway—campaigns had taken place in many institutions. Menstruating individuals were feeling that they could be prevented from experiencing education by lack of access or poverty stopping them coming to lectures and taking part in classes. They were turning round and going home if period products were not available to them. That is obviously a fundamental barrier to education.

We have a range of types of student—not just young people—so we have tried to make the products accessible in a variety of ways. For example, we might have young people from a care background who do not have a family to help with provision. Those are some reflections from the higher education sector.

11:30

Gail Anderson: The concept of making period products freely available is very important, as is flexibility in terms of delivering in a way that suits the local area, by people who understand local needs.

In Orkney, as I mentioned earlier, third sector organisations that work with a range of people including people who experience mental health problems, poverty and domestic abuse have a store of products that they can make available to those people. The products are also made available in all toilets—men's and ladies'—so that they can be picked up by anyone; they can be picked up by a man for someone whom he lives with who needs them. Trans people can access them from men's, ladies' or gender-neutral toilets. They are in baskets; there is a variety of products and people can just take what they need. As I mentioned earlier, we are also negotiating products being made available on the ferries.

We are raising awareness and we are making products freely available in as many locations as possible. We are also making sure that those who are most in need can access them through third sector organisations. However, there is more work to be done to promote that.

I have spoken about physical access; the other issue is education. As we promote the approach more, and people get more used to it and begin to understand that it is a right, there will be a gradual process of education and of raising awareness.

Councillor Evison: When the topic was discussed originally at COSLA, and the local authorities came together, they set up some guiding principles. The key principle was to protect students' dignity by avoiding anxiety, embarrassment and stigma. That has moved on, as we start to work in public buildings. Stigma is a huge issue that prevents access. We have figures that show that 41.8 per cent of young people do not feel comfortable buying sanitary products, even now. There are still young people who do not want to go to a shop to buy period products, let alone access somewhere in the school or community centre where they might have to answer questions about why they need it. We have to deal with that.

As part of reducing the stigma, it is important to provide access for everybody, in all toilets. The bill talks about gender-neutral toilets in particular. They are not available everywhere, and lots of males need to access products, either for themselves or for members of their families. We need to be open to where things are going, and to use that to help reduce stigma.

A key factor that has been mentioned is education. The fact that people are beginning to talk more naturally about periods is good, but it is still something that, in a classroom situation or in a work situation, people feel embarrassed about. People feel that it affects how they can work; they are nervous about how they might appear. Maybe they do not want to go to work or to school, which is a huge problem that we need to overcome.

Overcoming stigma is part of the solution, but educating people in a general sense is important, too. We need to do all those things to reduce stigma, because we cannot have people being

unable to access work or education because it is a particular time of the month.

Carolyn Hope: North Ayrshire has a variety of distribution methods within our schools. We started off with a free-vend machine in the communal area of the toilet, but we soon realised that there was a stigma for girls going up and taking something from the machine—it was embarrassing for them—so we put machines in the cubicles, as well. We have also moved to using baskets, which is in order to make it the norm. The more visible the basket, the more it becomes just part of the normal day, and is just something that you would normally find in those locations. That is part of trying to break down the barriers.

I echo what has been said about education being key. In North Ayrshire, there is still a lot of work to be done with our education partners about having open conversations with girls and boys in schools. Let us not underestimate the power of involving the boys in those conversations: they have sisters, mums and relatives for whom they could collect products, but the products are probably not very accessible to them. It is important to include them.

Celia Hodson mentioned Stirling; other authorities have done some great things that we can all learn from. Everyone should be included in discussions—we should open up the conversation and make it more natural. We can do quite a bit of work with our young people; if we get to them when they are young, they will be used to having such conversations.

The language is important because we are not trying to cover anything up. We are talking about periods; let us not call them something else. Let us talk about the subject and get the words out there so that people are not embarrassed when they are suddenly presented with them or the products, but are used to them as an everyday norm.

Celia Hodson: I agree with all that, of course. We created a best practice guide to share all the great stories about how boys and girls and mums and dads have got involved in the conversation. We have initiatives called "Hey boys!" and pads4dads, which is about getting men ready for their daughter to start her period and how to go shopping for products for their partner.

There has to be access for all. We use the terms "period poverty" and "period dignity". If you use the phrase "period poverty" in communities and, particularly, in education, people say, "They're for the poor kids. I don't take them because they're for the kids who haven't got anything." Even though we are providing a beautiful, environmentally friendly and sustainable product, students still think that they are for the poor kids. Giving access to anyone who needs it when they are caught short sends out a different message.

To pick up on the point about being caught short at work, we provide products for everyone from H&M to Brewdog bars. From our surveys we have found that 86 per cent of women have been caught short more than once when they have been at work, and that 96 per cent of those women went home. If we explain that to an employer in terms of lack of productivity, and show how they can, for a minimal amount of money, put products in washrooms and provide dignity for their staff, why would they not do it? It is not a difficult ask for the corporate community.

When the products are freely available to all, you will find that people do not fill their rucksacks—they take what they need. That might be one tampon or it might be three packs; it depends on their personal situation.

Graham Simpson: I have a question for Sheena Stewart, although it could also apply to councils. Section 5 of the bill deals with education providers. We are here to scrutinise the bill, so we have to drill down on every word in it. I will read from section 5.

> "In each school, university and college, the education provider must make period products available free of charge for pupils or students who need to use them."

There is no mention of staff. Sheena Stewart said that, in universities, 85 per cent of products are taken by students. The implication is therefore that 15 per cent are not taken by students but by other people.

Sheena Stewart: I will clarify that. I said that 85 per cent of the products have been taken by students, but we do not have any breakdown of how many students, as opposed to staff, have taken the products.

Graham Simpson: Does that mean that 15 per cent are not taken by students?

Sheena Stewart: Yes—or perhaps it means that they are not taken at all.

Graham Simpson: My point is that, as it is written, the bill mentions only "pupils or students" and nobody else.

Sheena Stewart: In higher education, to our knowledge no analysis has been undertaken of the costs. We are keen to do an evaluation when we get to the end of the two-year phase of the Scottish Government scheme. When we were discussing implementation, there were so many unknowns, so we had to make assumptions about costs.

Graham Simpson: Is the bill too limited? There are not just "pupils or students" at schools and universities.

Sheena Stewart: We have members of staff and visiting members of the public on campuses. The situation will vary in different types of campus and depending on what events are happening on campus. The impacts will be different in different types of higher education institutions.

Councillor Evison: When we started the work, a lot of it was about access to education—stopping women, girls and others from having to leave the classroom and miss out on education opportunities. That was a big spur for what was originally done.

In the discussions today, we have heard various questions about the workplace. Obviously, that includes people who work in a school or university. We have heard that the unions are pushing for workplace expansion, which would be helpful. My brief today is to talk about local authorities and what we are already doing with the money. COSLA does not have students and pupils working in our buildings, but we have free period products for everybody. Workplace expansion would be welcome and would mirror what we are trying to do in public buildings for the community. We have extended access to free period products during the past couple of years that we have been talking about it.

Universality includes people who access education, people who deliver education and people who are out and about in the community. That is not what the bill says at the moment, so expanding provision to the workplace sounds like a positive way forward.

The Convener: Thank you. Andy Wightman has to leave shortly, so I will let him in.

Andy Wightman: I am grateful, convener. I apologise; I have to leave for a 12 o'clock meeting.

I have four brief questions. The first picks up on Graham Simpson's point about universities and higher education institutions in general. The evidence from Universities Scotland says:

"If a statutory duty is placed on"—

higher education institutions

"it is vital that provision is fully funded, and to ensure this, that dedicated additional funding continues permanently."

However, section 5 makes it a statutory duty for universities, colleges and schools to provide free period products. Section 8 says that "Scottish Ministers may make" appropriate arrangements for funding, if they so wish. Through the bill, higher education institutions will have a statutory duty. Why do you feel that the Scottish Government must fund that? I presume that you pay for toilet paper and soap.

Sheena Stewart: We do. The context for us is the tight funding environment that we are in, with cuts to higher education funding over the past seven years. As others have mentioned, in order to be sustainable, provision has to be affordable. Part of that will be evaluation of how the provided funds meet the costs of delivering the scheme. Given the environment that we are in, if the duty is statutory, it must be sustainable and funded. The evaluation of the two years of the initiative will be helpful in informing the discussion.

Andy Wightman: Therefore, it is fair to say that your position is that you do not believe that you should have a statutory duty, unless there is statutory funding. Statutory funding is a rare thing, but we will leave that there.

You mentioned evaluation. Section 2(4) of the bill says that a scheme should be

"operational not later than 12 months after Royal Assent."

For today's purposes, let us assume that the bill is passed by Parliament and that it achieves royal assent on 31 March. That would mean that we would have to have a scheme in place by March 2021. Given that you are talking about two years to evaluate the current situation, would that be too soon?

Sheena Stewart: There is already some evaluation work in train—for example, with Young Scot. The funding ends in March 2020. The academic year finishes in June, so there will be time for the evaluation to be done, in order to inform the next stages.

Andy Wightman: I have a brief question for Councillor Evison. In your opening remarks, you mentioned the need for local variation in delivery of the scheme. Does the bill provide ministers with sufficient flexibility to deliver a scheme that is adaptable for different parts of Scotland?

Councillor Evison: There is a line in the bill that says "The Scottish ministers may". It is crucial that the bill emphasises that there has to be local delivery, because that is the only way that the scheme will work. We have been talking about the cost, but the scheme will provide access to everybody who needs it only if it is given local focus. Everything else that we are doing in relation to the national performance framework and what that is trying to do will work only if such things are done locally.

Andy Wightman made point about cost to Universities Scotland. Councils would also need to have everything fully funded. There is no way that local government could take on something else that is not fully funded, so I must emphasise that that would be a key aspect for our work as well.

We worry that the system could be too prescriptive, and that a voucher scheme could be far too prescriptive. The system must be designed locally with local partners in local places as appropriate, taking into account rurality. The islands and city areas are all different, and there are differences in each community. We need to ensure that local design is key to the approach. That will make it more cost effective, because targeting will happen in conjunction with local people.

11:45

Andy Wightman: Just to be clear, do you agree with the universities that the scheme has to be fully funded in statute? As I have said, that is difficult.

Councillor Evison: It has to be fully funded.

Andy Wightman: So, you do not see yourselves as providing workplaces in which, as I said in the previous panel session, you have to provide sanitation facilities and sanitation disposal facilities by law. You do not see a moral obligation to provide them at your own hand without relying on Scottish Government funding.

Councillor Evison: People in local government feel lots of moral obligations. That is why a lot of people are in that world doing that work. They feel that strongly, as you are very well aware. The bottom line is that our funding is very tight, and we have to live in the realms of what is possible. We cannot deliver what we want to deliver unless it is fully funded. That goes for any scheme that is given to us. We need full funding.

Andy Wightman: I understand the point that you are making, but we will have to reflect on that in relation to the provisions in the bill.

The bill makes no provision for any statutory consultation on the design of such a scheme. We have heard a lot of evidence this morning about various aspects of schemes and how they might work. It seems to me that the Government should consult, and I am sure that it will, if the bill is enacted. Should the bill make statutory provision for that?

Councillor Evison: The consultation is going on anyway. That is how we do things. As I said, there is a meeting tomorrow to do a further stage of the data analysis. We are doing that, and I imagine that most people who are involved in that work want to do that, because we want to be able to make the best system possible with the available resources. That involves reviewing and analysing and moving forward from that. I do not see a need to make that statutory. It is happening.

Andy Wightman: The bill goes further than the scheme that is currently being provided. It refers to powers to make the scheme universal and people applying by post, for example. It seems to me that we will have to reach out even to schemes that might operate in other countries, because we do not do that at the moment for anything.

Councillor Evison: I think that consultation at the local level is better. Evaluating a scheme at the local level shows whether need is being met at that level, and that is the key.

Andy Wightman: Okay. Thank you.

The Convener: I have a question for Councillor Evison. Earlier, there was talk about good practice and bad practice at the local level. Is there a danger that, if there is not a set standard, the approach will not work in some areas?

Councillor Evison: I do not think that it is about good practice and bad practice; rather, it is about very good practice and people learning as they go. I think that good practice will eventually become the norm. Nobody does not want to deliver. We are talking about authorities that are totally involved in what they are doing. Earlier, someone mentioned the pace at which we have moved to get to this stage. That has been very quick. Some authorities have prioritised the issue and others have not, as there have been other issues to talk about. It is not so much about good practice and bad practice as about good practice and developing practice.

The Convener: That was well put by COSLA.

Alexander Stewart: My reading of the comments that have been made is that there is a perception that the current system is not adequately funded to ensure that there are a range of products and opportunities for individuals in different communities to manage it. If that is the case, how realistic are the costs associated with the bill to ensure that we will get a better system across your organisations?

Sheena Stewart: At the moment, we do not know whether the funding is adequate. We are also seeing a change in demand as users become aware of what is available.

In the HE sector, we like to research and evaluate things. As we get to the end of the two-year funded period and test the assumptions that we had at the beginning and look at what the bill says about provision more widely, we will have a better sense of the adequacy of funding and what levels of funding are required to sustain the system for the number of students that we have.

Celia Hodson: Typically, the uptake of reusable products has been low. The number of requests and purchase orders that have come through for menstrual cups or reusable pants has been pretty low. If we give a student a menstrual cup in freshers week, as we have done with City of

Glasgow College students, they will have that for the whole of their time in education and probably a further five years after they have left, so there are significant cost savings. With Zero Waste Scotland, we ran the trial period campaign, which involved getting members of the public to try a reusable pad. Actually, once people have switched to a reusable product, they do not go back to disposable products. A greater focus on the environmental and cost-saving benefits of reusable products would be very positive.

Alexander Stewart: You have touched on public awareness and the stigma that exists and on how you educate people and evaluate and manage the system. Do you believe that such education will change the dynamics, and change the stigma and the organisation behind it all, so that women and girls feel much more at ease about the whole process? At the moment, it appears that they do not feel at ease, and there is still a big gap.

Celia Hodson: There has to be awareness raising. The sort of conversation that we are having now raises the subject of stigma and taboos. Our campaign involved Michael Sheen. To get him talking about periods on STV during an England-Scotland rugby match broke down some pretty big taboos right there. It is important that we have campaigns that raise awareness of menstruation and the products that are available to people who have periods.

Councillor Evison: I want to pick up on the costs. We have concerns about the finances. The cost projections for the bill are based on a cost of 9p per unit, whereas the work that we have done in local authorities suggests that it is 17.6p per unit, which is almost double that. We have to be aware of the costs and ensure that the bill is fully costed. There are also issues with administration and running costs, which would perhaps be magnified if we used a voucher scheme, although we do not want to use that anyway, for various reasons. We have to be careful to take into account all the costs that are involved.

We need to consider that costs might be higher at the beginning and then decrease. The figure of 17.6p comes from our review at six months of delivery. That might decrease as we move forward and work more with local partners, develop more appropriate schemes and understand needs. The representative of the on the ball campaign talked about boxes of products sitting around. That happened because there is a learning process to find out what is needed in particular areas. As we move on, we will not have boxes of products sitting around, because the provision will be more appropriate to what is required. However, we need to be realistic about the costs at the moment.

We want the provision to be universal and available everywhere, but we need to do the costing carefully. If we start worrying about the costs, we should think of the costs of not doing it, and what we are losing in terms of productivity, which we have heard about. We need to balance those issues, and we need to be realistic.

Alexander Stewart: So the costs that are in the bill appear not to be realistic in the short term, although potentially things may improve in the medium and long term.

Councillor Evison: In our experience, in the first six months, the cost was 17.6p per unit. We must be realistic. We want to make this happen, but we have to be realistic about the cost.

Kenneth Gibson: Most of my questions will be for Carolyn Hope, and not just because I am a representative of North Ayrshire but because North Ayrshire has the most experience and has been leading on the issue. North Ayrshire has about 2.5 per cent of Scotland's population, so one would think that it would be fairly easy to extrapolate the costs. In the past year, how much has it cost to deliver the service? I did not see that figure in your submission.

Carolyn Hope: We spent roughly £55,000. There has been a change in some of the feedback that we have had about the products, which goes back to what Alison Evison said about the situation changing. When we started to provide free products in North Ayrshire, we had a lot of heavy initial set-up costs for rent, vending machines and so on. However, those costs came down in the second year, because a different framework was available for us to use.

We are thinking about the longer game and hoping that costs will come down over time, because we are promoting reusable products. That work is in the very early stages in North Ayrshire. We are unsure about how that will pan out and about whether costs will come down, but we hope that they will. Students and pupils are keen to move in that direction, but there is also a wee bit of a fear factor about reusable products, and we need to have conversations about that. I am optimistic that there will be a reduction in costs, because we are using more reusable products.

We have a bit of education to do with senior primary pupils. It is important to get in touch with them and to have conversations about the range of products that are available as soon as we can, so that when pupils move into secondary school it will perhaps be more of the norm to use reusable products. The market is continually changing. Different products are going out, and prices will change.

I echo what everyone has said about it being difficult, at this stage, to say what the costs will be. We will need to continually review the funding levels that are available and how we can work better with other partners to provide a more efficient service. I am sure that we will all be keen to do that in order to maximise our funding and ensure that it goes out further to people who need it most.

Kenneth Gibson: North Ayrshire Council has been a trailblazing local authority on the issue, and it is important that its experiences are shared with COSLA and others so that other local authorities do not need to reinvent the wheel. You talked about vending machines being in cubicles rather than in toilets, which is very important. I do not know whether local authorities are planning to do this, but it might be possible to roll out the service to primary schools, because girls menstruate, on occasion, before they go to secondary school.

In its submission, North Lanarkshire Council says:

"Fluctuations in usage is evident across the secondary school estate however the average uptake based on the number of female pupils for the last school year was 45%."

What is the level of fluctuation? That is really important, because I imagine that there will be differences in relation to the socioeconomic backgrounds from which schools draw their pupils. The council says that 45 per cent of pupils use the service. Does that mean that 45 per cent of pupils use it routinely, or does it mean that 45 per cent of pupils have used it, with some girls dipping in and out? It is important to try to get as much information as possible so that the Scottish Government can provide the appropriate funding.

Carolyn Hope: That was a pretty crude figure. We looked at the number of female pupils in the school and at how many months we had products in vending machines. We looked at how many products were used over the full year, and there were huge fluctuations, as you said. However, across the nine secondary schools that we looked at, the overall uptake equated to 45 per cent. At the top of the range, there was huge usage—120 per cent—in some schools, but the usage in other schools was as low as 20 per cent.

More work is needed involving talking to girls in schools about why there is such fluctuation in the local area, what the needs are and whether we are getting it right with the products that we are offering. Different schools want different products, so there might be low uptake because we have not got the products quite right in the school. There also might not be a huge need in a school because of the economic situation in the local area. As a local authority, we need to do some of that digging.

Kenneth Gibson: Do staff in the schools take a uniform or an autonomous approach to the issue? We are talking about a range between 20 per cent and 120 per cent but, knowing North Ayrshire as I do, I do not think that the socioeconomic disparity is quite that huge across that area. What role is played by the approach that staff take? We want to get that right as the service is rolled out to more and more schools across Scotland.

12:00

Carolyn Hope: I agree. There is a stronger case for us to be working more closely with our education partners. Within North Ayrshire, facilities management—my service—is a key driver for the provision of the products and the communication with the school. We need more of a buy-in from the education department in order to have more open conversations with the schools to facilitate that. In January, we will work with education to conduct some more working groups—recently, the department has been more forthcoming in that regard, which is positive.

We have done a lot in North Ayrshire, but we cannot stop there, because there is a lot more that we can do. Sharing best practice with colleagues in other organisations is the way forward, because everyone has different ideas and things work differently in different areas. I support what Alison Evison said about local design. The pupils and communities are telling us locally what they need, and we need to respond to that because, if we do not, they will not use the service and there will continue to be a gap.

Celia Hodson: I want to make a point about vending, because that is an interesting part of this. Nobody wants to walk up to a vending machine and make it go, "clunk, clunk", and get themselves two plastic pads. Getting two plastic pads in a cardboard box from a vending machine is not the most environmentally responsible thing that you could do. It is also expensive—that, together with the stigma and the noise, puts people off using a vending machine.

If you start to not take a vending-machine approach, you can make a wider range of products available. Also, the usage will go up but the cost will come down, because you will not be tied into a contract that involves expensive vending machines. That is an interesting shift that will start to come through in some of the statistics.

Kenneth Gibson: Earlier, we heard that products are now being placed in baskets in toilets, which normalises things. That is important.

I have a question about rurality. My constituency, in North Ayrshire, includes the islands of Arran and Cumbrae. Carolyn Hope talked about distributing these products not only in

secondary schools but in 12 libraries and 29 community centres. Have you found any differences in uptake in the rural and island communities as opposed to the mainland and urban communities? In Orkney, how does the uptake in Kirkwall compare with the uptake in the more outlying island areas?

Carolyn Hope: Arran high school has a 118 per cent uptake, which is one of the highest rates. We also supply baskets to primary schools, and some of the primary school headteachers in Arran have requested more products. It seems that there is a slightly higher demand in Arran—the statistics certainly show that, and, anecdotally, that is what we hear from the headteachers and education partners.

Gail Anderson: In Orkney, we are in the process of evaluating the service, but we have had repeat demands for products from our island communities. At the moment, all that I can say is that the situation seems to be equal across the communities—that is anecdotal, however, as our evaluation is just beginning and we do not have actual figures yet.

We have taken great pains to make the products available in all those areas. As far as we are aware, the uptake is uniform across Kirkwall and the mainland and in our outer isles.

Councillor Evison: There was mention earlier of posting the products to rural areas that have issues with accessing the service. Many local authorities have huge reservations about whether that is possible. Many local authorities do not post anything at the moment, so doing so would require the setting up of a whole new administration system from scratch, which would involve huge costs. When we talk about widening access in our rural areas and islands, we should be thinking about working locally in areas through pharmacies, pubs or other such places where people can access the service. That is a better approach than posting things out, which might cause problems.

Kenneth Gibson: I completely share your concerns on that issue. During the break between our panels of witnesses I was speaking to other committee members who share that view, and I think that we should discuss it formally.

It seems to me that posting products would open a door to the scheme being bureaucratic and highly expensive. People in rural areas sometimes have to have food and other supplies, such as pharmacy items, delivered. However, having period products posted out—especially if it were to be done on request—could significantly increase the scheme's costs, which would place a disproportionate burden on those being asked to deliver the products. I do not know what other panel members think about that aspect, but I am certainly quite concerned about it.

The Convener: We need to move on.

Kenneth Gibson: Indeed. I have no more questions; I am just making a comment. I am not sure whether any other member wants to add to that.

Graham Simpson: I want to stick to the question of costs, which I think is the big issue here. The bill would create a scheme that would impose costs on public authorities and other public-facing bodies. The public-facing bodies are not named, so we do not know what they might be. My understanding is that there could be up to 120 of them in Scotland, but I have no idea what might actually be included under that heading. However, it is clear that the bill would impose costs on each and every one of them.

Section 8, which Mr Wightman referred to, says:

> "The Scottish Ministers may make such payments as they think appropriate to the ... councils, bodies, persons and education providers obliged by or under this Act".

The key phrase there is "as they think appropriate". I can foresee there being an annual stand-off between councils and the Government—a situation with which you will be familiar, Councillor Evison. If such a scheme were to be set up, I can see councils or universities saying, "We need £X", and the Government saying, "No you don't. We are going to give you £Y", which would be lower, so there would be a gap.

Is section 8 fit for purpose? Clearly, it does not tick the box that you want to be ticked, which would make the scheme fully funded.

Councillor Evison: We need such a scheme to be fully funded. That is important. You referred to the possibility of an annual stand-off over the appropriate funding level. If we are all working with the same aim in mind—that is, working within the terms of the national performance framework to develop schemes that we want to deliver between us—that aim should be to fund the scheme fully. We need to ensure that that is the way forward. If we share the aim and want the same outcome, surely it should be appropriate to fund such a scheme for our communities.

We also need to think about the costs of not fully funding the scheme, such as children missing out on their education and people leaving the workplace. Such costs are very hard to quantify. We have heard various figures, such as the figure of 96 per cent of people going home because they do not have the resources that they need at work. That situation exists, and if we are concerned about productivity, educational opportunities and equity, such a scheme needs to be put in place.

Graham Simpson: Would anyone else like to comment?

The Convener: There seems to be agreement on that across the panel.

Councillor Evison, you said that such a scheme needs to be put in place. By that, do you mean that everything that is in the bill as drafted needs to be put in place? You have said that the scheme should be fully funded, but if the required funding turned out to be much more than the Government felt that it could afford, that would be difficult. What exactly do you mean when you say that the scheme has to be put in place?

Councillor Evison: This conversation is about looking at the bill and analysing what can be done to strengthen it.

The Convener: It is indeed.

Councillor Evison: We question some of the bill's provisions—in particular, the idea of a voucher scheme, which would involve costs in putting it in place and administering it. We consider those administration costs unnecessary, because a voucher scheme would not be the best way of delivering what we want the bill to deliver.

We want access to period products to be universal. Getting even the minimum amount of information from people—such as their names and addresses—would create a barrier to universal provision of such products, because people would feel that they did not want to give that information.

We already have problems with free school meals in relation to whether—for various reasons—everyone who is eligible takes them up. The voucher scheme would be in danger of creating such problems as well. It would not achieve universality; requiring even a minimum of detail for a voucher scheme would put people off and create a barrier.

The Convener: To be fair, that was not the question.

Councillor Evison: The point was about the bill as it is, and we would like to see things such as that amended. That was the point of the question.

Graham Simpson: My question on section 8 was about the phrase

"Scottish Ministers may make such payments as they think appropriate."

Presumably, you are saying that that is not strong enough. If it is not strong enough, we need to know what the cost is, which we do not seem to know. You quoted a figure per unit that is way higher than the figure that is in the financial memorandum accompanying the bill. In addition, the Scottish Government has its own figures, which are higher than those that are in the financial memorandum. Therefore, the figures are disputed. We are here to make good law.

Councillor Evison: I also said that the figures that we have are for after the first six months. In addition, several of us have commented that there are ways of bringing the figures down over time. They will not necessarily be that high in future, because, as the scheme develops and as we learn, we will change what we do.

I also made the strong point about local development and local organisation in relation to how the scheme is done. If it is done at the local level, the money will be far more effectively used, because we will address need in a local area taking into account local circumstances. Such localism is key to addressing what might seem to be huge costs.

Annabelle Ewing: Good afternoon, panel. I have listened carefully to all your interesting contributions. I know that we are running out of time, but I want to pick up on the cost issue that was just discussed.

I do not want to paraphrase—if I do so incorrectly, please jump in—but it seems to me from what Councillor Evison said that she does not think that the financial memorandum is 100 per cent realistic. Is that a fair assessment?

Councillor Evison: I said that our figure of 17.6p per unit is for the first six months.

Annabelle Ewing: That is not the price-per-unit basis that is used in the financial memorandum, which is 9p. That is a quite a diversion. Very briefly, do the other panel members consider that the financial memorandum is not 100 per cent realistic, or are they happy with it?

Sheena Stewart: I will give some further figures from HE. At the 12-month point, our average price per product was 19p, which is—obviously—adrift from the initial assumptions. On the provision in the bill about placing products in every facility, in some campuses, there will be key facilities, and if that provision were to be rolled out to every toilet, the costs would increase. Those are the two elements from the HE perspective.

Carolyn Hope: It is a moveable feast, and so it is hard to pinpoint the costs at the moment. I mentioned how much we spent last year, but that is based on all things being equal. We may increase or change that provision as we move forward; we will continually adapt it. That goes back to my point that it is difficult to pinpoint the costs. Obviously, the figures that we put out are, perhaps, more operational and realistic at this point in time; however, they are subject to change. It is difficult.

Annabelle Ewing: I take that point. However, at the end of the day, the bill will have the provisions

that it will have, subject to parliamentary approval, and in turn they will have cost implications. You are all saying quite clearly that you expect the money to come from somewhere else, and so a figure will have to be arrived at. I take the point that it is a moveable feast and that things can change over time. However, I presume that, if one were coming at it from the perspective of local government, one would err not on the side of costs going down in relation to the ask of central Government, but on the other side.

It is a fair point to make as a matter of rationality, but as a matter of budgetary practice, it is probably not the way that local government would proceed in its discussions with central Government. As such, it is important to ascertain a realistic figure, because somebody has to find the money, which has to come from somewhere. If it is being spent on the scheme, it is not being spent on something else.

Sheena Stewart made a really important point. If we take the financial context into account, what is the priority for the bill? I raised that key issue with the previous panel. At the moment, the bill has a very wide potential scope. The cost of the bill is unclear, but what we hear is that it will be much higher than the financial memorandum leads us to believe. That begs a fundamental question: what is the scheme to be, within a cost envelope that can be afforded and is sustainable? As the bill undergoes parliamentary scrutiny, might COSLA contribute to the debate by coming up with a more realistic figure? I am looking at Alison Evison.

12:15

Councillor Evison: You first asked what we are trying to do. The overall purpose of our work on the scheme is to create period dignity. That is why the scheme is so important. In doing that, we will open the doors to educating people and to getting them to participate better, longer and in more diverse ways, such as through dance and physical education. We are looking at greater productivity in our workplaces. People will be able to concentrate on their work if they are not worrying about the product that they do not have in their bag the minute they need it.

As you know, the bulk of council funding—85 per cent—comes from the Scottish Government, so that is where we will look for funding for the scheme. We cannot possibly fund it ourselves from other resources.

You asked whether we have come up with any figures—

Annabelle Ewing: Are you planning to look at the figures in more detail?

Alison Evison: The figures that I have quoted are for the first six months. We have another meeting tomorrow, when the second stage of analysis will begin. We heard about Carolyn Hope's experience in North Ayrshire, and how the issue is a moveable feast as things change and as we get better at assessing local need. That takes us back to the issue of working with local partners, which means that the scheme will be far more appropriate to an area and the cost will come down.

We need to be realistic about what the scheme could cost, and ensure that funding is available. We also need to review what we are doing. However, if we are working locally to address local need, what we are looking at is entirely possible. In fact, as I have said, the scheme is crucial in terms of education, equity and better productivity. It is therefore crucial to economic development, inclusivity and all the things that we are working towards through the national performance framework.

Gail Anderson: The partnership's view is very similar to that of my colleagues on the panel. We feel that it would not be possible to participate in the scheme if the Government chose not to fund it. Many organisations face a challenging financial situation that would make it difficult to deliver the scheme in the manner in which it should be delivered.

Another point is becoming clear through the conversation. Many of us are reviewing the scheme and gathering information and have not yet had the opportunity to analyse properly the cost, the benefits and how the scheme could be improved. Without that information, it is difficult to make clear statements about the cost benefit implications of the scheme, its financing and the effect on people's dignity. We are maybe at too early a stage to provide a clear response, because we do not have enough information.

The Convener: I suggest that it is not a case of the Government not funding the scheme, but of the Government not knowing what it is being asked to fund. To be fair, it is early in the process, so at this stage the Government cannot make such a decision.

Celia Hodson: I want to pick up on the cost per unit. We won the Scottish Excel washroom solutions contract. As you will know, those contracts are won predominantly on price, and then on environmental impact and service. Our unit price is 7.5p for a pad and 9p to 13p for a tampon, so I am not quite sure where the other costs are coming from. If local authorities used the washroom solutions framework, that would instantly bring down the cost of the products.

Our products are environmentally sustainable. We have to give costs and choice, but in a pack of 10 well-known branded products there is the equivalent of four or five carriers bags of plastic. We are eradicating one problem and creating another for ourselves. We need to look at sustainable biodegradable and environmentally friendly reusable products, rather than buying whatever people used to buy.

Kenneth Gibson: That is a really important contribution. I think that we are talking about two different issues in relation to cost. There is an issue about setting up that involves ensuring that the areas where the products will be available are fully fitted-out. The on-going cost is likely to be less, because it will involve replacing only what is used. Over time, there will be a much more accurate reflection of the cost of uptake.

Carolyn Hope mentioned a cost of £55,000 in the past year. What was the set-up cost? You had to get all the stock initially. It might be that the Scottish Government will have to make a one-off payment of several million pounds to roll the scheme out across Scotland, but after that the figure might be closer to what the financial memorandum says.

Carolyn Hope: You are right; the set-up costs are heavy. Much of that came from installation and rental costs of free-vend machines, which we are trying to move away from. We were tied to a vending-machine contract that we are now coming out of. That is where we see cost savings coming through. Our costs were heavily weighted towards installation and rental, so I am confident that they will come down. We will just be replenishing and will be looking at alternative products.

Kenneth Gibson: You are not putting a figure on that. Obviously, we hope that other local authorities will learn from what has happened in North Ayrshire and will move to a different system. Are you saying that the initial cost in the first year was higher than it will be in subsequent years?

Carolyn Hope: Yes.

Monica Lennon: I congratulate North Ayrshire for being a trailblazer and for getting out of the traps early. We all appreciate that there were initial heavy costs in going first without support, but we can see that need is being met.

Many of the witnesses have talked about a rights-based approach, and about trying to achieve equity across Scotland. I take Councillor Evison's points about localism being absolutely key. The way in which the bill—which is a framework bill—has been drafted leaves a lot of prescription to come later, through dialogue with partners. Is that the right approach?

Alison Evison: COSLA thinks that that is the right approach. Schemes must be designed locally. Schemes that are effective in addressing local need will have been designed locally and will have involved the people. We have seen the brilliant effects of pupils having been involved in designing systems in their schools. The learning and understanding from that, and the contribution of that discussion to reducing stigma, have all been great. If we design a scheme locally, we bring in local partners. Someone mentioned food banks, and we have talked about community centres. Designing a scheme by involving all kinds of different people is the way forward. That is crucial to us as a principle for the bill.

Monica Lennon: Does the rest of the panel agree that the benefit of legislation is that we can future proof the rights and build on the good practice that already exists?

Carolyn Hope: I think so. The bill places a duty on people to make provision. That is something that we do not have now, so it is a massive step forward. We are reliant on other organisations doing it voluntarily. Locking in that duty will benefit a huge number of people and the impact will be immeasurable; I do not think that we will ever fully understand it. The local arrangements that are in place now are great. They are a positive step, but we recognise that there is lots more to do. The way forward is through legislative duty.

Celia Hodson: It is important that collection is from a regular place. If a person goes to their local library for pads, a dependency is created because they know that they can get their products there. If, after six months, that provision just stops, where do they go? It is important that provision is written in and continues so that we can support communities.

The point about local delivery is fantastic. The community champions—the women who drive around with their car boots full of menstruation products and deliver them to leisure centres, citizens advice bureaux and young mums groups—are absolutely amazing.

Sheena Stewart: In higher education, we are supportive of the bill's aims, with the caveat that I mentioned earlier about funding. We are fully behind the need to eradicate stigma and the barriers that we know prevent people from fully taking part in education.

Gail Anderson: I agree totally with my colleagues. We welcome the flexibility and scope for localism, which is really important. In the spirit of subsidiarity, decisions on local criteria for the scheme should be devolved to local bodies. For island communities, an impact assessment of the bill, if one has not already been done, would come to that same conclusion.

Monica Lennon: Another point that was raised by a couple of members and the panel, and in some of your written submissions, is that the bill provides that ministers could extend the duty to other public bodies. Sheena Stewart said that your students are not a homogeneous group, and that you have, for example, nursing students out on placement, so there is a challenge in getting products to them. I noticed that, in the Hey Girls submission, Celia Hodson picked up on the fact that the duty could extend to health boards. At the moment, there is an informal policy commitment from Government, but you have said that provision of free products in health boards is still uncommon and is often not supported by a budget commitment. That is an option for the Scottish ministers, so is it important for other public bodies, including the national health service, to do that? In my research, health boards said that they do not have a policy and that some nurses give their own products to patients. Do nursing students on placement struggle to access products, too?

Sheena Stewart: It should be borne in mind that nursing students on placement go to a variety of clinical settings, some of which will be public NHS and some of which will be private sector. Under the scheme, universities allow provision to take place in a variety of ways, but I do not have detail of the range of ways. The university ensures that students have products whatever the setting, because we cannot guarantee that they will always be in public sector settings.

Carolyn Hope: I would echo that. In my preparation for our submission, I spoke to North Ayrshire health and social care partnership. Its community link workers told me that they in local general practice across North Ayrshire they increasingly get requests for period products from patients, but there is no provision in GP surgeries. The community link workers asked me how they could access the provision that my service has for North Ayrshire. The sad story is that some of those employees have been buying products to give to patients. That should not be the case, and hits home on how big the problem. We do not really see it all—we just see the people who are brave enough to speak out and say that they need the products and do not have the means to get them. We have been helping to signpost people to where products are available in various buildings in North Ayrshire. There are a huge number of public bodies out there that could make a big difference.

The Convener: We must come to a close, so can you make answers brief please?

Alison Evison: I will be quick. It makes sense to develop place-based approaches to make every public body deliver, because people do not see a difference between a local government area and a health service area.

12:30

Monica Lennon: I was in Aberdeen on Monday and spent time with Community Food Initiatives North East, which led the Government pilot scheme. I went back on Monday and people were queued up at the food bank, which was very distressing to see. However, on a positive note, CFINE is very proud of the work that it has done. There is interest not just in Scotland, but internationally. When that project began, CFINE was inundated by journalists from all over the world who were looking to Scotland to see what we are doing with the legislation. Councillor Evison talked about the cost of not passing the bill. What message would it send out if we, as the Scottish Parliament, were not to pass the bill?

The Convener: Will you ask a question relating to the bill? Leave the press releases for later on.

Monica Lennon: If the bill is not passed, what message does that send?

Alison Evison: We have perhaps already answered that. In terms of education and workplace productivity, the cost of not passing the bill would be huge. The benefit of increasing dignity is also huge, so in that sense, we need to do it. That is a quick answer.

The Convener: We will finish there. I thank the panel very much for their time and their useful responses. Gail—I hope things were okay for you in Orkney.

Gail Anderson: They were absolutely fine, thank you.

The Convener: Thank you for your patience.

12:31

Meeting continued in private until 12:55.

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