

List of material published online

Access to sanitary products Aberdeen pilot: evaluation report

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/access-sanitary-products-aberdeen-pilot-evaluation-report/pages/1/>

Insight: Access to sanitary products in Scotland <https://youngscot.net/access-to-sanitary-products?rq=sanitary>

Access to period products in your school, college or university: Survey Results

<https://youngscot.net/news-database/free-period-products-scotland?rq=sanitary>



SURVEY RESULTS BREAKDOWN

The survey was commissioned by global girls charity Plan international UK and arried out by research agency Opinium. A nationally representative sample of 1000 girls aged between 14 and 21 in the UK were surveyed between 22 to 24 August 2017.

Data

- Nearly half (48%) of girls aged 14-21 in the UK are embarrassed by their periods

Q12 Have you ever felt embarrassed by your period?	Total	Female	Total	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	Total
Base: all respondents	1000	1000	1000	114	117	120	124	126	132	133	134	1000
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Yes – frequently	101	101	101	13	12	12	15	11	15	10	13	101
	10%	10%	10%	11%	10%	10%	12%	9%	11%	8%	10%	10%
Yes – occasionally	375	375	375	51	52	44	38	51	53	46	39	375
	37%	37%	37%	45%	45%	36%	31%	40%	41%	35%	29%	37%
No – not very often	378	378	378	32	44	48	54	48	45	50	56	378
	38%	38%	38%	28%	38%	40%	44%	38%	34%	37%	42%	38%
No – never	136	136	136	16	8	15	16	16	15	25	24	136
	14%	14%	14%	14%	7%	13%	13%	13%	12%	19%	18%	14%
Don't know	11	11	11	2	1	1	1	0	3	1	2	11
	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	0%	2%	1%	2%	1%
Net: Yes	48%	48%	48%	56%	55%	47%	43%	49%	52%	42%	39%	48%
Net: No	51%	51%	51%	42%	44%	53%	56%	51%	45%	56%	60%	51%

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- One in seven (14%) girls reported that they did not know what was happening when they started their period

Q1 When you had your first period, did you know what was happening?	Total	Female	Total
Base: all respondents	1000	1000	1000
	100%	100%	100%
Yes	846	846	846
	85%	85%	85%
No	136	136	136
	14%	14%	14%
Don't know	18	18	18
	2%	2%	2%
N/A – I haven't started my period	0	0	0
	0%	0%	0%

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- More than a quarter (26%) of girls did not know what to do when they started their period.

	Total	Female	Total
Q2 When your period started, did you feel you knew what to do?			
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Yes	713 71%	713 71%	713 71%
No	256 26%	256 26%	256 26%
Don't Know	31 3%	31 3%	31 3%

- One in five (22%) girls feel comfortable discussing their period with their school teachers/ staff.

How comfortable or uncomfortable would you feel discussing your period with the following groups of people? Q6 8 School teachers/staff	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Very uncomfortable	342 34%	342 34%	342 34%
Quite uncomfortable	291 29%	291 29%	291 29%
Quite comfortable	162 16%	162 16%	162 16%
Very comfortable	55 5%	55 5%	55 5%
N/A	151 15%	151 15%	151 15%
Net: Uncomfortable	63%	63%	63%
Net: Comfortable	22%	22%	22%

- **Less than a quarter (24%) of girls feel comfortable discussing their period with their male friends**

How comfortable or uncomfortable would you feel discussing your period with the following groups of people? Q6 5 Male friends	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Very uncomfortable	381 38%	381 38%	381 38%
Quite uncomfortable	227 23%	227 23%	227 23%
Quite comfortable	161 16%	161 16%	161 16%
Very comfortable	79 8%	79 8%	79 8%
N/A	152 15%	152 15%	152 15%
Net: Uncomfortable	61%	61%	61%
Net: Comfortable	24%	24%	24%

- **Under a third (29%) of girls feel comfortable discussing their period with their fathers**

How comfortable or uncomfortable would you feel discussing your period with the following groups of people? Q6 1 Father	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Very uncomfortable	332 33%	332 33%	332 33%
Quite uncomfortable	271 27%	271 27%	271 27%
Quite comfortable	184 18%	184 18%	184 18%
Very comfortable	103 10%	103 10%	103 10%
N/A	110 11%	110 11%	110 11%
Net: Uncomfortable	60%	60%	60%
Net: Comfortable	29%	29%	29%

- **Four fifths (82 per cent) of girls admitted they have hidden or concealed their sanitary products**

- Total of those who 'always', 'often', 'sometimes' or 'rarely' do so)

How often, if ever, have you done any of the following while on your period? Q9 2 Felt like you need to hide or conceal your sanitary products	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Always	184 18%	184 18%	184 18%
Often	179 18%	179 18%	179 18%
Sometimes	289 29%	289 29%	289 29%
Rarely	164 16%	164 16%	164 16%
Never	183 18%	183 18%	183 18%

- **Almost three quarters (71%) of girls admitted that they have felt embarrassed buying sanitary products**

- Total of those who 'always', 'often', 'sometimes' or 'rarely' do so)

How often, if ever, have you done any of the following while on your period? Q9 1 Felt embarrassed buying sanitary products to manage your period	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Always	97 10%	97 10%	97 10%
Often	135 13%	135 13%	135 13%
Sometimes	251 25%	251 25%	251 25%
Rarely	224 22%	224 22%	224 22%
Never	293 29%	293 29%	293 29%

- Over half (59%) of girls revealed that they had received negative remarks about their perceived behaviour and mood whilst on their period

Q15 Have you ever experienced any of the following negative remarks in terms of you and your period? <i>Base: all respondents</i>	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
Comments about your perceived behaviour/mood while on your period	592 59%	592 59%	592 59%
Comments about your ability or desire to take part in sexual activity	182 18%	182 18%	182 18%
Comments about your cleanliness/hygiene	142 14%	142 14%	142 14%
Other (please specify)	5 0%	5 0%	5 0%
No – none of these	336 34%	336 34%	336 34%

- One in ten girls have been asked not to talk about their periods front of their mother (12%) or father (11%)

Have you ever been asked not to talk about your period and its impacts in front of the following people? Q8 0 Mother <i>Base: all respondents</i>	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
Yes	122 12%	122 12%	122 12%
No	846 85%	846 85%	846 85%
N/A	32 3%	32 3%	32 3%

Have you ever been asked not to talk about your period and its impacts in front of the following people? Q8 1 Father <i>Base: all respondents</i>	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
Yes	108 11%	108 11%	108 11%
No	782 78%	782 78%	782 78%
N/A	110 11%	110 11%	110 11%

- **49% of girls have missed an entire day of school because of their period, of which 59% have made up a lie or an alternate excuse**

(i)

Have you ever experienced the following because of your period? If so, please tell us how many times this has happened to you Q13 0 Missed school (entire day)	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Never	496 50%	496 50%	496 50%
Once	173 17%	173 17%	173 17%
2-3 times	171 17%	171 17%	171 17%
4-5 times	61 6%	61 6%	61 6%
6-7 times	34 3%	34 3%	34 3%
8-9 times	10 1%	10 1%	10 1%
10 times or more	42 4%	42 4%	42 4%
N/A	12 1%	12 1%	12 1%
Net: have missed	49%	49%	49%
Mean (of those that have missed):	3.30	3.30	3.30

(ii)

Thinking about when you have experienced each of the following... Have you had to lie or make up an alternative excuse when you were on your period? Q14 0 Missed school (entire day)	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents who have done this</i>	491 100%	491 100%	491 100%
Yes	289 59%	289 59%	289 59%
No	202 41%	202 41%	202 41%

NB: The sample base of 491 is all of those young people out of 1000 surveyed who reported that they have missed an entire day of school because of their period

- 64% of girls have missed a PE or sport because of their period, of which 52% of girls have made up a lie or excuse
- (i)

Have you ever experienced the following because of your period? If so, please tell us how many times this has happened to you Q13 3 Missed PE/sport at school	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Never	336 34%	336 34%	336 34%
Once	102 10%	102 10%	102 10%
2-3 times	202 20%	202 20%	202 20%
4-5 times	137 14%	137 14%	137 14%
6-7 times	80 8%	80 8%	80 8%
8-9 times	30 3%	30 3%	30 3%
10 times or more	90 9%	90 9%	90 9%
N/A	23 2%	23 2%	23 2%
Net: have missed	64%	64%	64%
Mean (of those that have missed):	4.59	4.59	4.59

(ii)

Thinking about when you have experienced each of the following... Have you had to lie or make up an alternative excuse when you were on your period? Q14 3 Missed PE/sport at school	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents who have done this</i>	641 100%	641 100%	641 100%
Yes	333 52%	333 52%	333 52%
No	308 48%	308 48%	308 48%

NB: The sample base of 641 is all of those young people out of 1000 surveyed who reported that they have missed PE/Sport because of their period

- **68% of girls admits they feel less able to pay attention at school/college and work and almost half (52%) have made up a lie or excuse**

(i)

Have you ever experienced the following because of your period? If so, please tell us how many times this has happened to you Q13 4 Felt less able to pay attention at school/college/work	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Never	297 30%	297 30%	297 30%
Once	95 9%	95 9%	95 9%
2-3 times	193 19%	193 19%	193 19%
4-5 times	140 14%	140 14%	140 14%
6-7 times	59 6%	59 6%	59 6%
8-9 times	44 4%	44 4%	44 4%
10 times or more	144 14%	144 14%	144 14%
N/A	29 3%	29 3%	29 3%
Net: have missed	68%	68%	68%
Mean (of those that have missed):	5.16	5.16	5.16

(ii)

Thinking about when you have experienced each of the following... Have you had to lie or make up an alternative excuse when you were on your period? Q14 4 Felt less able to pay attention at school/college/work	Gender		
	Total	Female	Total
<i>Base: all respondents who have done this</i>	674 100%	674 100%	674 100%
Yes	351 52%	351 52%	351 52%
No	323 48%	323 48%	323 48%

NB: The sample base of 674 is all of those young people out of 1000 surveyed who reported that they have felt less able to concentrate during school/college/work due to their period

- **One in ten girls (10%) have been unable to afford sanitary wear**

	Total	Female	Total
Q17 Thinking about the affordability of sanitary wear, have you experienced any of the following?			
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Been unable to afford sanitary wear	96 10%	96 10%	96 10%
Struggled to afford sanitary wear	152 15%	152 15%	152 15%
Had to ask to borrow sanitary wear from a friend due to affordability issues	139 14%	139 14%	139 14%
Had to improvise sanitary wear due to affordability issues	123 12%	123 12%	123 12%
Changed to a less suitable sanitary product due to cost	191 19%	191 19%	191 19%
Other (please specify)	9 1%	9 1%	9 1%
None of these	591 59%	591 59%	591 59%
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- **One in seven (15%) girls have struggled to afford sanitary wear**

	Total	Female	Total
Q17 Thinking about the affordability of sanitary wear, have you experienced any of the following?			
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Been unable to afford sanitary wear	96 10%	96 10%	96 10%
Struggled to afford sanitary wear	152 15%	152 15%	152 15%
Had to ask to borrow sanitary wear from a friend due to affordability issues	139 14%	139 14%	139 14%
Had to improvise sanitary wear due to affordability issues	123 12%	123 12%	123 12%
Changed to a less suitable sanitary product due to cost	191 19%	191 19%	191 19%
Other (please specify)	9 1%	9 1%	9 1%
None of these	591 59%	591 59%	591 59%
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- **One in seven girls (14%) have had to ask to borrow sanitary wear from a friend due to affordability issues**

	Total	Female	Total
Q17 Thinking about the affordability of sanitary wear, have you experienced any of the following?			
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Been unable to afford sanitary wear	96 10%	96 10%	96 10%
Struggled to afford sanitary wear	152 15%	152 15%	152 15%
Had to ask to borrow sanitary wear from a friend due to affordability issues	139 14%	139 14%	139 14%
Had to improvise sanitary wear due to affordability issues	123 12%	123 12%	123 12%
Changed to a less suitable sanitary product due to cost	191 19%	191 19%	191 19%
Other (please specify)	9 1%	9 1%	9 1%
None of these	591 59%	591 59%	591 59%
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- **More than one in ten girls (12%) has had to improvise sanitary wear due to affordability issues**

	Total	Female	Total
Q17 Thinking about the affordability of sanitary wear, have you experienced any of the following?			
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Been unable to afford sanitary wear	96 10%	96 10%	96 10%
Struggled to afford sanitary wear	152 15%	152 15%	152 15%
Had to ask to borrow sanitary wear from a friend due to affordability issues	139 14%	139 14%	139 14%
Had to improvise sanitary wear due to affordability issues	123 12%	123 12%	123 12%
Changed to a less suitable sanitary product due to cost	191 19%	191 19%	191 19%
Other (please specify)	9 1%	9 1%	9 1%
None of these	591 59%	591 59%	591 59%
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- **One in five (19%) of girls have changed to a less suitable sanitary product due to cost**

	Total	Female	Total
Q17 Thinking about the affordability of sanitary wear, have you experienced any of the following?			
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	1000 100%	1000 100%	1000 100%
Been unable to afford sanitary wear	96 10%	96 10%	96 10%
Struggled to afford sanitary wear	152 15%	152 15%	152 15%
Had to ask to borrow sanitary wear from a friend due to affordability issues	139 14%	139 14%	139 14%
Had to improvise sanitary wear due to affordability issues	123 12%	123 12%	123 12%
Changed to a less suitable sanitary product due to cost	191 19%	191 19%	191 19%
Other (please specify)	9 1%	9 1%	9 1%
None of these	591 59%	591 59%	591 59%
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Access to Sanitary products - Evidence summary

Extent, nature and impact of the problem – Scotland/UK

Until recently, there has been very little evidence on the extent and impact of lack of access to sanitary products in Scotland, and the majority of information available was anecdotal (e.g. from food banks, homelessness services, news reporting). Campaigns and news reporting suggested that those on a low income may struggle to afford sanitary products as well as other essentials. In addition anecdotal evidence was presented that some girls are missing education in order to manage their menstruation. Scottish Government and other stakeholders are working to build the evidence base. Results from a small number of recent surveys and an evaluation of a pilot project confirm that some people do struggle to access sanitary products, and that different groups are affected in different ways (e.g. those on a low income vs in educational settings). These studies also provide some insights into the reasons for and impact of lack of access to products. However, there remains a lack of robust data available to estimate how many people in Scotland are affected by this issue.

Scottish Government funded a pilot in Aberdeen between September 2017 and February 2018. It aimed to explore options for providing access to free sanitary products in ways that provide choice and respect dignity, and to better understand the circumstances people are in that mean they cannot access products. It explored both targeted provision for those in low income households and provision open to all in educational settings. The evaluation found that two thirds of the community participants had experienced difficulties accessing products, compared with one third of college and university participants, and a fifth of school participants.¹ As provision via community partners targeted low income households, and low income was the main reason given for lack of access, this disproportionate impact is what would be expected. The main reasons given for difficulty accessing products related to affordability. Other reasons included irregular or heavy periods, embarrassment and local access. Those in education settings also mentioned not having a product with you when you need one (e.g. at school). The evaluation also highlighted that for some of those that who are not able to access the products they need this may impact on their wellbeing and, for a minority, their ability to continue with day to day activities during their period.

Young Scot published findings from an online survey in March 2018². Ninety two percent of survey respondents were currently in education. Around a quarter (26%) of respondents in education said they had 'struggled to access sanitary products' in previous year. Of those respondent in education who had experienced difficulty, 60% said that this was because they 'didn't have the product they needed', while 43% said they 'couldn't afford to buy sanitary products'. The most common way these respondents coped was having to ask someone else for a tampon/towel (71%) or to use an alternative e.g. toilet paper (70%). Around three quarters (74%) of those in education said they feel very or quite comfortable discussing sanitary products, while 57% said they feel very or quite comfortable buying sanitary products. The survey took place between 21st December 2017 and 31st January 2018 and received 2,050 complete responses. The short survey, developed with

¹ Scottish Government, *Access to Sanitary Products Aberdeen Pilot: Evaluation Report*, May 2018

² [Access to Sanitary Products in Scotland](#), March 2017

Scottish Government, asked questions about current experiences accessing sanitary products and future provision.

In October 2017 Plan international publicised results of a survey of young women's experiences of menstruation in the UK.³ The results reported state that: 10% of those surveyed have been unable to afford sanitary products; 15% have also struggled to afford sanitary wear (it's unclear the difference between sanitary products/wear); 14% have had to ask to borrow sanitary wear from a friend due to affordability issues; 12% have had to improvise sanitary wear due to affordability issues; and 19% have changed to a less suitable sanitary product due to cost. The press release states that the research was conducted online by Opinium Research amongst a representative sample of 1,000 14-21 year olds in the UK between 22 to 24 August 2017. While proportions of young women struggling to afford sanitary products reported in the survey are similar to our estimates, no further information is available online on the survey methods so it is not possible to assess their quality.

Women for Independence's *Free Period Scotland* campaign ran a 12 question survey asking about experiences accessing sanitary products.⁴ A report has not been published, but some findings have been reported in the media. According to a report in the Guardian (5th February)⁵, over 1,000 responses were received. They report that nearly one in five respondents said that they have had to go without period products because of finances, while one in 10 said they had been forced to prioritise other essential household items over buying sanitary wear. Just over one in five (22%) reported they were not able to change their products as often as they would like to, with 11% of those describing a significant health impact because of this. These findings should, however, be interpreted with caution as it is unclear whether respondents are representative of the wider population, and those with experience of difficulty accessing products may have been more likely to respond

In the absence of suitable data to estimate how widespread lack of access to sanitary products is in the general population, living on a low income may be considered a suitable proxy. However, many working age adults living in relative poverty are close to the poverty threshold (around a third)⁶ and are theoretically less likely to be experiencing difficulty affording basic essentials such as sanitary products. The percentage of women and girls in severe poverty (those with an equivalised income below 50% of the median income) is likely to be the best proxy for being unable to afford sanitary products. However, producing figures for the number of women in poverty is problematic because poverty is measured at the household level. Fourteen percent of working age adults were in severe poverty (after housing costs) in 2014/15-2016/17 in Scotland.⁷

³ <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/1-in-10-girls-have-been-unable-to-afford-sanitary-wear-survey-finds>; <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/almost-half-of-girls-aged-14-21-are-embarrassed-by-their-periods>

⁴ <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/FreePeriodScotland>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/05/period-poverty-scotland-poll-shows-women-go-to-desperate-lengths>

⁶ Scottish Government, Severe Poverty in Scotland, 2015: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/03/4673>

⁷ Further breakdowns of statistics relating to poverty in Scotland, 2018: <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Social-Welfare/IncomePoverty/povertytable>

The members Bill Consultation Paper notes that statistics on the attendance record of pupils⁸ show that boys and girls have a similar record of attendance until around S2. At this point, the attendance rate of girls drops very slightly compared to their male peers (in 2015 girls' attendance is 1 percentage point lower in S3, 0.6 lower in S4 and 0.5 lower in S5). There is no evidence that this difference is linked to menstruation.

Some limited evidence on attitudes towards menstruation is cited in the members Bill Consultation Paper.⁹ An unpublished 2016 YouGov survey for Action Aid asked 2,140 men and women in the UK aged 16 and over about their attitudes towards periods.¹⁰ They found that 14% of girls and women in the UK have missed school or work because of their period, yet only a quarter of these (27%) spoke honestly about the reason – the majority (65%) citing other reasons rather than disclosing they have their periods. Unpublished research conducted by Censuswide for betty (a femcare brand) in March 2017 surveyed 2,000 female respondents from across the UK. They found that almost half (47%) of women felt unprepared and didn't know what to expect when their period started. Also that PE tends to be a subject skipped by schoolgirls when they are menstruating – a problem which can continue into adulthood with women avoiding sporting activities.¹¹

From discussions with stakeholders, we do know that provision of free sanitary products is very locally driven: the supply that exists has stemmed from the goodwill of organisations seeking to meet a need which they have observed in their community. A survey by Trussell Trust of their network of food banks found that most provide non-food items (including sanitary products) along with their food parcels.¹² Sanitary products are most often provided in response to a volunteer's question (38/50 responses); food banks varied as to how often they estimated they receive requests for sanitary products.

Extent, nature and impact of the problem – low and middle income countries

While there is a dearth of research on access to sanitary products in high income countries, there is a large literature in low and middle income countries. Research on access to sanitary products sits within the broader literature on education and awareness, and 'menstrual hygiene management' (MHM), with a particular focus on school-age girls and the impact of menstruation on education. There is also some focus on the additional challenges faced in humanitarian disasters and by refugees.

The literature on low and middle income countries suggests that many women and girls in poverty are not able to access clean and safe sanitary products, because they are unaffordable or unavailable. Other key issues identified include: clean and safe spaces to change/wash products; access to water and soap; education and

⁸ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/AttendanceAbsenceDatasets>

⁹ The quality of these surveys is unclear as neither survey is published so the methods used cannot be assessed. From the sample sizes it is likely that these surveys are reasonably representative of women in the UK.

¹⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/british-woman-too-embarrassed-to-talk-about-periods-action-aid_uk_5747ff03e4b03e9b9ed5a43b

¹¹ <https://bettyforschools.co.uk/news/period-taboo-research>

¹² Trussell Trust, '[Non-food provision](#)' in [The Trussell Trust Network in Scotland](#)', December 2016

awareness; cultural norms and beliefs that stigmatise menstruation.¹³ A number of researchers and policy-makers have argued that an inability to manage menstruation has an impact on the lives of women and girls, from preventing them from going to school to increasing the likelihood of infections, which exacerbate cycles of poverty and inequality.

Research in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and South America, has concentrated on understanding girls' experiences of the onset of menstruation and the subsequent water, sanitation and hygiene challenges they face managing their menstruation in school. The literature suggests a possible relationship between MHM (including issues wider than access to sanitary products) and girls' participation in education, but the available is primarily qualitative and/or small-scale.¹⁴ Sommer et al in a 2016 summary of the evidence on MHM conclude that there is a lack of evidence on the extent and intensity of girls' challenges managing menstruation.¹⁵ They also suggest that there has been insufficient research examining the impact of inadequate MHM guidance or environments on schoolgirls' levels of self-esteem, their self-efficacy to manage their menstruation in school, and their ability to concentrate in class.

Menstruation age and cycles – Scotland/UK

The average ages cited for the onset of menstruation and menopause in the UK vary slightly between sources. NHS Choices state that the average age for starting to menstruate is 12 and for onset of the menopause is 51, while the average menstrual cycle is 28 days.¹⁶ Data from the Biobank¹⁷ (used in the members Bill Consultation Paper) find that menstruation usually starts around the age of 13 and the average age of menopause is 50 years old, while the average length of a menstrual cycle is 26.8 days (meaning that the average menstruating female experiences 13.6 menstrual cycles each year).¹⁸

Findings from the Millenium Cohort Study suggest that the average age for UK girls to start their menstrual cycle is 12.9. Focussing on early onset puberty, Kelly et al (2016)¹⁹ report that 1 in 10 girls are starting their period by age 11 years of age. Girls from poorer families are two-and-a-half times more likely to start their period by the age of 11, than children from wealthier backgrounds. Early puberty is linked to numerous health outcomes including increased risk of poor mental health (in adolescence and throughout life), cardiovascular disease and some cancers.

The cost of sanitary products

Various estimates have been made of the average yearly and lifetime costs of sanitary products specifically and periods more generally. A figure that has been widely cited is that women spend more than £18,000 over a lifetime

¹³ Sommer et al., 2016, A Time for Global Action: Addressing Girls' Menstrual Hygiene Management Needs in Schools: <http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1001962>

¹⁴ Hennegan and Montgomery, 2016, 'Do Menstrual Hygiene Management Interventions Improve Education and Psychosocial Outcomes for Women and Girls in Low and Middle Income Countries? A Systematic Review': <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0146985>

¹⁵ Sommer et al., 2016,

¹⁶ <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/periods/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

¹⁷ Biobank UK follows the health and well-being of 500,000 volunteer participants aged between 40-69 years in 2006-2010 so does not provide data for the age of menstruation for females today.

¹⁸ <http://biobank.ctsu.ox.ac.uk/>

¹⁹ <http://adc.bmj.com/content/early/2016/09/26/archdischild-2016-310475>

having periods – based on a survey by vouchercodespro.co.uk.²⁰ However, this includes other spending e.g. pain relief and new underwear as well as sanitary products, and suggests £13 per month for sanitary products based on survey respondents' estimates of how much they spend each month. On the other hand, a BBC calculator estimates a lifetime cost of £1,600 based on starting to menstruate at age 12 and going through menopause at age 51 – this estimate of average usage works out at around £37 per year.²¹ Based on an average of 300 products per year and average retail costs of 8-12p per product, the average annual cost of sanitary products works out as around £24 to £36. This equates to an average lifetime cost for managing menstruation of around £1,000 to 1,500.²²

²⁰ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/09/03/women-spend-thousands-on-periods-tampon-tax_n_8082526.html

²¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-42013239>, based on: 13 periods, 22 products per cycle and 13p per product:

²² An average of 13 periods lasting 5 days and using 4-5 products per day = 300 products. Based on retail prices. Taking the average age of menarche as 12 and of menopause as 54 (42 menstruating years in total).

Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities

ACCESS TO SANITARY PRODUCTS PILOT EVALUATION REPORT SCHEDULED FOR PUBLICATION IN THE WEEK OF 28 MAY 2018

Purpose

1. To inform you of the intention to publish the evaluation report on the Access to Sanitary Products Pilot in Aberdeen, which is scheduled for publication in the week of the 28th May, and to alert you to its key findings in terms of the Programme for Government commitment and to inform consideration of any further action.

Priority

2. Routine.

Background

3. We funded a six month pilot scheme (September 2017-February 2018) to provide access to free sanitary products, testing two areas: through third sector partners to people from low income homes; and universal provision in selected schools and one college and university in Aberdeen. This submission sets out the key messages from the pilot evaluation. A draft Executive Summary is attached as Annex A and a draft of the full report is enclosed with this submission. It is anticipated that the Evaluation Report will be published w/c 28th May 2018, to coincide with a planned event in Aberdeen. The event is an opportunity to thank stakeholders and beneficiaries for their involvement in the pilot and to share the evaluation findings with them.

Main points

Is there a demand for provision?

4. While the evaluation findings cannot tell us how widespread lack of access to sanitary products is in the general population, they confirm that this is an issue faced by some of those living on low incomes and in an educational setting. As would be expected, a much higher proportion of low income women had experienced difficulties accessing products (67%) than college and university students (32%) and school pupils (20%). Both groups raised similar issues related to being able to afford products on a low income; however, not having a product when you needed one in school or away from the home was also a consideration in education settings.

Is there evidence that lack of access has impact on lives?

5. For some of those that do not have the products they need, this appears to have an impact on their wellbeing and, for a minority, their ability to continue with day to day activities during their period.

6. The pilot was not able to shed light on whether difficulties managing menstruation due to lack of access to sanitary products has an impact on attendance at school, college or university.

Provision routes

7. It is not possible to conclude with any certainty from the evaluation that one model of providing access to products is better than another – although students and pupils have a much stronger preference for products in toilets than low income groups. The key considerations identified across the different data sources were around ease of access or convenience, provision that is dignified, discreet and does not identify recipients as needing help, and preventing misuse or abuse of any provision.

Distribution by Community Partners

8. Partner staff identified raising awareness of the pilot and getting people to take part as a challenge. A sizeable proportion of participants did not take up the offer of regular provision. Having to ask for products and ease of access were identified as issues. Additionally, the pilot activity was generally driven by one committed individual on top of an already busy role.

9. The majority of participants in Community Partners pilot were already engaging with services. Further consideration is needed on how to reach other groups who may be in need.

Distribution through a pre-paid card

10. The limited data collected suggest that the pre-paid card was of interest to some participants. Receiving a card to use in shops was also a popular option for future provision. The convenience of using the card to purchase products at the same time as other shopping, choice, and dignity were benefits noted. Concerns were raised by both partner staff and participants around whether a pre-paid card would be used to buy products.

Distribution through designated suppliers

11. Picking up products up from a range of convenient and accessible locations such as pharmacies, doctor's surgeries or health clinics, or community centres was suggested by partners and participants.

Online supply

12. Ordering online for delivery by post was also a fairly popular option. Participants noted it would be discreet or convenient, although it would not be accessible for those who did not have easy access to the internet.

Provision in Schools, colleges and universities

13. In providing access to products in educational settings, embarrassment about periods generally and having to ask someone else for products was considered to be a particular issue, especially for younger students. However, schools were reluctant to trial

making products available in school toilets because of concerns about misuse and, where this was tested, problems were encountered.

14. Having free products available in toilets was a popular option for school, college and university students. This is likely to be because it was seen as a good option if you are 'caught short'. Receiving a card and ordering online were also popular options. The least popular option for school, college and university students was to get free products from a member of college or university staff – having to ask someone for products was generally seen as a barrier.

CONCLUSION

15. We have a meeting arranged on the 10th May to discuss the findings of the evaluation. Briefing on proposals for the Celebration Event will follow in due course. We are in discussion with Communications teams about potential Ministerial involvement in this event. We will work with Communications colleagues to draft lines to take on the publication of the evaluation report.

16. You are invited to:

- Note the findings from the Aberdeen pilot and the proposed timetable for publication of the evaluation report.

[redacted]

Communities Analysis

Ext 43110

4 May 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to sanitary products has been raised as a concern by campaigns and stakeholders. Those highlighting the issue have approached it from two perspectives: 'period poverty', or the issue of people being unable to afford sanitary products; or an equalities or human rights informed approach that argues that free sanitary products should be considered a right. The Scottish Government funded a six month pilot in Aberdeen between September 2017 and February 2018. The main aim was to test different approaches to providing access to free sanitary products for people from low income households and all students, and to better understand the circumstances people are in that mean they cannot access sanitary products.

The pilot was run by Community Food Initiatives North East (CFINE) using established relationships with local partners through the FareShare network. The pilot was initially rolled out in a number of third sector organisations and regeneration areas. It was later extended to educational settings – Robert Gordon's University (RGU), North East College Scotland (NESCol) and 3 secondary schools where universal provision was offered – and some additional community/third sector organisations. A primary school was also added. Just over 1,000 participants received products during the pilot: 209 via CFINE, 588 via the other community/third sector partners, 43 at RGU, 108 at NESCol and 133 at the four schools involved.

Pilot delivery and evaluation methods

For the purpose of the pilot, participants were asked to 'sign up' to take part. Methods for signing up participants and distributing products varied depending on how the organisation works with clients. Generally, sign up took place in a private room and products were picked up from the same location. However, other examples include a worker taking products out with them on a visit or inclusion in a food parcel. To test whether participants would prefer to buy their own products, rather than receive them directly, the option of offering cash to participants was introduced in October and a pre-paid card in December.

A range of monitoring data was collected by CFINE and partners about the distribution of products. In addition the evaluation surveyed participants at the start and end of the pilot, and qualitative interviews were conducted with a small number of participants and administrators at a sample of the partners. Data on products received was recorded for 731 participants. An initial survey was completed by 630 participants. The survey at the end of the pilot was completed by 136 participants.

Findings – Community Partners

The majority of participants were not working: 38% were unemployed, 11% were long term sick/disabled, 9% were looking after the home/family and 17% were in full or part-time education. Almost half of those who gave information were single parents, while just over a quarter were couple households with children. Asked about why they/their family are facing financial difficulties, over half of those who provided a response mentioned that they are living on a low income: many due to living on benefits. A problem/delay with benefits, disability/illness, paying off debts, coping as a single parent, and a change in family circumstances were also mentioned.

Previous difficulties accessing products

Accessing sanitary products had presented difficulties in the past for two thirds of participants. Asked if they had ever been unable to purchase sanitary products 58% said they had. The main reasons for difficulty accessing products related to affordability. Other reasons included irregular or heavy periods. Ways participants managed without the products they needed included asking a friend or family member for products or money to buy products or using an alternative – most commonly toilet roll, but also rags or nappies. Some participants mentioned feeling anxiety, embarrassment, or dirty/degraded.

Accessing products during the pilot

Most participants surveyed (91%) said they felt comfortable collecting products. Discretion and ease of access were highlighted in interviews with partners and participants as important considerations in how products were provided. Having to speak to someone to access products was identified as a potential barrier to taking up provision. Just under two thirds of participants were recorded as receiving products on one occasion only. However, of the participants who signed up in the first 3 months of the pilot, 31% had received products twice and 23% had received products 3-6 times. Ease of access and having to speak to someone were also considered important in influencing whether people returned monthly.

Products provided

Almost all community partner participants received products, and more received towels than tampons. Most participants who completed the end-point survey (96%) said they received enough products. Around 70% said they received a reasonable choice of products, while 30% selected 'partially – I was able to choose the type of product I wanted but not my preferred brand'. In interviews most participants and partners discussed having a choice of type absorbency and other practical aspects as the most important elements of choice.

Providing the means to buy products

Some participants thought a pre-paid card would provide choice, be convenient, and be less embarrassing than collecting products, although others raised concerns about cash or a card not being used to buy products. Looking at CFINE's data only – where cards were offered for the longest time – pre-paid cards made up almost a fifth (30/158) of their recorded provision during the time they were offered.

Several partners expressed discomfort about the pre-paid card and, in particular, the cash option. Many of their clients are vulnerable and they were uncertain about whether the cash, and to some extent, the card would be spent on products. There was also a feeling among some that both of these options added an extra layer of unnecessary complexity – if people need products, just give them products.

Impact of the pilot

Slightly under two thirds of participants said they thought taking part in the pilot had, had an impact on them, 22% were unsure and 15% said it had not. When asked what impact the pilot had, the most commonly selected response was 'more money available to spend on other essential items' (68%), followed by 'less worried about having my period' (51%). Around a quarter thought the pilot had 'introduced me to other services' (28%) or meant that they were 'more able to continue with day to day activities during my period'

(26%). In interviews with participants, impacts mentioned included: freeing up money for other essentials, changing products more often, and worrying less.

Future access

Partner staff and participants had diverse views about the best way to provide products in the future. Three key considerations emerged across interviews with both participants and partners:

- Convenient – somewhere that fits into people's day to day life and is easy to access for most people.
- Discreet – accessing products in a way that does not require speaking to someone or being identified to others as needing free products.
- Preventing abuse – concerns about people 'misusing' or 'taking advantage of' provision were raised.

The survey asked respondents' views on a set of options for if a scheme to provide access to free sanitary products was introduced in the future. Receive a card I can use in shops and order online through a secure system for delivery by post were the two most popular options for community respondents. Free products available in public toilets was one of the least popular options for community respondents in contrast to students (see below).

Findings – Schools, college and university

Previous difficulties accessing products

Accessing sanitary products had presented difficulties in the past for around a third of student participants, while slightly under a quarter had ever been unable to purchase sanitary products. Just over half of pupil participants did not answer this question.

Twenty percent of pupils who answered the question had experienced difficulty accessing sanitary products and had been unable to purchase products. Affordability and being 'caught out' were the main issues raised.

Accessing products during the pilot

Raising awareness of the provision at the college and university seemed to have been a challenge amongst the volume of communications students received. The main reason from those surveyed for not taking part in the pilot was not knowing about it – either that the pilot was taking place, how to sign up or who is eligible. Others said they had access to products or did not want to ask for products.

Having to speak to someone to access products was considered to be a key barrier for students. Embarrassment was highlighted as a particular issue for younger people. Other barriers to accessing products identified were limited time during school day for young people to drop past and collect products, staff being out of office when young people attended, and students may have seen provision as just for those in need. Schools were reluctant to make products freely available in toilets as they were concerned about misuse. The school that trialled this discontinued provision for this reason.

Products provided

Students were more likely to receive tampons (41%) than towels (37%) in contrast to community partner participants. Around three quarters of school pupils received towels. Fifty nine percent said they received a reasonable choice of products, while 41% said partially. Awareness of reusable products was higher amongst students than participants

at community partners and the majority of students who had not tried reusable products were interested in trying them. However, this did not translate into the proportion of products given out.

Impact of the pilot

Slightly under two thirds (63%) of college and university students thought the pilot had an impact on them, while 22% were unsure and 15% thought it had not. When asked what impact the pilot had the most commonly selected response was 'less worried about having my period' (51%).

Future access

The survey asked students' views on a set of options for if a scheme to provide access to free sanitary products was introduced in the future. Free products available in toilets was one of the two most popular options for school, college and university respondents. Receive a card was one of the top two most popular options for school and college respondents, while order online was one of the top two options for university students. The least popular option was to get free products from a member of staff. Reasons given for their preferred method were similar across most of the options, and commonly highlighted that the option was easy to access or convenient, and discreet or less embarrassing

Key learning points

To date, discussion on lack of access to sanitary products has relied mostly on anecdotal evidence. These findings confirm that access to sanitary products is an issue for some people, and that it affects different populations in different ways. Two thirds of low income participants had experienced difficulties compared with one third of college and university participants, and a fifth of school participants. This disproportionate impact is not unsurprising – particularly given that low income was cited as the main reason for lack of access, although being caught out and embarrassment also featured.

The findings also highlight that for some of those that do not have the products they need, this appears to have an impact on their wellbeing and, for a minority, their ability to continue with day to day activities during their period. The pilot was not able to shed light on whether lack of access to sanitary products has an impact on attendance at school, college or university.

Key learning points – provision for those on a low income

- Partner staff identified raising awareness of the pilot and getting people to take part as a challenge, while a sizeable proportion of participants did not take up the offer of regular provision. The sign up process and ease of access were identified as issues. Additionally, the pilot activity was generally driven in each organisation by one committed individual – on top of an already busy role.
- The key considerations identified across the different data sources were around ease of access or convenience, provision that is discreet and does not identify recipients as needing help, and preventing misuse or abuse of any provision.
- The limited data collected suggest that the pre-paid card was of interest to some participants. Receiving a card to use in shops was also a popular option for future provision. The convenience of using the card to purchase products at the same time as other shopping, choice, and dignity were benefits noted. However, concerns were raised by both partner staff and participants around whether a pre-paid card would be used to buy products.

- Picking up products up from a range of convenient and accessible locations such as pharmacies, doctor's surgeries or health clinics, or community centres was suggested by partners and participants. Ordering online for delivery by post was also a fairly popular option, as it was considered discreet and convenient, although it would not be accessible for those who did not have easy access to the internet.
- The majority of participants were already engaging with services. Further consideration is needed on how to reach other groups who may be in need. In addition, further exploration of methods for accessing products that do not require talking to someone and other settings such as community pharmacies would help build the evidence base.

Key learning points – provision in educational institutions

- In providing access to products in educational settings, embarrassment about periods generally and having to ask someone for products was considered to be a particular issue, especially for younger people. However, schools were reluctant to trial making products available in school toilets because of concerns about misuse and, where this was tested, problems were encountered.
- Provision that is easy to access and discreet was also seen as important by students. Receiving a card and ordering online were also popular options. The least popular option for school, college and university students was to get free products from a member of staff – underlining the preference for not having to ask someone to access products. However, in contrast to those on a low income, having free products available in toilets was a popular option for school, college and university respondents. This likely to be due to different expectations for provision among many students – to be there when you are caught short rather than as a monthly supply.