

Local Government and Communities Committee

Call for Views on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill

Submission from Girlguiding Scotland

- 1. The Bill has been brought forward partly in response to concerns about "period poverty" - difficulty in being able to afford period products. Do you think period poverty is a serious issue in Scotland? Please provide any relevant information you may have to support your views.**

Girlguiding Scotland believes period poverty is a serious issue in Scotland. As the leading charity for girls and young women in Scotland, this is an issue which we have been campaigning on since September 2017 and our members have been taking action at local and national levels.

Our Girls in Scotland survey 2018 found 13% of girls aged 13-25 knew another girl their age who has experienced period poverty.¹

Prior to this, in 2017 we surveyed our members and supporters to find out more about their experiences and views on period poverty. Our survey received 76 responses, 90% of which were from members age 30 and under. These results were shared in a previous consultation on this issue and we're pleased to have the opportunity to highlight these findings again and the views and opinions of girls and young women across Scotland.

When researching the prevalence of period poverty our survey found that:

- 25% of respondents had experienced period poverty themselves or had friends or family who had experienced period poverty
- The majority (20%) said this was an occasional experience, while 5% said it happened 'a few times of year' or 'every or most months'

Moreover, the vast majority of respondents had some experience of being 'caught out' and finding themselves without period products when they needed them:

- Nearly a quarter (24%) said this happened 'every or most months' while 99% reported that this had happened to them occasionally

We acknowledge that with a limited sample size our findings can only offer a snapshot into this far-reaching and complex issue. We are aware that further research on the impact of period poverty that has been conducted since our survey findings.

Some of our members also provided comments on why they believe everyone who needs period products should be able to access them for free:

"Periods are a natural process which no woman chooses and yet women are sometimes forced to choose between buying period products or buying food. A box of tampons can cost upwards of £2.99, depending on the choice available in the local area. Many women will need

¹ <https://www.girlguidingscotland.org.uk/girls-in-scotland/>

multiple boxes a month, which will quickly add up especially with multiple people experiencing periods in the same household. Which can be an expense a lot of households just can't afford."

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 23

"Period products are as necessary as food to some women and young girls, this is an issue which should be just as concerning as a child not having breakfast."

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 22

"We need to break stigma, and make period products as easy to get as free condoms."

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 30

"Periods cause enough pain and issues already, especially to young people who have just started and aren't used to them. Not having period products because they can't afford them is only adding to the problem. Young girls are missing school due to their period which, if they miss school frequently, could have a big impact on their education and their life in general."

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 19

2. Do you support the overall aim of the Bill - that no one in Scotland should have to pay for period products and that this should be set out in law?

Girlguiding Scotland is fully supportive of the overall aim of the Bill. The introduction of a universal system of free provision of period products and the creation of duty for relevant bodies to provide free period products, will help to ensure financial barriers are removed when accessing period products.

We're pleased to see this issue on the political agenda and welcomed the decision by the Scottish Government to provide free period products at schools, colleges, universities, libraries and leisure centres across Scotland, but note this is not a statutory basis. Creating a legal right to access period products would generate an obligation on Ministers to continue to provide funding in this area and a legal basis by which users of period products can uphold their right to access such products.

We believe making free period products easily available to everyone who needs them will not only create economic benefits, but will support girls and young women's participation in education and extracurricular activities, and help to end the stigma around periods.

Our members highlighted a wide-range of benefits such a bill could create for public life in Scotland:

- 89% agree free period products would help make sure girls and young women don't miss out on school or college
- 91% agree free period products would help girls and young to participate in afterschool activities
- 89% agree free period products would help to reduce stigma around periods

We also asked our members to think about the benefits the proposed bill could create in their own, everyday lives and the lives of their peers. We found that:

- 87% said access to free period products would save them money
- 75% said access to free period products would make them feel more comfortable talking about periods with family, friends and peers
- 67% said access to free period products would make them feel more comfortable taking part in extracurricular activities like sport, youth clubs, and volunteering while they had their period
- 63% said access to free period products would make them feel more comfortable going to school or college while they had their period

3. The Scottish Government already has a scheme for free period products across schools, colleges and universities. Some public bodies also provide free products voluntarily. Do you have any experience of such schemes? If so, do they seem to you to be effective?

Girlguiding Scotland Headquarters and our outdoor adventure centre, Netherurd, currently provide free period products in our bathrooms.

As part of our efforts to support the campaign to end period poverty and to ensure our young members feel happy and comfortable at unit meetings, we have been encouraging our volunteers to provide period products at the unit meeting place. We also encourage our members to collect period products and other toiletries for their local foodbank.

Feedback from Girlguiding Scotland staff and from members has been very positive, citing the main benefits as being able to access products when in unexpected need and the removal of the financial burden of having to purchase products.

This year, we asked Girlguiding Scotland staff and members to comment on their experience using a free period products scheme:

“Having this scheme at work is so handy and it’s great to have that lifeline as periods can be so unpredictable.”

Girlguiding Scotland staff member, age 30

“...my school have one [period poverty scheme] and it’s displayed in the toilets so is accessible, the nurse and guidance teachers are also able to give them out, and they tell you this during PSE lessons.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 17

“I use the free period products at uni all the time! The difference is amazing: I don’t even have to think about my period, never mind worry about it, and it’s one less thing to fit into a tight student budget.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 20

4. The Bill would allow the Scottish Government to require organisations other than schools and colleges to provide free period products. Do you support this? If so, what other organisations should be legally made to provide free products?

We believe free period products should be available in spaces where girls and women spend their everyday lives to promote participation in school, work and extra-curricular activities.

Girlguiding Scotland supports proposals to make free period products easily accessible in the places where girls and young women spend their time, such as schools, colleges and universities. Also in libraries, leisure centres, public toilets, community centres, health centres and job centres.

Our survey found:

- 99% of respondents said having period products at schools and colleges would be very or somewhat helpful
- 99% of respondents said having period products at GPs, health centres and clinics would be very or somewhat helpful
- 96% of respondents said having period products at sports centres, leisure centres, libraries and community centres would be very or somewhat helpful

We are of the firm view that every girl and young woman has the right to feel safe and happy at school, college and university so they can get the most out of their education. We'd therefore support proposals to create a duty for schools, colleges, and universities to provide free period products in bathrooms.

Feedback from our own members suggests that stigma may make it difficult for girls to be open about problems they have related to their period – including their ability to afford period products.

- 68% of respondents said they did not feel comfortable talking about periods with staff at school or college compared to just 13% who did
- More than half (52%) said they would not feel comfortable telling school staff that they were struggling to afford period products
- Even among friends, 39% of respondents said they would not feel comfortable speaking about problems affording period products

These figures suggest many girls may be struggling in silence and feel unable to approach school staff for support due to the stigma of period poverty.

Encouragingly, when thinking about their own everyday lives and experience 63% of our survey respondents said access to free period products would make them feel more comfortable going to school or college while they had their period. 75% said access to free period products would help them to feel more comfortable talking about periods with family, friends and peers.

An accessible and anonymous approach like making free supplies available in school and college bathrooms could make it easier for anyone who needs period products to access them without worrying about embarrassment or stigma.

“It’s a real problem that needs to be tackled - politicians need to use their unique position to provide concrete change and ensure that girls don’t have to lose out on education and life just because of a biological function that they have no control over.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 16

“For those of us who have problems with periods, period products are not the only cost we endure to cope with them. Would also be helpful in schools and places where women are perhaps struggling to have access to a change of underwear.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 30

In addition, our members recommended a wide variety of other spaces where access to free period products may be helpful including in restaurants, bars, pubs, train stations, airports, supermarkets, shopping centres and all public bathrooms.

In 2019 we asked members what other organisations/places should be legally made to provide free products:

“I think they should be free in all buildings which are government-funded, and we should encourage privately owned places such as restaurants to supply them as well.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 20

“I think that all government and council buildings should have it available as well as education establishments (colleges, uni etc.) I think it’s important that it is available at primary schools as well. I also think that as many other businesses as possible should provide free products as well but I understand that it’s not always possible for smaller businesses.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 17

“Pleased to see free period products starting to appear across football grounds in Scotland especially at Tynecastle, Easter Road and Hampden.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age unknown

“Pleased to see a basket of free tampons and pads in bathrooms on CalMac ferries”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age unknown

5. The Bill requires the setting up of a scheme for making free period products available. Do you have any views on what elements a scheme should include? In answering this question, you might want to take account of factors such as the importance of privacy, accessibility, value for money and the environment.

As discussed above, the stigma surrounding periods - including the ability to afford period products - is important to take into account when designing such a scheme.

Currently, many existing schemes place period products in the general area of the bathroom. It may be worth considering placing such products in individual cubicles so as to further safeguard a person’s privacy. It’s important that these supplies are consistently and adequately stocked and appropriate signage is included to indicate that the products are available to use and are free of charge.

Girlguiding Scotland believes that, as far as a possible, a range of period products should be included in the scheme. Girls and women have a diverse range of needs, with many only able to use certain products. For the scheme to be inclusive and effective, there should be ample choice offered which aims to meet the needs of as many girls and women as possible. This also includes variety based on varying levels of menstrual flow.

While we fully recognise the growing research and evidence of the detrimental environmental impact of certain period products, we do not think girls and women should be discriminated against by limiting access to only certain products within the scheme.

The needs of all girls and women should be fairly balanced with factors including cost and environmental impact. Indeed, we are supportive of moves to raise awareness of reusable period products and some of our members highlighted concerns around the impact disposable period products can have on the environment. They suggested the establishment of a free period product scheme could offer an opportunity to raise awareness of reusable and environmentally-friendly alternatives.

“It should be taught more in the curriculum that periods are perfectly normal and the way you handle them has an effect on the world. I was only taught about pads and tampons when at school but after doing my own research I’m the proud owner of a menstrual cup. I think the way to tackle period poverty is to tackle the idea that you have to use disposable products. It would be much cheaper for the government to give everyone reusable period products than to provide free disposable ones.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 17

Indeed, we would welcome such products in the scheme, alongside other existing products such as tampons and pads (opting for versions with as little plastic as possible).

We are broadly supportive of proposals for a universal, card-based system providing access to period products for those who need them. Our survey found 57% of members supported this idea while 28% were unsure whether this would be an effective system while 15% did not think this would be an effective way of providing access to free period products.

Members who were familiar with the c-card scheme felt this system worked well and could be applied to period products and highlighted the need for any system to be open, easily accessible and avoid adding any additional stigma to those making use of it.

“I believe there should be a no questions asked period product system - similar to the current "C-Card" condom system. I think this availability would increase confidence levels and the opportunities taken by young girls in difficult situations.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 20

However, some members expressed concern that a card-based system may not go far enough to tackle stigma and that some girls and women may still miss out if they don't have the confidence to register.

“The card based system would not cause the cultural change we need. It would be similar to the free contraception policy and would mean only those with access, awareness of and

confidence will reach those services. This would still affect vulnerable, remote or younger members of society.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 26

6. Do you have any other comments you wish to make about the Bill?

Financial Implications

We believe provision of free period products will create a significant economic benefit for anyone who experiences periods and relies on these products.

Predicting the potential cost impact goes beyond the scope of our survey and research. We are aware there will be organisations and bodies much who are better placed than us to address cost implications to government, schools and colleges and businesses.

We are best placed to speak to the cost implication for individuals. 67% of our survey respondents indicated they would expect to make use of free period products regularly (24%) or occasionally (43%), suggesting that the proposals would result in a cost reduction for them.

We also recognise the growing body of research highlighting just how much individuals can expect to spend on period products with research finding the average woman spends more than £18,000 on period products over the course of their lifetime².

Equalities

We believe providing free period products will have overall positive impact on equality, by eliminating barriers that make it harder for girls and women to fully participate and get the most out of education, employment and extra-curricular activities.

We believe this proposed bill would have a positive impact by:

- Helping to end the stigma around period poverty and periods more generally
- Tackling a barrier that may prevent or have a detrimental impact on girls’ experience of education and other opportunities such as extra-curricular activities including participation in youth groups and sports clubs
- Making it easier for anyone who requires period products to access them via a convenient accessible and inclusive system and in spaces where they already spend much of their time (schools, colleges, universities etc.)

In addition to the economic benefits the proposed bill offers, our members felt it could also be instrumental in reducing stigma and increasing participation. Our survey found:

- 89% of respondents agreed free period products would mean girls are less likely to miss out on school, college or university
- 90% of respondents agreed free period products would make it easier for girls to participate in extra-curricular experiences like sports and youth clubs

² Huffington Post: [Women spend more than £18,000 on having periods in their lifetime, study reveals](#) - 3rd September, 2015

- 89% of respondents agreed free period products would help to reduce stigma and embarrassment around periods

“Periods are something that most women experience regardless of wealth. Each individual has different experiences. I think it is just important to raise awareness and improve perceptions of periods in general. I think greater understanding, awareness, openness and flexibility will improve 'period poverty' though. Since it isn't only detrimental to the less wealthy I think it would be better phrased as 'period positivity' as women (and men alike) should be embraced as individuals and periods should not be viewed negatively.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 23

“It is unfair that girls are still disadvantaged by something that is a natural part of being female and shocking the government is making a profit on periods. We need to make periods normal and socially accepted to reduce stigma and make girls feel included every day of the month.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 22

“Not having access to period products is a barrier to equality for girls who may not be able to partake in activities, especially sports, and this leads to a wider gap between boys and girls.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 20

“I think the stance on considering period products on a luxury item is wrong: it is a necessity for some women and young adults and even those who aren't classed as low income or on benefits can struggle to afford them: they could be able to afford food or tampons one month, but not both. Letting girls/women know that this issue is something that is understood and they can be supported with would help a great deal to help combat embarrassment and stigma, but also money worries and stress.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 22

We welcome a universal approach and believe this will help to end stigma around periods and period poverty and ensure anyone who needs them can access free period products.

We believe the measures put forward in the proposed bill should be implemented in a way that is accessible and inclusive to help end the stigma surrounding periods and ensure that free period products reach all who need them.

For this reason, we support a universal approach that does not require recipients to prove eligibility criteria. We are pleased to see in the policy memorandum recognition that some transgender individuals experience menstruation and that the provisions of the bill must apply to all those who require period products.

“Period products are essential for so many people (not just women and girls but trans and non-binary people as well) and they should be free and accessible.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 21

Sustainability

We believe this proposed bill can be delivered sustainably and will create a wide range of economic and social benefits.

We believe the proposed bill will create a wide range of economic and social benefits not only for individuals directly impacted by period poverty but across public life in Scotland including:

- Increasing participation of women and girls in education and an improved experience of school, college or university
- Increasing participation of women and girls in extra-curricular activities such as sports and youth clubs and an improved experience for girls and young women in their everyday lives
- Tackling stigma and promoting an open and honest discourse about periods, poverty and the health challenges individuals can face in connection with menstruation
- An opportunity to raise awareness of environmentally-friendly period products

Our message to the Scottish Parliament

In addition to the questions covered in the consultation we asked members if they could give the Scottish Parliament one message about period poverty what would it be.

Here are some of their messages:

“We need to break stigma, and make period products as easy to get as free condoms.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 30

“That everyone should be allowed access to suitable products.... not just cheap inefficient ones!”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 30

“Period poverty is real. Don't ignore it.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 22

“I think that periods are a very important part of girls' lives and they should be taken more seriously by places of education, and places really should provide free product support to anyone who needs them.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 17

“If we can provide free condoms it should be a no brainer to provide free menstrual products. Period products aren't a luxury!”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 19

“That it should no longer be a taboo subject and we should face this genuine issue that girls have.”

Girlguiding Scotland member, age 17