

Proposed Sanitary Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill

Page 2: About you

Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

on behalf of an organisation

Which of the following best describes you? (If you are a professional or academic, but not in a subject relevant to the consultation, please choose "Member of the public".)

No Response

Please select the category which best describes your organisation

Third sector (charitable, campaigning, social enterprise, voluntary, non-profit)

Please choose one of the following; if you choose the first option, please provide your name or the name of your organisation as you wish it to be published.

I am content for this response to be attributed to me or my organisation

Please insert your name or the name of your organisation. If you choose the first option above, this should be the name as you wish it to be published. If you choose the second or third option, a name is still required, but it will not be published.

No More Taboo

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

Page 7: Your views on the proposal

Q1. Which of the following best expresses your view of the proposed Bill?

Partially supportive

Q1. Which of the following best expresses your view of the proposed Bill?

Please explain the reasons for your response

We completely agree that the free provision of both disposable and reusable menstrual products is an extremely important measure in combatting period poverty in the short-term. Access to menstrual products is a human right – it is grossly unacceptable that those who are experiencing poverty are barred from managing their periods in a safe, clean and dignified manner due to the price of these products, and we commend Monica Lennon for having proposed this Bill and worked so hard to campaign against the issue. We think that the proposal to make a range of menstrual products accessible at certain points, for free, is a good way to solve the immediate issue of period poverty. However, we feel that the Bill could do more to solve the issue in a longer-term, more sustainable manner. These are detailed below.

1. In our experience, working with vulnerable people in the South West of England, we have found that many people are embarrassed and ashamed to come forward to ask about menstrual products, and that the menstrual taboo holds people back from asking for support, products and help.

2. Alongside this many of the organisations we have worked with such as shelters and foodbanks who are already providing sanitary products for free have told us that they do not give many out at all, after investigating this further we realise this is because of the same menstrual taboos which are stopping staff discussing sanitary products with service users or offering them. One organisation telling us they have several years worth of products in storage but no one wants them, there is a severe lack of communication on the topic.

3. We also have found that there exists a deep lack of knowledge with regards to menstrual cups and washable pads in the general public, and we doubt that many vulnerable people will actively choose to switch to a reusable product without further information. Most workshops participants have expressed disgust and horror when introduced to a menstrual cup for the first time. However, a menstrual cup, bought at wholesale prices, can recover its cost in as little as 3 months, and lasts for 10 years, in contrast to disposable products, which will be a constant financial outlay. Either, menstrual cups and washable pads will not be asked for, or those who do receive these products without any information may not try using it due to confusion as to how they work.

4. The shame and embarrassment surrounding menstruation, alongside the lack of knowledge of menstrual products, and the fact that this hasn't been raised as an issue in Parliament before 2017 exemplifies the existence of the menstrual taboo well. Steps need to be taken to break down this taboo, such as more comprehensive, holistic education. This should be compulsory in schools for young people of all genders, and classes should not be segregated by sex, as this implies that this is a taboo subject, and excludes transgender and non-binary children. This would help to reduce instances of period poverty within young people and build a generation unashamed to talk about periods and seek help if they need it.

We have been conducting confidence-building and educational workshops for young people from 10 – 24 years, and vulnerable women between 20 – 50 years, and offering training to the staff of organisations that work with vulnerable people. This is a quote from a participant who reported having to make her own sanitary towels with cotton wool and sellotape when she couldn't afford to buy them: "As [the workshops've] gone on feel really positive about it, it's not a bad thing is it to talk about periods - more able to openly talk about periods. It's good that you get the discussion going in the workshop as women have tips that they can share with other women. The Ruby cup is fantastic, I was so unsure at first - it's simple but genius! You've done one of the best things ever, it's a significant change!" Despite her initial reluctance to involve herself in the discussion, she really enjoyed the session, is now much more comfortable with discussing periods and feels that the menstrual cup has made a positive change in her life. We feel that education is a strong part of breaking the taboo, not only for vulnerable people and young people, but also for those who have the power to fight period poverty on a daily basis such as healthcare, education, and third sector professionals. A support worker at a drug support group in Bristol, after receiving staff training, told us that "it really helped me in my role with working with vulnerable women. It taught me a lot about the issues surrounding period poverty and now I feel a lot more confident talking to women about their menstrual health."

Page 8: Universal provision of sanitary products

Q2. Do you think a universal, card-based system (modelled on the c-card system for free condoms) would be an effective means of providing sanitary products for free to those who need them?

Unsure

Please explain the reasons for your response

As discussed above we believe the only way of tackling period poverty is by coupling access to products with

Q2. Do you think a universal, card-based system (modelled on the c-card system for free condoms) would be an effective means of providing sanitary products for free to those who need them?

education and breaking down taboos for both providers/distributors and people accessing the service. With the current levels of stigma and taboo it is difficult to assess if a p-card would work. Some of the potential challenges are: 1. Access points, these would need to be easily accessible for all. Potential distributors may only be available during restricted opening hours and if the system requires sign up by providing even a partial post-code this can be difficult for those who do not have a permanent residence or may be details they do not wish to disclose, many of whom find it difficult to access any health services for this reason. They also may not be available when needed most e.g. in a 'period-emergency', many vulnerable people have very irregular periods due to the stress of their situation and may not have somewhere to store products and 'stock-up' in advance. 2. Due to the taboo around periods take up may be very low and people may not feel comfortable coming forward to request this, work would need to be done to break down some of these societal taboos. 3. Distributors would require training about menstrual health and alternative products such as menstrual cups and how to use them. However, this could be an opportunity to provide lots of information and support, such as where they can access showers/laundry, info about gynaecological symptoms which it is currently difficult to provide to everyone but in particular those in precarious housing situations. 4. Communication of how the system works and marketing would have to reflect audiences, for example not everyone living in poverty has access to the internet and would need to be gender neutral. 5. A large amount of investment into disposable sanitary products and their storage may be required to offer different types (choice here is very important) and the take-up may not happen without the education and societal change to go alongside it, this could create a large amount of waste. One thing we are encouraging all organisations to do is to provide products for free in public toilets (if segregated by gender then ensuring available in male and female toilets) or public spaces. The theory behind this is that we provide toilet roll so why not sanitary products. Although this would mean less understanding of who is using the products it would mean they are universally accessible to anyone accessing that space and would help break down barriers if they are seen as a part of every day life, this can help people access them without judgement which may be especially useful for transgender people.

Q3. Which of the following best expresses your view in relation to a card-based system?

The card should be available to anyone; card-holders should have unlimited access to free sanitary products

Please explain the reasons for your response.

If a card based system were to be used it would need to be accessible to anyone and everyone! As with the c-card system it is likely this will only be a small amount of the potential audience, however it would need to be encouraged through education and communication to reach those in need. If possible we would also have selected 'other' as we believe it could be possible to run this system by providing them for free to anyone who needs them in public spaces without the need to have a card, just by providing them openly to anyone.

Q4. Do you have a view on which locations would be most suitable for dispensing free sanitary products (e.g. GP surgeries, pharmacies, community centres, health clinics)?

We agree that sanitary products should be available from GP surgeries, pharmacies, community centres and health clinics. We also suggest that they could be available from homeless services, food banks, charities that work with vulnerable people with complex needs such as housing, mental health and drug addiction, libraries. However each of these organisations would also need training and support on how to provide information and guidance on gynaecological health problems and using alternative sanitary products such as menstrual cups. If sanitary products were to be available without the need for sign-up we would encourage them to be places in public toilets (both council funded and those found in privately-owned shopping centres) and other public spaces that many homeless people use as refuge in the day time. They should also be available from all educational institutions, including primary schools.

Q5. Do you agree that there should be specific obligations on schools, colleges and universities to make sanitary products available for free (via dispensers in toilets)?

Yes

Please explain the reasons for your response

The more we can show younger generations that there is no need to be ashamed or embarrassed about periods the better. We believe having sanitary products available publicly, for example in a basket at reception or just in a basket in the toilets can really help this (adding in dispensers can add a layer of making this clinical and secretive). We know that periods can affect attendance in school and cause lots of issues for young people. We conducted research with 65 young people across England in different parts of the country with different backgrounds, many mentioned the worry of the expense of sanitary products that they are 'too expensive'.

Page 12: Personal experience (questions 6 and 7 are for individual respondents only)

Q6. Have you ever struggled to access or afford sanitary products during menstruation? (e.g. financial barriers, unexpected circumstances, health issues)

No Response

Q7. If sanitary products were available for free, which of the following would apply to you?

No Response

Page 14: Financial implications

Q8. Taking account of both costs and potential savings, what financial impact would you expect the proposed Bill to have on:

	Significant increase in cost	Some increase in cost	Broadly cost-neutral	Some reduction in cost	Significant reduction in cost	Unsure
(a) Government and the public sector (e.g. local authorities, the NHS)		X				
(b) Colleges and universities		X				
(c) Businesses (including suppliers/retailers of sanitary products)			X			
(d) Individuals (including consumers of sanitary products)				X		

Q8. Taking account of both costs and potential savings, what financial impact would you expect the proposed Bill to have on:

Please explain the reasons for your response

Without education and promoting behaviour change this scheme will end up investing a lot in disposable sanitary products, which have a cost associated with them both financially and environmentally. However, by breaking down some of the taboos it could potentially save the NHS money by encouraging more attention towards gynaecological health. For educational organisations there will be a cost but in terms of well-being and attendance some of this cost will be negated. For individuals, there will be some reduction in cost (this is not huge amounts of money so it may not seem significant) however it is very significant when it comes to their well-being.

Q9. Are there ways in which the Bill could achieve its aim more cost-effectively (e.g. by reducing costs or increasing savings)?

Sustainable sanitary products are the most cost effective way of providing access to sanitary products as they are reusable- a menstrual cup will last for 10 years and will pay for itself in less than 6 months, however we understand there must also be an element of choice. We believe sanitary product manufacturers have an obligation to support those in need and should therefore support through donation of products rather than requiring governments to buy them.

Page 16: Equalities

Q10. What overall impact is the proposed Bill likely to have on equality, taking account of the following protected characteristics (under the Equality Act 2010): age, disability, sexual orientation etc will be able to manage their period in a dignified, safe manner. The current system – having sanitary products as a monetised, commodified product is exclusionary to those who cannot afford them, and supplying them for free will break down these barriers and provide access.

Positive

Please explain the reasons for your response

Offering access to sanitary products in publicly accessible spaces that are easily accessible by everybody will ensure that people of any gender, race, disability, sexual orientation etc will be able to manage their period in a dignified, safe manner. The current system – having sanitary products as a monetised, commodified product is exclusionary to those who cannot afford them, and supplying them for free will break down these barriers and provide access.

Q11. In what ways could any negative impact of the proposed Bill on equality be minimised or avoided?

- Ensure that distribution points are equally located in rural and urban areas, and in areas where there is high deprivation/high percentage of BAME communities
- Ensure that access points are accessible by wheelchair. Special measures should be made to ensure those that are house-bound can access products and training is given to distributors on the specifics of managing menstruation with a disability.
- Branding of P card and campaign is gender neutral and distributors understand transgender and gender non-conforming people can menstruate
- Ensure that free sanitary products are accessible by anybody of any age – no age limits like C Card

Page 18: Sustainability

Q12. Do you consider that the proposed Bill can be delivered sustainably i.e. without having likely future disproportionate economic, social and/or environmental impacts?

Unsure

Please explain the reasons for your response:

• Disposable products – huge environmental impacts, one pack of sanitary towels contains the equivalent of four plastic bags 150kg of waste per person. • This scheme has the potential to shift use towards reusable products through advocacy and education, which in the long-term will have positive environmental and economic impacts • The scheme will have a positive impact if it has a high take up rate – less people experiencing period poverty. However, it should also look to campaign against the root causes that caused this situation: deprivation, austerity, lessening support for those who need it such as disabled people, rising living costs and lack of employment opportunities. • The scheme can help to break down some of the societal taboos around menstruation by bringing this into the public eye.

Page 19: General

Q13. Do you have any other comments or suggestions on the proposal?

It is wonderful to see Scotland heading up policy development around periods and we are excited to see what comes. However, please make sure time and money is invested in the education and behaviour change to support these schemes.