



Research briefing: Is the free period products scheme working?

Girls' and young women's experiences and thoughts on the free period products scheme for schools and colleges in England

July 2022

Contents

Advocate foreword	3
Executive summary	3
Availability of free period products at school and college	4
Reasons for needing free period products.....	5
Consultation and engagement	5
Period education	5
Calls to action	6
Methodology	8

Advocate foreword

‘No one should be forced out of education because of their period. We were so pleased in 2020 when the UK government finally introduced free period products in schools and colleges in England.

But our research shows that the scheme isn’t working as it should. Millions of girls, young women and others who menstruate either don’t have access to period products or feel too uncomfortable and embarrassed to access them at school. Although teachers are meant to ask us about what we need, this isn’t happening which means lots of pads and tampons are going to waste while some of our peers can’t afford to buy their own.

As Girlguiding advocates we’re calling on the government to change this. It shouldn’t be our job to evaluate the scheme. We want the Department for Education and counterparts in devolved nations to do a full evaluation and make the changes needed so that everyone can access the period products they need. We also want to see better education about periods in school, delivered to everyone to help end the stigma around periods. No one should feel ashamed of such a normal thing.’ **Caitlyn and Lucy, Girlguiding advocates.**



Executive summary

After campaigning by Girlguiding and many other organisations and activists, the Department for Education introduced a scheme in 2020 to deliver free period products to under 18s in schools and colleges across England. Similar schemes are in place in Scotland and Wales, following campaigning by Girlguiding Scotland and Cymru. A pilot scheme is underway in Northern Ireland.

Over two years on, Girlguiding has run an assessment of the scheme to encourage the UK government to do a full evaluation. We asked over 2000 girls and young women aged 11 to 18 about their experiences of free period products. We found that:

- Almost half of respondents (46%) haven’t accessed period products at their school or college. Almost a third (32%) say they haven’t accessed free period products at school or college because they weren’t available. A similar number (30%) say they feel too embarrassed to access them.
- Despite the recommendation to consult students, four-fifths (80%) of respondents reported that their school or college has not asked what type of product they would like. As a result, our data suggests a mismatch of products students want.
- Many students can access free period products in their school toilets (35%) but 32% say they have to ask a teacher if they want to access them. Worryingly, over half (54%) of respondents disagreed that they felt comfortable asking for period products at school.
- When it comes to the cost, 77% agreed that period products are too expensive. 1 in 10 say they or their family cannot afford to buy period products.
- 84% of respondents say they learn about the menstrual cycle at school. However, less than half say they learn about the impact of periods of physical health (40%), mental or emotional health (36%) and period stigma and shame (27%) at school.

As a result of these findings Girlguiding recommends that the Department for Education:

- Conduct a full evaluation of the free period products scheme.
- Make the free period products scheme permanent.
- Require schools or colleges to consult students and issue guidance on how to do so.
- Recommit to ending period poverty by 2025.

Introduction

For over 100 years, Girlguiding has been standing up for girls and young women. We want every girl and young woman to feel confident and safe. We know that period poverty, stigma and shame about periods, and lack of education about menstruation can hold girls, young women and other young people who menstruate back.

That's why in 2018 our youth panel, [Advocate](#), led a [campaign](#) to make sure no one had to miss school or feel ashamed because of their period. In Scotland, Girlguiding Scotland's [Speak Out](#) representatives have also campaigned on this issue. Along with many other organisations and young activists, we were successful in campaigning for the UK government to introduce free period products in all schools and colleges in England, following the governments of Scotland and Wales in 2017 and 2018 respectively. A pilot scheme has also been underway in Northern Ireland since September 2021.

Two years into the scheme in England, the Department for Education statistics show that 94% of secondary schools and 90% of post-16 organisations in England now provide free period products to pupils.¹ The Department for Education website also suggests the contracts to supply these products have been extended to at least August 2024.² As a cost-of-living crisis hits across the UK, this is welcome news to make sure every young person who needs period products can access them.

But in the absence of the national-scale evaluation*, it's very difficult to know how girls, young women and others who menstruate are accessing the scheme. We need to know when, how and why are they accessing free period products at school; how is this contributing to reducing missed lessons and stigma around menstruation and; how students feel about the scheme. Our research seeks to answer these questions by combining exclusive quantitative data assessing the effectiveness of the scheme, supplemented by peer-to-peer research conducted by Girlguiding advocates to gather deeper insight.

We found that, despite the Department for Education's figures, availability of products remains relatively low and consultation about need is very limited. Girls and young women continue to be embarrassed about accessing products at school, some are struggling to afford period products while education about the impact of their period remains low. As a result, Girlguiding recommends the Department for Education and devolved administrations take several actions to improve and sustain the scheme.

*In Wales, a full evaluation is underway.

Availability of free period products at school and college

The number of girls and young women who have and haven't accessed free period products at school is similar. Just under half say they haven't accessed them (46%) while half (51%) say they have. Take up is highest in the 15 to 18 age group at 64% and among Black respondents (67% compared to 48% of White students).

'Just knowing they are there makes me feel safe and I'm sure other girls will agree as well...the mental aspect of it is lessened just by knowing it is there.' Participant 2

Free period products are accessed in different ways in these schools and colleges. Almost two-fifths (35%) say free period products are available in the toilets at their school or college

¹ [Period products scheme: management information - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

² [Period Product provision to schools and post-16 education organisations across England - Contracts Finder](#)

and this is higher in the devolved nations. Almost 1 in 6 say the products are available at a drop-in collection (14%). A similar number (12%) say they're available in a communal space. Almost a third (32%) say they must ask a teacher. And a small minority (14%) don't know where to access the period products available to them.

'They are shoved into a basket on top of the toilet I think, but I'm not entirely sure.'

Participant 3

3 in 10 (30%) say they're too embarrassed to access them, rising to 51% in Scotland. And over half (54%) say they don't feel comfortable asking for period products at school or college. Comfort with asking increases with age (50% of 15 to 18s agree compared to 31% of 11 to 14s).

'The whole idea of a period is taboo and no one really talks about it at school.'

Participant 2

Disappointingly, almost a third (32%) of girls aged 11 to 18 say free period products are not available in their school or college, rising to 36% of 15 to 18s. Availability is highest in London (64%), Scotland (60%) and Wales (58%) and lowest in the South East and Eastern regions (43% and 38% respectively). Perhaps unsurprisingly as the pilot is still being rolled out, 36% of those in Northern Ireland said period products were not available at their school or college.

When and why do students need free period products?

The majority (71%) have accessed free period products at school when they've forgotten to bring them. And over half (59%) needed them when their period started unexpectedly.

'I have accessed [free period products] quite a few times if [I have a] heavy [flow] and I've run out of my own products.'

Participant 1

Sadly, 1 in 10 (10%) had to access period products from their school or college because they couldn't afford them. This is highest in the Yorkshire and the Humber where 13% say they needed to access products at school because they couldn't afford them, compared to 5% in the South-West and Northern Ireland. Over 3 in 4 students (77%) say period products are too expensive.

'Where you don't have finances, knowing that you are going to be saved and knowing that means you don't have to say helps.'

Participant 2

Consultation and engagement

8 in 10 (80%) girls and young women aged 11 to 18 haven't been asked what type of period products they'd like provided by their school or college. Those in London are most likely to say they've been asked (23%) and Black students also reported being consulted at a slightly higher rate than White students (20% compared to 13%).

Potentially as a result of this lack of engagement and consultation, there's a mismatch between the type of period products available and the period products girls and young women want. When it comes to the types of period products available to them, almost 7 in 10 (68%) say pads are available to them. However, only 9% say environmentally friendly pads are available, despite 13% saying these are their preferred products to use.

Period education

The devolved governments develop their own Relationships and Sex Education, and England reformed its curriculum in 2020. The majority (84%) of girls and young women across the UK

say they learn about the menstrual cycle at school or college, and almost half (47%) learn about different period products they can use. This is significantly lower in Northern Ireland where just 29% say they learn about different period products and highest in Scotland (55%) and Wales (54%).

‘Because it’s an all-girls school, everybody is just more open about [periods], everybody is encouraged to talk about it...There have been assemblies and campaigns to promote and encourage girls to talk about menstrual cycles. So, it has enhanced my ability to be more open about it.’ Participant 1

A similar number learn how to manage their periods (46%). However less learn about the impact of periods on their physical health (40%) and their emotional health (36%). Just over a quarter (27%) say they learn about period stigma and shame.

‘We were shown a video on how to use a pad. And in biology we were shown a video, but it was in front of the boys too so it wasn’t particularly easy to ask questions about.’ Participant 3

Calls to action

Girlguiding, along with many other organisations and individuals, campaigned for the UK government to introduce free period products in schools and we welcome the recent commitments to renew the scheme in England.

However, our research two years on clearly shows more work is needed to make sure that all girls, young women and people who need period products can access them safely and easily at school or college, without fear of embarrassment or shame.

We recommend that the Department for Education (DfE):

- **Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the free period products scheme.** Girlguiding is proud to do this work and engage our members in period awareness but we are no substitute for a full government evaluation which assesses access, availability and engagement across the country and makes changes to the scheme accordingly. A comprehensive evaluation of the new Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum in England is also essential to assessing why there are such low levels of learning about the impact of menstruation and supplying education professionals with the tools to change this.
- **Make the free period products scheme permanent.** The research clearly shows that period products are needed in schools and colleges. The current model of renewing the scheme and supply contracts every few months is unstable and uncertain. Girlguiding recommends that the Department for Education make the free period products scheme permanent to ensure longevity and stability.
- **Require schools to consult students and issue appropriate consultation guidance.** Our research finds that lack of consultation about what products students need is leading to ineffective, expensive and wasteful over and undersupply. DfE should do more to encourage schools and colleges to consult with students about their preferences and needs, not just about products but about how they would like to access them, helping to reduce stigma or embarrassment. Girlguiding recommends DfE publish new guidance on how best to do this.
- **Recommit to ending period poverty by 2025.** In May 2019 the government pledged £250,000 to end period poverty by 2025 but it is not clear how this money has been spent and the Period Poverty Taskforce remains suspended. Girlguiding joins women

and girls' organisations in calling for the government to recommit to ending period poverty by 2025.

'My old school didn't used to have them. Once, I ran into an issue where I needed them and they weren't there, and so I had to ask my friend. But I know that if my friend wasn't there I would have been stuck. Trying to avoid girls running into that situation is really important. I just think [the scheme] has had such a positive impact on school life.' Participant 2

We recommend that devolved governments:

- **In Scotland:** conduct a full evaluation of their scheme and take steps to make sure every young person in Scotland can access free period products when they need them. Specific attention is needed to address the increased embarrassment and discomfort Scottish girls and young women and young people feel when accessing products at school or college.
- **In Wales:** respond to the findings of their evaluation to ensure that every young person who needs them can access free period products in Wales.
- **In Northern Ireland:** introduce a full free period products scheme for every school and college in Northern Ireland.

For Girlguiding members

In 2018, the Advocate panel, made up of Girlguiding members aged between 14 and 21, designed the first ever Period Poverty badge for girls and leaders to wear to show their support for the campaign and encourage others not to be ashamed or embarrassed about periods. You can still [buy the badge](#) and [pledge your support](#)! You can also:

Talk periods in your unit!

We've worked with fellow charity WaterAid to develop activities to get girls and young women talking openly about periods, the stigma connected to them, how we deal with them and poverty. Download the pack now and start talking with your girls.

Keep in mind that these activities have been developed for Guides and Rangers, but they can be adapted for younger girls too. If you're doing these activities then you might want to let parents know in advance.

[Download the core activity pack](#)

[Download the additional activities pack](#)

Collect period products

We want to lead by example in Girlguiding, so we encourage all units to collect period products and keep them on hand in your unit for anyone in need. This will mean that if anyone's period arrives unexpectedly or they are unable to buy products, there's no need for this to stop them having a great guiding experience.

Collect period products for your local foodbank

If your girls feel strongly about period poverty, why not collect products and donate them to a local foodbank for those who need them. If you don't have a relationship with a foodbank already, you can search for your local Trussell Trust Foodbank.

Methodology

Savanta conducted 2,008 interviews with 11-18-year-old girls and young women in the UK. Quotas were set on age and region and the fieldwork took place between 13 and 22 June. Savanta is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

The qualitative quotes in this report were taken from transcripts of three peer-to-peer interviews conducted by members of Girlguiding's youth panel, Advocate. In taking this peer research approach, we hoped participants would feel more comfortable discussing this topic among peers. We also recognise the limits of this approach in terms of sample size and diversity considerations. We hoped to have more advocates involved in the project but an especially busy exam-season meant many were unable to commit to the timeframes. This provides a good learning about carrying out peer research with young people. Thank you to the [Young Women's Trust](#) for inspiring this approach, Girlguiding hopes to conduct more girl-led research in the future.

About Girlguiding

Girlguiding is proud to be the UK's leading charity for girls and young women, with nearly 370,000 members. With over 24,000 groups meeting weekly, powered by over 80,000 brilliant volunteers, we empower girls to be their best and face the challenges of growing up today. We're active across the country and beyond, offering 290,000 girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference in their communities. We build girls' confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. Through Rainbows, Brownies, Guides and Rangers, Girlguiding has been creating fun, friendships and adventures for those aged 4 to 18 years old, for more than 100 years.

[girlguiding.org.uk](https://www.girlguiding.org.uk)

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Girlguiding 2020. Registered charity number 306016

