

## HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

11 SEPTEMBER 2018

### PERIOD POVERTY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN MEDWAY

Report from: James Williams, Director of Public Health

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#### Summary

On 26 April 2018, a motion concerning period poverty was submitted to Full Council (item 970A refers).

The Council referred this issue for further in depth discussion at the Medway Health and Wellbeing Board.

This report outlines the results of some initial research and investigation into the prevalence and impact of period poverty in Medway.

#### 1. Budget and Policy Framework

1.1 This report is consistent with the Medway Council Plan which outlines the Council's ambition to support all of its residents and including young people to realise their potential through the provision of services and initiatives that will help Medway become a healthier and safer place to live. Supporting healthy resilient families and the ambition that every child achieves their potential in schools.

#### 2. Background

2.1 The term 'period poverty' is defined as 'women not having sanitary products because they cannot afford them or do not have adequate access to them'.

2.2 At Full Council on the 26 April the following decision was made:

*"This Council recognises that children across the United Kingdom are suffering from period poverty as a result of being unable to afford menstrual products. This has far reaching effects; research from the charity Freedom4Girls has shown that thousands of young women are missing school every month and a survey by Plan International UK showed that one in ten women or girls aged 14 to 21 in Britain cannot afford sanitary towels.*

*This Council thanks the Medway Public Health Department for taking action in 2017 to see if this was an issue locally. Whilst no schools in Medway have requested assistance, this Council wishes to place on record its clear and unwavering commitment to continuing to prevent period poverty in Medway. No girl should be marginalised or made to suffer because they cannot afford menstrual products*

*As a result, this Council will refer this issue for further in depth discussion at the earliest opportunity to the Medway Health and Wellbeing Board, as the most appropriate forum for any action as appropriate.” (item 970A refers).*

2.3 There have been 3 main pieces of published research in to period poverty for young people in the UK, these are:

#### 2.3.1 **Freedom4 Girls**

This was a research project undertaken in Leeds by the Freedom4Girls project which is an organisation which focusses on running sanitary towel projects across the world. The research was based around one secondary school in Leeds (approx. 1000 girls) and found that a significant proportion of girls in the school were struggling to afford sanitary products. The full research report and methodology has not been published.

#### 2.3.2 **Plan International**

This was a survey of 1000 young women in the UK undertaken by Plan International a Children’s Charity. 1,000 girls and young women aged 14-21, carried out the survey (online only) in August 2017 which showed the following results:

- One in ten girls (10%) have **been unable** to afford sanitary wear;
- One in seven girls (15%) have **struggled** to afford sanitary wear; and
- One in seven girls (14%) have had to ask to borrow sanitary wear from a friend due to affordability issues.

#### 2.3.3 **Always Survey**

In 2017 a UK survey of 500 young women 500 parents and 500 teachers was funded and undertaken by the sanitary product manufacturer Always which highlighted:

- A fifth of parents said they have struggled to afford sanitary protection for their daughter;
- 40% of schools surveyed are supplying students with pads or tampons;
- 35 (7%) of the young people surveyed said they had missed school as a result of not being able to afford Sanitary products.

### **3. Findings of local Medway research into Period Poverty**

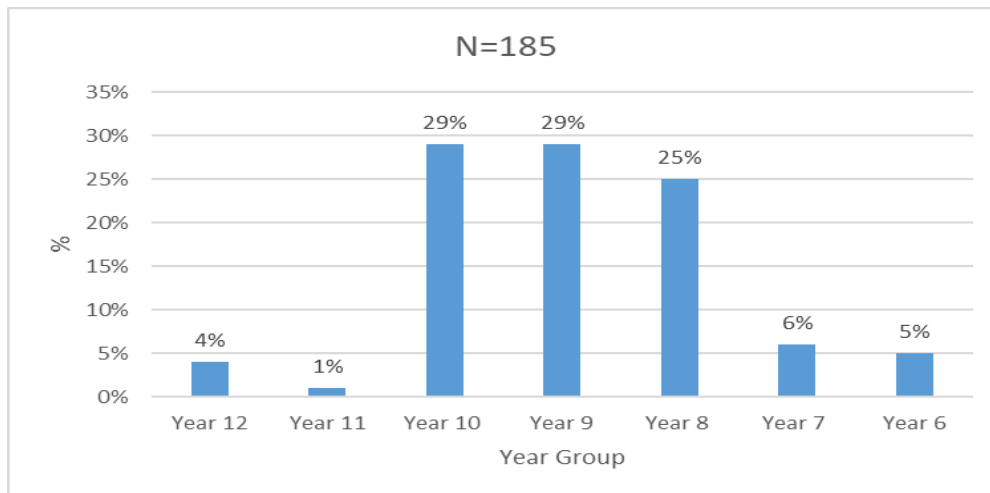
3.1 Throughout June and July 2018, the Medway Public Health team undertook in-depth research as to whether period poverty impacted on school attendance of young girls in Medway. Data and insight was gained from engagement with young people, professionals working with young girls and parents. Evidence was gathered in a variety of ways. This included online surveys and three face to face focus groups with young people. Over 250

local residents and people working with young people took part in the review. Paragraphs 3.2 to 3.6 provide an overview of the key findings.

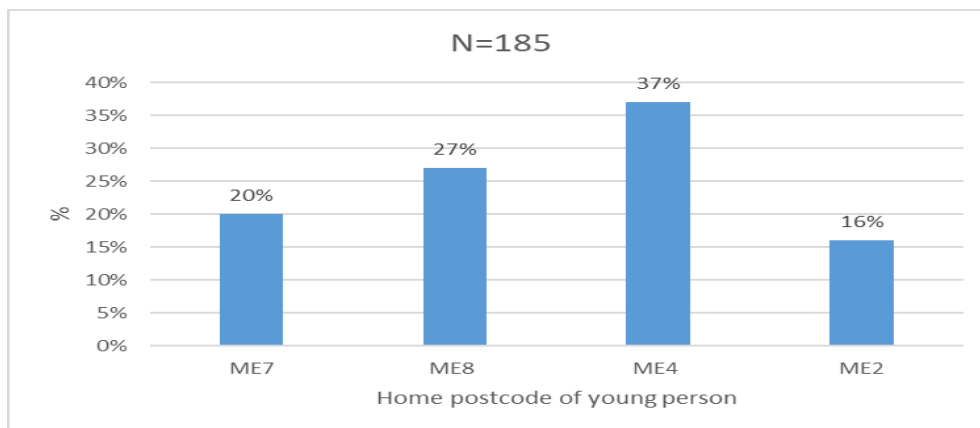
## 3.2 Young Peoples Survey

3.2.1 The young people's survey had 185 responses. Figures 1 and 2 provide an overview of the age and general area of residence (postcode) of the young people who took part in this survey.

**Figure 1** – School year of Period Poverty Young People Survey respondents



**Figure 2** – Postcode of residence Period Poverty Young People Survey Respondents



The research was careful to ensure that young people from all across Medway responded to the consultation and as the graph above demonstrates a significant percentage of respondents were young people from some of our most deprived areas.

3.2.2 Young people were asked directly about whether lack of access to sanitary products, had impacted on their ability or that of a friend/classmates to attend school. Table 1 provides an overview of survey responses. Additional free text comments provided by young people in the online survey have also been included.

**Table 1** Percentage of respondents who said “yes” or “no” to 4 questions concerning availability of sanitary products

Questions	Yes	No
1) Have you had any problems getting hold of sanitary products?	25 (14%)	160 (86%)
2) Have you ever heard of anyone else having problems affording sanitary products?	59 (32%)	126 (68%)
3) Have you ever missed school because you have not had access to any sanitary products?	12 (6%)	173 (94%)
4) Have you heard of anyone else (friends/classmates) missing school because they haven't had access to sanitary products?	36 (19%)	149 (81%)

### 3.2.3 Summary of Comments –

- Many young people commented that products should be cheaper or free;
- There should be help for those people who cannot afford it whether it be young people or adults;
- Schools could be more understanding of girls needs and will often not let girls use the toilet in class time even though sometimes it's really needed; and
- Schools and youth centres should put products in the toilets for people to use.

## 3.3 Young Peoples Focus Groups

3.3.1 Three Focus Groups were held during July run by the Public Health team supported by the Medway Youth Service. These groups were designed to have a more in depth engaging discussion with young people (boys and girls) about their attitudes and experiences.

- 9 July Strood Youth Centre
- 26 July Woodlands Youth Centre
- 3 August Parkwood Youth Centre

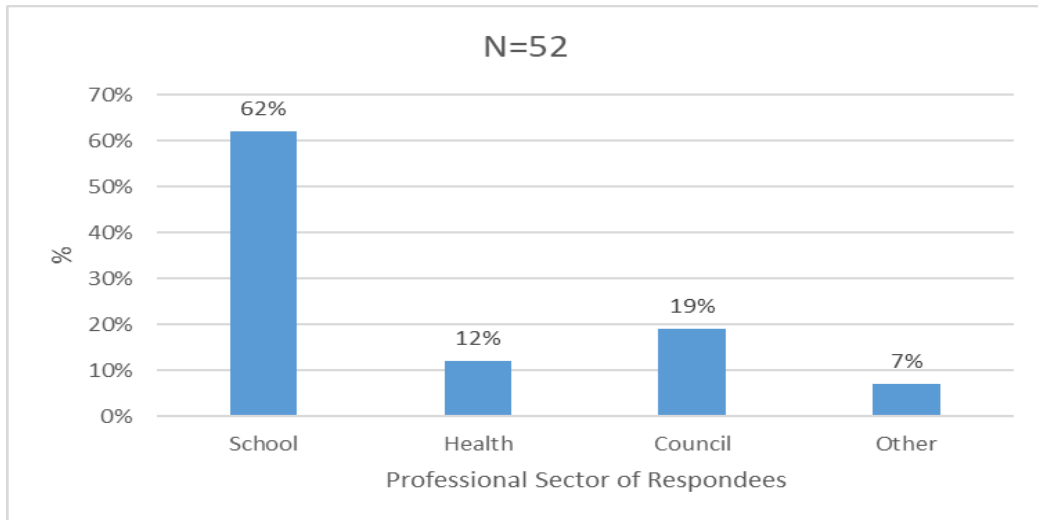
3.3.2 A summary of these focus groups can be found in Appendix 2 but the key themes and findings were:

- There needs to be more done in primary schools to prepare young people for the hormonal changes of puberty;
- Schools could be more flexible with young people about how they access products during the day and could further support young people by having access to things like pain relief and wipes;
- There was a desire for more young people to be willing to talk to each other about and to adults about the challenges of periods including the possibility that a young person may be impacted by period poverty;
- Most felt that they could access products when needed either via friends and family or via places such as schools and youth settings.

### 3.4 Professional Survey

3.4.1 52 responses were received from professionals working across the public and voluntary sector. The breakdown of respondents by professional sector is set out in Figure 3.

**Figure 3** – Breakdown of respondents by professional sector



3.4.2 Professionals were asked a range of questions in relation to their perception of the severity of period poverty within Medway. Figures 4 to 7 provide an overview of responses.

Figure 4 - Are you aware of any issues in your school/setting around period poverty?

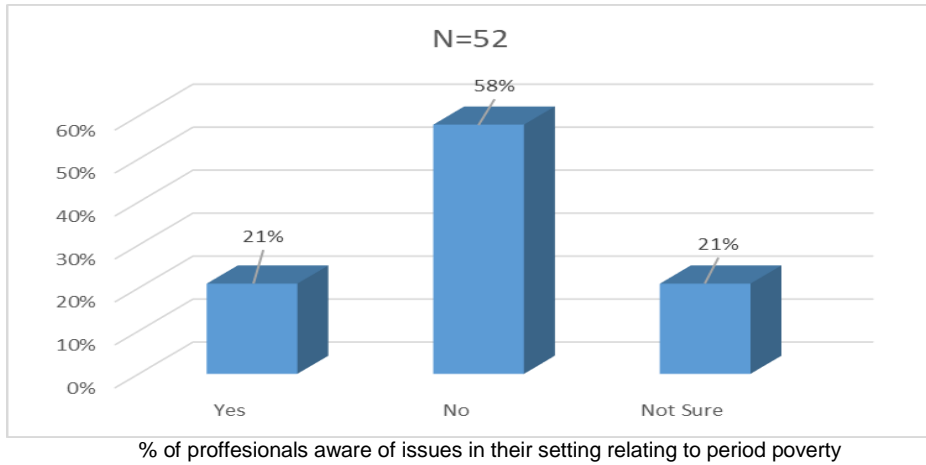


Figure 5 - Have any students in your school been absent due to period poverty?

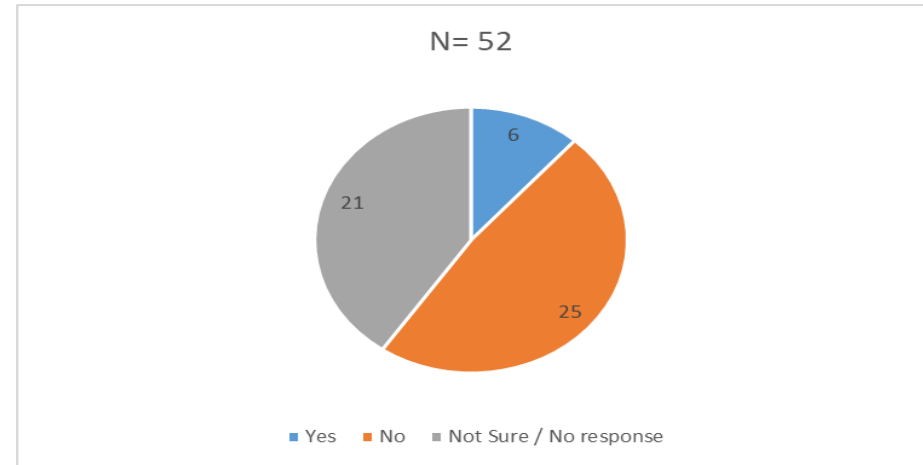


Figure 6 - Does your school/setting offer sanitary products to young people?

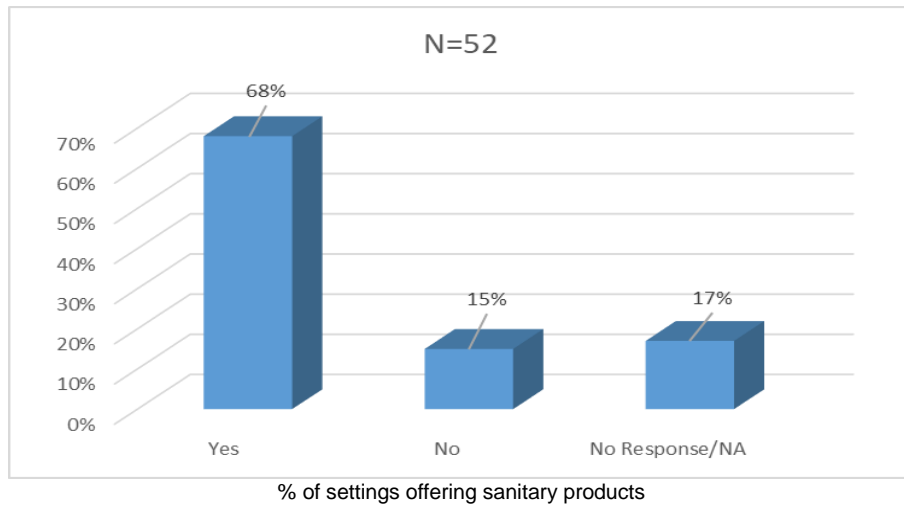
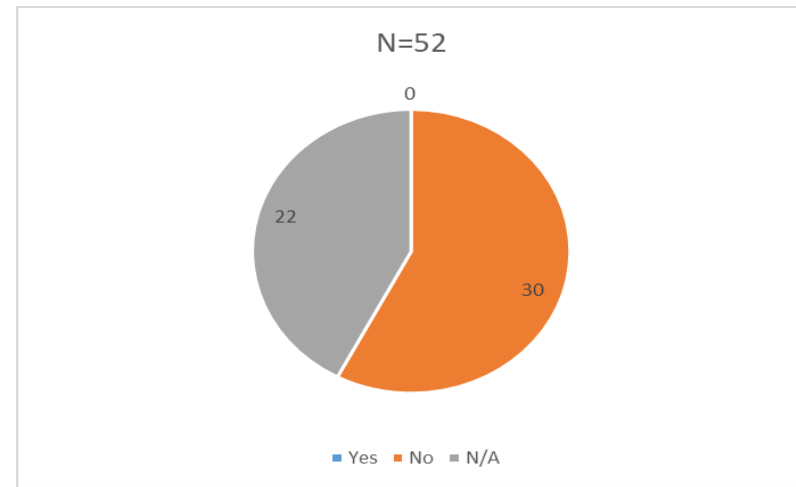


Figure 7 - Does your school receive external support/ funding to provide sanitary products for students?



### **3.5 Other research**

3.5.1 Public Health England (PHE) were contacted to see if they were aware of any work or research nationally that was happening beyond those identified in section 2 of the report. They highlighted the pilot initiative in Scotland to provide free sanitary products to women and girls in low income homes and also clarified that PHE has not produced any focussed insight or analysis on the prevalence of period poverty to date.

### **3.6 Current provision in Medway**

3.6.1 Medway Council through its Public Health Department, already offer a range of support to school aged young girls and people directly working with girls who may be affected by this issue. All Medway schools are able to access Medway Public Health's quality assured Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) schemes of work. These have been produced in partnership with the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Association and cover key stages 1-3. In years 1-2 there is a lesson plan on the human life cycle and the human body. This learning is built on in years 4-5 with lessons on the physical and emotional changes of puberty as well as a lesson on the topic of menstruation and personal hygiene.

3.6.2 This learning is then revisited in year 6 and 7 with a puberty recap lesson and a lesson on how a baby is made. These materials are all available free of charge to schools. The Child Health team also provide teacher training on the safe and effective delivery of RSE, alongside co-facilitation of lessons that teacher's do not feel confident in delivering. Currently 16 out of 17 secondary schools in Medway are delivering PSHE and RSE in some form and nearly 70% of Primary Schools are signed up to delivering RSE.

3.6.3 The local research demonstrates that most of the key points of contact for young people in Medway are proactively supporting the period poverty agenda.

- All Medway Early Help Hubs provide free sanitary products to young people if required;
- Many secondary schools in Medway already offer sanitary products via the 'Red Box' Initiative;
- Medway Foodbanks are also now starting to stock sanitary products; and
- Schools have free access to and some are making use of Public Health assured lesson plans and materials and some are using the specific period resources for Years 5-8.

## **4. Risk management**

4.1 Risk management is an integral part of good governance. The Council has a responsibility to identify and manage threats and risks to achieve its strategic objectives and enhance the value of services it provides to the community. Using the following table this section should therefore consider any significant risks arising from your report.

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk
Validity of research	That the research wasn't comprehensive or representative enough of different groups, ages and geographical areas	A targeted approach to the consultation and survey has ensured a good spread of ages, areas and professions have contributed. The total participants exceeded 250 which is around ¼ of some of the national surveys undertaken meaning it can be deemed as if not more statistically valid in comparison to the population available.

## 5. Consultation

- 5.1 A consultation was launched for professionals working with young people and parents at the end of June 2018 and was open for 8 weeks. This consultation obtained 52 online results and was promoted via social media, mailing lists and word of mouth.
- 5.2 A consultation directly with young people was undertaken in July 2018 and 185 young people responded.
- 5.3 Three Focus Groups were also run by the Public Health Team supported by Medway Youth Service and a further 19 young people in Gillingham, Chatham and Strood.

## 6. Financial implications

- 6.1 There are no direct financial implications arising directly from this report.

## 7. Legal implications

- 7.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

## 8. Conclusions

- 8.1 The research drew out some clear themes from which the Public Health team have drawn the following initial conclusions:
- National research on this subject is underdeveloped with the only three relatively small scale research projects. One survey focused on a single specific secondary school in a deprived area of Leeds, another was funded by a manufacturer of sanitary products. Without access to the original data from these studies (which was requested but not provided) it is difficult to determine whether these findings can be generalised to a wider UK population. It is also the case that without independent confirmation of household income, it is



challenging to identify children who are in period poverty as a direct result of their family being unable to purchase sanitary products (see note of definition of children living in poverty<sup>1</sup>). These facts aside, findings from the Medway specific research, suggests that the prevalence of period poverty in Medway is significantly lower than national studies. There were however a small number of individuals who had issues accessing sanitary products.

- Settings such as schools and Early Help hubs/Youth Centre's are in the main already very proactive in making free products available to students who may require them.
- Materials and lesson plans about educating young people about puberty menstruation and personal hygiene, are in place but could be used better and at an earlier point.
- More materials should be made available to help young people talk about the realities of menstruation rather than just the physical elements arising from puberty.
- Professionals should encourage young people to be more comfortable to speak about periods.

## **9. The way forward**

9.1 Based on the research undertaken by the Public Health team, the following actions are proposed for implementation and will be led by the Public Health Child Health team supported by partners:

- Normalising period's campaign to be co-designed with young people and launched as a tool to promote awareness and good practice across schools and the wider workforce. This will help to reduce the stigma of periods which appears to be a more significant factor impacting on school attendances as opposed to affordability/accessibility of sanitary products within educational settings in Medway.
- Public Health to use this evidence to improve resources and improve uptake of resources through promotion of findings, awareness raising to schools and other settings.
- Adaption of some of the materials and lesson plans available to schools to take on board some of the comments and feedback.

Note: No additional funds will be needed for these actions and Public Health will utilise existing funding and resources within the Child Health team to implement.

## **10. Recommendations**

10.1 The Health and Wellbeing Board is asked to:

- a) note the research undertaken by the Public Health team on the prevalence and impact of period poverty in Medway set out within the report; and
- b) support the actions set out in paragraph 9.1 which will be undertaken by the Public Health team.

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<sup>1</sup> Official definition of children in low income households is - the Number of all dependent children under the age of 20 living in families in receipt of Child Tax Credits (CTC) whose reported income is less than 60 per cent of the median income or in receipt of Income Support (IS) or (Income-Based) Job Seekers Allowance (JSA).

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**Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Key Comments from Survey

Appendix 2 – Focus Group Transcripts

**Background Papers**

Item 970A Full Council 26 April 2018

<https://democracy.medway.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=17939>

## Appendix 1

<b>Professionals Survey - Comments other than Yes or No</b>
<b>1) Are you aware of any issues in your school/organisation around period poverty?</b>
Comments other than yes or no:
I am aware of it, as get patients or their children have not discussed it in clinic.
One pupil finds it difficult to deal with having periods.
1 learner is finding it very difficult to deal with.
No- we sometimes have students asking for products but not often.
Yes- feel there are young girls affected all over Medway
YP often have no sanitary products un clear why this is- could be laziness/disorganised rather than not affording.
Not in particular but period education and normalisation as well as money contribute.
Yes, including managing pain, worries about leaks at schools& what to use.
There must be lots but it's not something that young people like to talk about. We have many families on low incomes, so it must be an issue.
Concerns/Issues is very difficult as they are not open, they feel embarrassed- house support if they wish to talk.
This hasn't been an issue currently
We are aware& have a supply in schools. However we now have a supply from a parent involved with this project.
Some parents not discussing period or products to be used when starting periods.
Yes, we (our pastoral team) deal with this
I work with a small group of young women and at least 2 from the group of 5 have issues with periods.
None that I am aware of.

No, has not been highlighted to me

Many girls do not have sanitary products when they come to school but I do not know if this is because they just don't have them at home or that they forget to bring them to school

Yes we now have implemented the red box scheme with House Managers on hand to support students when the need arises.

## **2) Have any students in your school been absent due to period poverty?**

Not to my knowledge yet.

None

Yes, unsure of exact numbers however at least 3 times a month due to having holes in clothes/shoes/bus fare money

Not that I have worked with

Not that I am aware of.

Not that I'm aware of.

Not that I am aware

Not known

We do have students taking time off for heavy periods or period pains- maybe 2-3 days. Difficult to provide this information.

Yes- has affected the attendance due to pains, / first couple of days.

Yes- around 10 students up to a week at a time.

Yes, couple of days a months.

No, not to our knowledge

Not that I'm aware of.

Yes, 2--3 girls 4 days per pupil.

I am not aware of students not coming to school because they do not have sanitary products but a number of girls are absent because of extremely heavy periods.

**3) Does your school provide sanitary products to students? If so what products do you provide, how are they accessed and at what quantity?**

None of the clinical settings i.e. healthy living centres seem to provide products.

We have resources.

Yes- Available for emergencies. We have used the Belly Bus service within our school.

Yes- sanitary towels through a charity.

Yes Sanitary towels for children who start their period during school time.

Yes- pads on a needs basis.

Yes- supplies left in toilets & replenished regularly. (From school health visit- extra packs are left)

Yes, sanitary towels, school nurse.

Yes, tampons + sanitary towels. Available as + when needed + girls know who/ how to access them/go to.

Yes- Red boxes @ all schools & centres I work in.

Yes. I keep sanitary products in my desk drawer- provide for free. Also have machine in toilets but this will be going- would rather provide for free \* have had incidents where mum can't afford.

Not directly but at Gun Wharf I have seen 'Red Box Project' boxes to receive collections.

We provide a small selection of products that staff buy. As a primary school, girls have not always got themselves organised. They are in a cupboard, the girls can just help themselves if they need them; no questions asked.

Yes if needed we always provide.

We now have a Red Box scheme that staff/visitors can donate to + people in need can take donations

We use to keep emergency supplies. As of last week we now have supplies kindly provided by the 'Red Box' project which has gone down very well already. Clover Street Clinic and Early Help have also shown interest in this wonderful service.

Do supply, if needed or send students home, as they prefer this we have just started using the 'red box'

Yes. Only on the 1st day/so.

Yes- always, as necessary.

They would be if conversation was had with parents of this need.

Yes- to our pupils on request due to age not a huge uptake.

Yes, Sanitary towels, tampons. That are available in our office, also the relevant children have a cosmetic bag readily available. They know where to go where a sanitary bin is available too. The girls are confident and act maturely during these time

Towels, tampons, feminine wipes. Kept in a cupboard in medical room, girls just come to take when they need. Office staff check to replenish stock if needed.

Yes. Sanitary towels via pastoral office supplied by school, purchased at supermarket.

Yes- Sanitary towels etc.

Yes sanitary towels & tampax. Girls are informed who to ask for them (welfare dept)

Yes we give out sanitary products when required.

We have at gun wharf the red box project supply- contributions from staff.

Yes via FLO/Medical room

We have the red box for sanitary product donations.

We have red box

Red Box

Yes we give girls tampons and pads. We also give them clean knickers and tights. They are kept at Student Services. We don't keep a record of how many we give out.

**Does your school receive external support for this? If so please could you provide details?**

Not sure but I know there is arrangement with Red Box Project.

No it's part of our services

The Red Box Project. We have the most amazing sexual health nurse who is happy to talk to students about periods. As of Tuesday, they should have received their crate from the Red Box Project.

School Nurse Sexual Nurse 'red box charity'

We contact school nurses

Teachers/staff bring in for personal use but will provide for children when needed.

**Further Comments:**

I would definitely like to know more about period poverty. As most of the information/resources is directed at school health.

Government should provide sanitary products to all young women, especially those still in education.

We need to overcome period poverty. Look into providing sanitary items- free of charge in schools alongside contraception initiative.

Really glad to see that this is being focussed on. Are links being made with the foodbank network?

It's something not spoken about in schools but it must be affecting attendance and self-esteem. Any help is helpful and appreciated.

It's a much needed scheme :)

Sanitary products should be available to young girls in the same way as young people can access condoms.

It would be a good idea for the Health Teams to supply schools with sanitary products for families on universal credit.

Schools to be supplied free sanitary products for those who need it.

I would be interested in knowing more about issues and problems. Is there a ' Public Health Champions module on this?

They should be free so they don't feel embarrassed when asking for towels.

This hasn't ever really been highlighted as a problem locally

## Appendix 2

### Period Poverty focus group #1

Venue: Strood Youth Centre

Date: Monday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2018

Demographic: 8 young girls- one year 6 and 7 year 8

Question: **What is period poverty?**

Feedback:

- 'Unsure'
- One person has heard of it but not confident to say

Question: **Who do you think may be affected?**

Feedback:

- People in Africa are probably affected

Question: **Do you know if anyone you know suffers from period poverty?**

Feedback:

- Friend had a day off as she was embarrassed to go to school, there were lots of reasons why she didn't go, she was worried about people laughing, her pad might move, blood coming through her dress. She was okay after a few days
- Haven't heard of anybody has been off because they didn't have anything or couldn't get something

Question: **Do you know who to go to in school about the issue if there is a problem? And do you know if your school has sanitary products if girls need them?**

Feedback:

- Poster on the door of the toilet (Strood Academy)- and available from student services
- Who would ask for them? You'd be embarrassed
- I have no idea where I would go
- Teacher at school (Gordon Road) is great and has a load in her draw
- One girl started at school wouldn't go to school as teacher is a boy, she didn't feel comfortable talking about it.
- Everyone said they would be embarrassed to speak to teacher. They would speak to a friend.

Question: **How can we help those who are affected by it? And what products would be helpful to be provided (Underwear etc.)?**

Feedback:

- Give free or spare things/buy a pack and get another one free
- Put them in the bath room, would be better not to have to ask for them
- Wipes, pads, tampons, bags, flushable wipes would be great
- Some school uniforms have light skirts and are really embarrassing for girls on their period we worry about it showing all the time

Question: **Where did you learn/find out about periods?**

Feedback:

- Book, school, mum, friends mostly, found it out by themselves.
- Year 6s not been told yet and that's too late
- It's like secondary assumed we already know. They expect us to know about it.
- Found it hard to concentrate in the lessons.
- Difficult to learn about it
- Would prefer to be told over a week or so not just one lesson



## Period Poverty focus group #2

Venue: Woodlands Youth Centre

Date: Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> July 2018

Demographic: 4 girls (14-17) and 4 Boys (14-17)

Question: **What is period poverty?**

Feedback:

- 2 girls were aware of the term and explained it as 'like choosing food over period products'
- It's when you can't afford to buy stuff and have to borrow from friends

Question: **Who do you think may be affected?**

Feedback:

- Not sure don't have any examples of it in their schools or with their friends
- Some felt it was something that was mainly in poorer countries

Question: **Does anyone you know suffer from period poverty?**

Feedback:

- Not that we know of

Question: **Do you know who to go to in school about the issue if there is a problem? And do you know if your school has sanitary products if girls need them?**

Feedback:

- They all knew about the Redbox initiative
- Yes all of the schools and colleges we attend provide them if needed
- Would normally go to the school office but sometimes it's embarrassing it would be easier to put them in toilets
- Would normally just ask friend for one
- One girls said her dad would happily buy them for her

Question: **How can we help those who are affected by it?**

Feedback:

- All schools to have a red box that you can access without asking
- Encourage girls to share products

Question: **What products would be helpful to be provided?**

- Usually only Tampons available but lots of people use pads and other products so they also need to be available
- Would be useful to have painkillers and heat pads as well for when it's painful

Question: **Where did you learn/find out about periods?**

Feedback:

- Mum told us about it
- Schools in year 6 and 7 but it didn't prepare us for what it would be like (embarrassment/pain/hormones etc.) it was all just about the bleeding and nothing else.
- Need to have more openness about it and better conversations in year 5 and 6.
- Boys also need to know (2 boys agreed and 2 boys said they didn't need to know about it)
- One of the boys could articulately explain what periods were to the group
- Two boys at single sex school didn't learn about periods at all
- All of the group felt products should be free like condoms and had heard of the Tampon Tax debate and disagreed about how much products cost

### Period Poverty focus group #3

Venue: Parkwood Youth Centre

Date: Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2018

Demographic: 3 14/15 year old girls

Question: **What is period poverty?**

Feedback:

- Don't know not heard of it before

Question: **Who do you think may be affected?**

Feedback:

- Not sure

Question: **Does anyone you know suffer from period poverty?**

Feedback:

- Not that we know of

Question: **Do you know who to go to in school about the issue if there is a problem? And do you know if your school has sanitary products if girls need them?**

Feedback:

- Yes, go to year office at school and they will give you products.
- You have to ask and younger years find it embarrassing.
- There is info on school notice board so people know where to go.
- School gives out little packs from Always, containing sanitary towels and tampons

Question: **How can we help those who are affected by it?**

Feedback:

- Make more free products available
- Teach more in schools

Question: **What products would be helpful to be provided?**

- We don't really need to know about other products (cups, reusable ) as regular products are easier to find

Question: **Where did you learn/find out about periods?**

- Learnt from parents, didn't get taught in school.
- One girl said she was taught in year 6
- Should be more important in schools
- Natural to girls but boys have a negative view about periods. They should learn about them too
- Should be regular lessons spread out so you feel comfortable and have the opportunity to ask questions
- Products should be free!