

Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council

Call for evidence - Period Products (Free Provision) Bill

December 2021

1. Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence regarding Period Poverty. The information contained in this report has not been considered by Council given the timescale for response. However, this issue has previously been discussed by the Council and it is supportive of how it can contribute to easing Period Poverty.

There are three main issues when considering the issue of period poverty in Lisburn and Castlereagh:

- Supporting Northern Ireland-wide campaigns to have free sanitary products for all who need them
- Supporting initiatives at a local level to alleviate period poverty
- Supporting the breaking down of barriers of period stigma and providing inclusive education in raising awareness of period dignity

2. The first issue is a campaign to gain acceptance that sanitary products should be available free of charge for all women. There is a high cost implication for this but campaigners would suggest that this should fall to central government to fund and administer, like its UK counterparts. The Council input continues to lobby government and support campaign bodies.

3. The second issue is more local and provides the Council with a number of opportunities to contribute to alleviating period poverty. A number of independent Community Centres in Lisburn and Castlereagh already provide products either in baskets in the toilets or discreetly with centre management, although this is not replicated in all Centres. The cost is borne by individual centres or on the goodwill of staff.

4. Breaking down the barriers and providing inclusive education may fall substantially to the education sector, however all public authorities have a duty to support women in period poverty with sensitivity and kindness.

The results of some research carried out by the Council in the last number of months have shown that:

1. It is difficult to assess whether people are in financial stress by their attendance at Council facilities. People may visit Council premises to keep warm or to keep up an appearance of normality when they are unable to afford basic necessities such as sanitary products.
2. There is a concern that if sanitary products were made available in Council toilets and changing areas, they could be used by anyone and would not necessarily benefit those who could least afford to buy them. However evidence from colleagues in other Councils has shown that the provision of

free products is generally not abused and those in need are being supported in an anonymous and inconspicuous way.

3. If products were only made freely available behind reception desks or in stores, some young women may feel stigmatised at having to ask for them.
 4. There is no way of knowing the likely uptake of such a scheme or its potential effectiveness in tackling period poverty.
5. A number of pharmacies across the Council area currently run schemes similar to those operated by food banks whereby customers buy additional products and leave them in a dedicated box or basket to be distributed to local period poverty charities. This again relies on the goodwill of customers and staff.
6. Council officers have researched the estimated cost of implementing a programme across all premises, which is difficult to accurately predict as this is previously untested. Best estimates are:
- If the Council was to provide free products in all the existing sanitary ware vending machines in each ladies' washroom across its premises, the cost is likely to be in the region of £15,000/£20,000 a year.
 - If the Council were to provide free products in each cubicle, there would be a one off cost for the dispensers of almost £6,000.
7. In summary, the Council is keen to support:
- Food Banks, churches, charities and other related groups to back the introduction of a national programme to combat period poverty;
 - subject to government funding, support a scheme whereby free sanitary products are made available at all public facilities;
 - continue to raise awareness of hygiene and period poverty and work with all appropriate agencies and organisations; and
 - break down the barriers of period stigma and provide inclusive education in raising awareness of period dignity.