

Divisions Affected - All

CABINET – 18 July 2024

Period Poverty Scheme Trial

Report by Executive Director of Resources & Section 151 Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. **Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to**
 - a) Approve the allocation of the £10,000 from the cost-of-living programme funding for a trial scheme of period products to support residents experiencing period poverty.
 - b) Note the update on progress made on the Period Poverty motion approved by Council on 12 September 2023.

Executive Summary

2. Since the period poverty motion was approved by Council in September 2023, a cross organisational officer working group has been established to consider the scope for a trial period poverty scheme in Oxfordshire. A number of options have been considered for provision for residents for both disposable and reusable products, as well as for council employees.
3. Cabinet is recommended to proceed with a trial using the £10,000 funding from cost-of-living work to establish the scale and uptake of period products for residents. The trial will offer both disposable and reusable products, with the aim of assessing demand and preferences for different types of period product and the most appropriate locations to access them. The trial will also collect feedback to inform future provision and understand long term budget requirements.

Background

4. Period poverty is a term that refers to the inability of individuals to access menstrual products, due to financial constraints, limited availability, or stigma preventing them from seeking the essential products they need.
5. In 2023, ActionAid¹ found that 21% of people who need period products were struggling to afford them, this was up from 12% in 2022. They also found that 27% of 18–24-year-olds who need them experience period poverty, making

¹ [UK Period poverty rises from 12 to 21% | ActionAid UK](#)

them the worst affected age group. Of those affected by period poverty, 41% kept sanitary pads or tampons in for longer, and 8% re-used disposable pads. 37% said they had used tissues or cotton wool instead of sanitary products in the last 12 months. 13% used socks or other clothing, and 9% resorted to using paper or newspaper.

6. In September 2023, a motion on period poverty was passed unanimously by Council. The motion asked Cabinet to:
 - Look into a period pant scheme, akin to reusable nappy schemes, to help with the costly purchase of more climate friendly products for all ages.
 - Promote the national school period product scheme to all Oxfordshire schools and monitor gaps in uptake.
 - Make free Menstrual products accessible in every council owned building in the county.
7. A cross council working group was formed in late 2023, to consider a cohesive and coordinated response to all elements of the motion. The group is comprised of representatives from Partnerships and Delivery, Public Health, Education, Facilities Management, Libraries, Waste Strategy and Circular Economy and is led by the Policy team.
8. There are a number of council buildings that already have existing provision. Didcot and Abingdon libraries currently supply period products, however these are organised and donated by a local organisation, All Yours. The Council currently only supports this scheme in terms of hosting the boxes and handing them out when requested by residents, it has not supported the scheme financially.
9. In May 2024, Cabinet [approved £10,000 of funding from the cost-of-living programme](#) to support the motion and allow for one off provision of period products to help assess demand for future resourcing decisions.
10. Research has shown that most other councils across the UK that offer free period products primarily distribute them through libraries. Local authorities in Scotland and Wales have a responsibility to provide products, as well as funding from their devolved administrations, meaning their schemes are often large in scope and scale. In Northern Ireland, period products are also now available in all libraries. Local authorities in England with period poverty schemes tend to offer products on a smaller scale often at only one or two locations.

Response to the Motion - Reusable Products

11. Prior to the motion, the Waste and Circular Economy team had already been considering best ways to promote reusable period products. They are currently working with students at Oxford Brookes University who will be trialling different reusable period products and writing blogs and articles on their experiences to promote reusables in Oxfordshire.

12. The reusable nappy scheme allows parents to borrow, trial, and then return the products, and there is no evidence that a similar scheme is desired by residents in relation to period products. Research has not found any scheme like this operating in the UK, and where trials have existed, they have given away free products rather than lending them. A loan scheme also would not help with covering the cost of purchasing the products, therefore mirroring the reusable nappy scheme is not recommended.
13. The working group and Waste Team have instead investigated options to directly distribute reusable products to those most in need. It is proposed that this element of the motion be incorporated into the approach of providing free menstrual products to residents.

Response to the Motion - Period Product Scheme for Schools

14. The national school period product scheme is currently available for schools until 'at least July 2024'. It has already been promoted to all Oxfordshire schools via the School News Newsletter. Further communication will be timed with the wider period poverty programme, so that additional resources such as access points for free period products, and any reusables schemes, can be promoted.
15. The Department for Education (DfE) has confirmed that since its launch in January 2020, 99% of secondary schools have ordered products using the scheme. A Freedom of Information request to DfE has confirmed that in Oxfordshire 97% of secondary schools have purchased products for their students through the scheme between September 2020 and July 2023. Data for uptake on the scheme after September 2023 is not currently available.

Response to the Motion - Free Menstrual Products in all Oxfordshire County Council Buildings

16. To run a successful trial to identify demand, it is recommended to distribute products in areas that are public facing and will be close to residents in need. It is proposed to prioritise trialling the scheme in Oxfordshire County Council buildings that serve residents in areas of deprivation, and support residents who are more likely to be experience financial difficulty. The need of council employees has also been considered.
17. Data on uptake of products, both from members of the public in other period poverty schemes and in office buildings, has been challenging to find. Other local authorities that have been spoken to either do not have data available on uptake or has used donations to fulfil products. This has at times led to the products running out and not being available to residents at times of need. Therefore, the trial is proposed to help understand what provision and need will look like in the long-term.

Providers

18. Two main provider options have been identified for supplying period products, offering the simplest and most beneficial choices for provision. An options appraisal has been undertaken on providers to recommend which one to take forward for the trial. Considering the merits of both providers, it is recommended that Hey Girls are used for the period poverty product scheme trial.
19. Hey Girls, a social enterprise, are the self-proclaimed 'experts in best practice for distribution of free products to the public sector' and supply over 80 councils. They work within a range of budgets and supply the majority of Welsh and Scottish councils with their products, and a small number of English authorities. As well as offering bespoke packages, Hey Girls offer training to employees on location where products are provided for the public via a train the trainer model – to increase confidence and education in period products. Hey Girls also offer reusable products.

Locations

20. A wide range of locations have been considered for residents, and employee provision in council buildings, these have been organised into tiers to consider different costs and levels of scale.
21. For the public provision of period products, libraries have been identified as the most suitable locations for the trial. Libraries offer a range of services to residents, they are also centrally located and scattered across the county, making them accessible and convenient for a large number of residents. Additionally, libraries have employees and volunteers who are adept at handling sensitive conversations and provide discreet and respectful services to residents in need. Children and Family Centres have also been considered as potential locations for the public provision of period products, as they cater to residents with higher needs. Products will be evenly distributed to all libraries and children and family centres initially, with the ability to redistribute products if certain locations have high uptake than others.
22. For the trial, it is recommended that the period products will be available in whole packs. This is because someone who is experiencing period poverty will need a number of products to supply them for a month, rather than a handful of products which may only last a day. To reduce stigma associated with periods and in particular period poverty, the products will be accessible on open shelves to anyone who needs them, without the need to request them. Library staff will be trained to have conversations with residents about period poverty, as well as the different products and how to use them safely.
23. It is also recommended that reusable cups, including sterilisation pots, and reusable pads are on offer as part of the trial. These reusable products have been selected as the most accessible and easy to use and offer a more one size fits all approach than period pants. Due to their cost, there will be fewer reusable products on offer than disposables, but the uptake of reusables versus disposables will be monitored as part of the trial to understand where

need is. As well as being environmentally sustainable, reusable products are financially sustainable. Whilst they do have a higher initial cost point, they are designed to last between 5-10 years, so could provide substantial support to someone experiencing period poverty, helping them through up to 130 periods.

24. In Oxfordshire County Council office buildings, it is recommended that disposable period products are provided in larger office building bathrooms, for employees to use whilst they are at work.

25. The below table considers the indicative costs at different locations for a trial lasting up to a year.

Tier	Public or Employee Provision	Buildings	Indicative Cost for 1 Year
Tier A	Public	8 libraries in, or serving, residents in our ten priority areas of deprivation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abingdon • Banbury • Barton • Blackbird Leys • Botley • Oxford Westgate • Littlemore • Woodgreen 	Each library to have 240 packets of Hey Girls product to take a year, 20 packs a month – most basic option of pad and tampons: £276 per location £2,207 total
Tier B	Public	10 additional larger site libraries which are fully staffed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bicester • Cowley • Didcot • Headington • Henley • Kidlington • Summertown • Thame • Wantage • Witney 	Each library to have 240 packets of Hey Girls product to take a year, 20 packs a month – most basic option of pad and tampons: £276 per location £2,759 total
Tier C	Public	All other 26 Oxfordshire Libraries	Each library to have 120 packets of Hey Girls product to take a year, 10 packs a month – most basic option of pad and tampons: £138 per location £3,587 total

Tier D	Public	8 Childrens and Family Centres: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abingdon • Banbury • Barton • Bicester • The Leys • Didcot • Rosehill • Witney 	Each Children and Family Centre to have 240 packets of Hey Girls product to take a year, 20 packs a month – most basic option of pad and tampons: £138 per location £2,207 total
Tier E	Employee	Significant OCC Office buildings with 100 employees/desks or more <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County Hall • Samuelson House • Ron Groves House Offices & Kidlington Library 	Estimated 1000-4000 products a year Hey Girls cost: 500 pads £41.25 500 tampons £77.45 Between £119 – £475 a year
Tier F	Employee	Significant OCC Office buildings with up to 100 employees/desks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mount House • Holton Park Libraries • Westgate Library • Barton End Office • Rewley Road Fire Station • Union Street • Didcot Children’s Centre 	Estimated 250 – 1000 products a year Hey Girls cost: Up to £119 on top of Tier E
Tier G	Employee	78 additional buildings with fewer employees on location	Estimated 750 – 3000 products a year Hey Girls cost: Up to £356 additional to Tier E
Tier H	Public	Reusable products available at the 8 libraries in Tier A	100 reusable products available, 50 cups and sterilising pots, 50 packs of 5x pads. Hey Girl cost: £1,549

26. It is therefore recommended that provision for the period poverty product trial covers Tier A, Tier B, Tier D, Tier E, Tier F and Tier H – leading to a total initial cost of £8,960.

27. The remaining £1,040 will be spent on marketing costs and be available to replenish products during the trial if they run out.

Monitoring and Evaluation

28. The period poverty product trial will be monitored and evaluated ensuring data is collected to track the uptake of products at different locations, feedback will also be sought from residents who use the products. The data will include the number and type of products distributed, the frequency and timing of replenishment, and feedback from service users and employees. This will help to understand the level of need and demand for period products in different areas, as well as the impact of the trial on the wellbeing and dignity of those who access them. The data will also inform the long-term budget provision and planning for the continuation of the scheme beyond the trial period.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

29. The period poverty trial scheme supports Oxfordshire County Council's Strategic Plan to tackle inequalities, support the health and wellbeing of residents, put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work, and support children, young people and families to reach their full potential.

Financial Implications

30. The £10,000 funding from the cost-of-living programme was approved by Cabinet on 14 May 2024. The trial therefore already has funding secured and will not incur any additional costs. The trial will help the council understand period product provision for Oxfordshire and allow for a proposal to be put forward in the 2025/2026 budget for long-term provision to alleviate period poverty.
31. As set out in the Contract Procedure Rules the procurement threshold is £25,000 so this does not require a full procurement process. However, the expectation is that value for money and social value will be maximised through the chosen supplier.

Comments checked by:

Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance and Deputy Section 151 Officer,
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Legal Implications

32. The Council will need to enter into a contract for the supply of the period products, but there are no other legal implications arising from the report.

Comments checked by:

Paul Grant, Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer,
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Staff Implications

33. The trial will be delivered within existing council resources.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

34. The trial period poverty product scheme is expected to have positive impacts on all communities and protected characteristics, as products will be accessible in public spaces to anyone who needs them. The aim of the trial is primarily to support residents who experience inequalities in Oxfordshire, and in particular to meet the needs of our most economically disadvantaged residents. Access to period products will support the dignity of residents and ensure they are not excluded from attending school, work or sport and social activities on account of period poverty.

Sustainability Implications

35. The trial period poverty product scheme has considered sustainability implications, by ensuring provision of reusable period products. These products can reduce the amount of waste generated by single-use items and save money for users in the long term. In addition, the recommended provider uses sustainably sourced disposable products to minimise environmental impacts.

Risk Management

36. There are no risks arising directly from this report.

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