

Written evidence submitted by Bloody Good Period [RCW0027]

Note

Before we provide evidence to this Inquiry, we feel we must address the inadequate term “women” used in this call for evidence.

We know that it is not just cis-women experiencing the gendered impact of the cost of living crisis, but also trans people, non-binary people and gender-diverse persons. We also know that trans people especially are feeling the impact of the cost of living crisis due to the marginalisation they are already facing ([Pink News, 2022](#)). Whilst the cost-of-living crisis is heavily gendered, this has little to do with the sex you were assigned at birth, but rather your role in society and the gendered expectations placed on you as an individual.

Therefore, throughout this evidence, we will use the term ‘people who menstruate’, and other gender-neutral terms, alongside women. This specific, targeted language benefits everyone - allowing the correct support and services to be provided to whoever it is relevant to. This approach serves to reduce the grave disparities in the lives and well-being of transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse individuals.

Who We Are: Bloody Good Period

Bloody Good Period is a UK-based charity that fights for menstrual equity and the rights of all people who bleed. We believe that no one should be at a disadvantage just because they menstruate. Many refugees, people in the asylum system and those living in poverty simply cannot afford period products. People who menstruate also suffer because of the culture of embarrassment, stigma and shame that exists around this natural, biological process.

We give period products to those who can't afford them and provide menstrual education to those less likely to access it. And we help everybody talk about periods. We have partnered with more than 100 organisations around the country, helping women and people who menstruate have bloody good periods.

Through our Bloody Good Employers (BGE) initiative, we have set our sights on UK workplaces. Based on 2021 research with both employers and employees, which showed a need for change and open conversations about menstruation in the workplace, we now have a year-long training and accreditation programme. This program is already driving huge change to improve the lives of people at work, nationwide.

The evidence we will provide to this inquiry is derived from our own research and data, information and data from stakeholders within our network and qualitative data from the people who access our services (this has been anonymised). We hope in publishing the evidence for this inquiry, considerate steps will be taken to tackle the additional barriers and disparities that exist for people who menstruate.

1. How are rising food, energy, housing, and other costs affecting women compared to men?

Everyone who menstruates has a regular, additional cost when caring for their periods and health - i.e. period products (which are essential, not an optional luxury). As the cost of everyday items continues to soar, people who menstruate are being forced to make increasingly difficult decisions about which everyday essentials they can buy. The cost-of-living crisis has only accelerated this problem - with period poverty rising from 12% to 21% between 2022 and 2023 ([Action Aid, 2023](#)).

One in five people who menstruate (21%) in the UK are struggling to afford period products. This amounts to an estimated 2.8 million people - a million more than the year before ([ActionAid, 2023](#)). We are seeing this increase translate into our work with community partners across England and Wales: in 2023, we have seen a 43% increase in the number of product requests we received each month, from 42,909 packs of products requested Jan-June 2022, to 61,160 packs requested Jan-June 2023. Due to this unprecedented level of need, we currently have 80 organisations on our waiting list, whom we do not currently have the resources to help.

Action Aid found that 60% of those unable to afford period products had to prioritise food and 48% gas and electricity bills over period products ([ActionAid, 2023](#)). This places an exceptional burden on people who menstruate, especially as they are often the main caregivers and oversee household budgets. This means that they often have to prioritise between essential household costs needed for good health and well-being. As one of our service recipients stated:

"The cost of living crisis is crazy is a nightmare because now are you thinking about your period products or are you thinking about food? So in a family that has like the mom and three girls that are menstruating. Tell me how this mom is gonna buy for herself, buy for the three girls? She will save that money she would use to buy the product and buy food because you need to pay the electricity bill, you need to pay a gas bill, you need to pay your telephone bill when you think about the bills and the bills. Like someone like me, sometimes I have to skip my meals to put food on the table for my kids."

Since 2022 prices for period products have been increased by up to 57% ([The Grocer, 2022](#)). As an organisation, we have felt the impact of these rising costs when delivering products to the people we work with. The cost of a case of pads (our most frequently requested product) has increased by 9% this year, and tampons by 4%. This means that whereas a typical order for a community partner (250x packs each of day, day maxi, night and night maxi pads) cost £1,331 in April 2022, it now costs £1,556 in October 2023: a 17% increase. These price rises have an even more dramatic impact on individuals and households, who cannot access discounts for buying in bulk - on top of impacting the charities aiming to help them.

Unequal Access

Access to period products mirrors other societal inequalities, meaning that as household income decreases an inability to access period products increases. The expense of period products is a specifically pertinent problem for individuals from low-income and minoritised backgrounds, as this further widens already existing gaps.

Regional access is also an issue when accessing period products. Whilst cheaper period products are not suitable for everyone due to their low quality which can often lead to irritation, and the need to change more regularly; they are also not available to everyone. These products are often only available in larger supermarkets and retailers. Therefore if you're not able to afford the fare to travel to one of these larger retailers, or there are no large retailers in your local area, low-cost products are often inaccessible.

This issue is magnified for those accessing products via Foodbanks, as one of our Experts by Experience Forum members¹ - who have lived experience of the UK asylum system - explained:

“We're given £8 or £9 a week for you to live on; we need food and we have all of these things that we need to buy, and period products are not cheap. Also, the transport for us to get to the food banks, as I know that someone may say 'why not go to the food banks?' - but the transport and the distance for you to go to a food bank and get a product? It's not that easy.”

2. What long-term effects will the rise in the cost-of-living have on equalities for women?

Health and Wellbeing

A lack of access to period products puts people in impossible situations and forces those who menstruate to take on unhealthy behaviours when menstruating. In a 2023 report by Action Aid, survey respondents explained how they manage their periods:

- 41% used pads or tampons for longer than recommended
- 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 ([Action Aid, 2023](#)).

Overusing products or using inappropriate alternatives can have far-reaching impacts on people's health and wellbeing - including the risk of irritation and infection, and also potentially fatal Toxic Shock Syndrome I. Without access to readily available, free period products we cannot expect people who menstruate to have healthy periods.

¹ Our EBE forum brings together 9 people who have lived experience of the asylum process and have experienced difficulty in accessing period products and/or menstrual healthcare for financial reasons. The forum comes together 8 times a year, in a safe and comfortable environment, to discuss how we can better improve our services and organisation and co-design a campaign for change in menstrual provision.

Our work demonstrates that period product provision helps to reduce the stress, worry and shame that can come from having limited financial resources, as well as dealing with the practicalities of heavy blood loss, irregular cycles and leaking through clothing. As some of our partners and service recipients have stated:

"I have a heavy period, I go through period products with so much ease"

"Your package of period products has arrived today and it has really made a huge difference to our service as well as all of the individual women. Not only has this improved the overall mood, it has also got us talking about more sustainable products such as the moon cups you provide."

"Please thank the people who give us these pads. They are making our stress less and our happiness flow."

"I'm undergoing kidney stones problems and having to wear tena discreet extra plus all the time as I have 2 stents in place. With 1 large stone on left and 1 large stone on the right. I have only just been covering the cost of these due to being on ESA. Your donation helped me a lot. Thanks"

We know from the people who we work with that period poverty severely impacts a person's confidence and ability to participate fully in society, to devastating effect. Having access to period products encourages social participation, as well as enabling people to care for their bodies and manage limited financial resources. Having access to these products also provides individuals with the security and comfort they need to be able to leave their accommodation, and not feel isolated. As our partners have noted:

"Women would not leave their hotel or home when menstruating if not for the pads and tampons that BGP provide."

"We appreciate all your donations you have given women back the confidence to go out and live without fear of their natural bodily occurrence each month."

Participation

The simple fact of having a period shapes people's participation in their social, professional and personal lives. The shame and stigma attached to periods and the silence that surrounds them affect how those who menstruate partake in daily activities; typically inhibiting their ability to learn, work, exercise and move through public spaces.

In our 2022 report with Discover AI ([Discover AI and BGP, 2022](#)), we uncovered that for most people who menstruate, periods are "at best, an often unpredictable everyday stressor". For those who menstruate, constant considerations are being made about how to navigate public spaces, the healthcare system, education, employment, caring responsibilities and so much

more. This is evidenced by the fact that 25% of those who menstruate report missing social activities while on their periods and 39% report missing exercise ([ActionAid, 2023](#)).

Not being able to afford or access period products also has long-standing consequences for people's participation in the workforce and education. This either results in individuals removing themselves from the workplace and education, or means that individuals are physically present, but are performing below their optimal capacity due to fear of leaking; often accompanied by negative feelings of shame and self-blaming thoughts in menstruating individuals ([Shoep et al., 2019](#)), which inevitably takes a toll on bodies, livelihoods and health outcomes.

We know that young people are most likely to feel the impact of a lack of access to period products. Among 18-24-year-olds, more than a quarter (27%) are unable to afford period products ([Action Aid, 2023](#)). This leads one in three menstruating students to miss school because of their period ([commissioned by Irise International, In Kind Direct, Freedom4Girls, Bloody Good Period and Cysters, 2023](#)), that's almost 150,000 lessons being missed every year ([Irise, 2023](#)).

3. How effectively is the Government's cost of living response helping women to meet the costs of essentials?

The UK Government has acknowledged that period poverty in the UK is a problem. But unlike the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, the UK Government has made little progress in funding significant increases in free period product provision. This lack of support is magnified by the reduction in state support being offered to individuals as the cost of living is increasing.

No new policy or provision around period products has been introduced since early 2021, despite growing demand across multiple parts of society, not just those mentioned above. The Government pledged to invest £250,000 into finding solutions to period poverty in the UK, and an additional £2 million in funding period products and education on periods worldwide. Yet it is still not known how or if this money has been spent or allocated.

Currently, there is limited support for adults struggling to afford menstrual healthcare (including products and prescriptions). This includes:

- **The removal of VAT from some period products (January 2021).** The Tampon Tax was abolished in 2021, with the intention - recently confirmed by the Treasury to campaigner Laura Coryton - that period products would be made more affordable and accessible. However, this has not happened. [This report](#) by the Tax Policy Associates shows that at least 80%, if not all, of the savings were retained by retailers, meaning that consumers never received the benefit of the Tampon Tax Removal.

Even if savings had been passed on, they would now have been wiped out by the rise in inflation. The rising cost of period products not only affects the ability of women, girls and people who menstruate to buy these essential items; it means that charities are finding it

increasingly difficult to purchase the number of products needed to meet the demand - which is at record levels because of the prolonged and severe cost of living crisis.

- **The free provision of products in hospitals for patients (2019) and to people in custody (2019);** the efficacy and extensiveness of these schemes are unknown as no review has been published. However, [a recent article by BBC News](#) highlighted the lack of access to period products available to patients in NHS psych wards.
- **For young people in schools or colleges, there is the [Period Product scheme](#);** the efficacy of this scheme is limited as sign-up is optional. Despite the Scheme's evaluations of itself showing success, in 2021 almost half of respondents (46%) haven't accessed period products at their school or college, and almost a third (32%) haven't been able to because they weren't available. The disparity in evaluation is due to the fact the Scheme's evaluation focuses on distribution and not impact as service recipients and schools did not input. We have been contacted by several schools who are unaware of the scheme or who say the allocation is simply not sufficient to meet everyone's needs.
- **For refugees and asylum seekers, a specific benefit allocation is available.** Refugee and Asylum seekers in the UK receive £13 a year towards "feminine hygiene" products (tampons, towels, panty liners, incontinence liners/pads). There is no data on the effectiveness of this provision but our work indicates that it is simply not effective, and the costs of period products as outlined above show that the financial provision is far from sufficient. o refugee and asylum seekers with access to public funds.

Yet despite all of these schemes almost a third of girls, young women and people who menstruate in the UK are still unable to access these necessities ([The Guardian, 2022](#)). It is clear our Government's current approach is insufficient in supporting individuals to obtain these basic health necessities.

4. What could the Government Equalities Office do to ensure the Government's cost-of-living measures respond to any inequalities women face?

Period products should be freely available - and they should be accompanied by education, normalisation, practical support and legislation to ensure our society is set up to support periods, the menstrual cycle and menopause.

We know that healthy periods are about more than access to period products. For individuals to have healthy periods, every part of our lives needs to be set up to support periods, the menstrual cycle and menopause. This means that to respond to the inequalities the cost-of-living crisis is creating we must also look at the wider determinants of menstrual inequality in the UK. Therefore, any focus on healthy periods and reproductive health must go beyond solely medical solutions, and take a more Public Health approach that considers the everyday impact that periods and reproductive health have in society. □

As the rapid findings from the implementation of the [Period Products \(Free Provision\) \(Scotland\) Act 2021](#), there is a need to accompany product provision with choice, knowledge sharing, visibility, campaigns and partnerships with both the private sector, civil society and faith-based organisations.

This is why Bloody Good Period advocates for a [new menstrual health action plan](#) that includes new legal and policy frameworks in addition to better data, evidence and support schemes on menstrual health. We are calling for:

- A new legal duty that requires local authorities and employers to make period products free for everyone who menstruates in England and Wales.
- Any new or revised government strategy to tackle the social and economic barriers that prevent women from accessing menstrual care.
- National statutory rules and guidance on menstrual and menopausal health for public bodies, public agencies and employers.
- Evaluate the effectiveness and reach of existing government schemes run in custody, temporary accommodation, by the NHS and in schools - and address any shortcomings identified through these evaluations.
- Commission an independent assessment of the funding provided to public bodies and agencies contracted to provide menstrual products and education, to assess if this financing is adequate to enable public bodies and agencies to provide adequate services.
- Launch a new Parliamentary inquiry into menstrual equity.

5. What could businesses do to help women cope with increases to the cost of living and manage debt?

Supermarkets

As noted above, despite the Tampon Tax being abolished in 2021 to make period products more affordable and accessible, retailers haven't passed on these savings to consumers. We believe supermarkets must meet the intention of the Tampon Tax abolishment and pass the savings onto consumers. Therefore, we have [signed the petition by Laura Coryton](#) demanding that supermarkets make period products cheaper now tampon tax has been scrapped.

Employment

Through our Bloody Good Employers program, we have seen how workplace provision of period products can foster a safer working environment for everyone. However, in the UK workplace provision for period products is mixed. Almost a third (31%) of working women have

had to use makeshift materials such as toilet paper or fabric to manage their periods at work ([Water Aid, 2023](#)).

In workplaces, British workers have reported insufficient access to WASH facilities. Employers have been found to not give adequate permission to use toilets, alongside inadequate supplies of soap and toilet paper and a lack of locks on toilet doors. Workers' pay has also been reduced due to toilet breaks ([Trade Union Council, 2010](#)). All of these factors mean that periods are having an even greater impact on people's financial situation during the Cost of Living Crisis.

November 2023