

## Local Government and Communities Committee

### Call for Views on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill

#### Submission from Poverty Alliance

#### **About the Poverty Alliance**

The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland. We are an independent organisation with over 230 members drawn from the voluntary and public sectors, trade unions, researchers, faith groups and individuals with direct experience of poverty.

Our aim is to work with others to enable communities and individuals to tackle poverty. We have a number of key policy areas that provide the focus for our activities; these are addressing low incomes, supporting services to address poverty, enhancing the participation of people with direct experience of poverty in policy development processes, and addressing attitudes to poverty.

#### **Introduction to submission**

We welcome the opportunity to provide our views on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill, introduced by Monica Lennon MSP.

We recognise that, while living on a low income is a major reason why many women and girls<sup>1</sup> are unable to access period products, it is not the only reason and that access to period products can be limited by factors other than poverty. For example, denial of access to period products can be a method of control used by abusive partners and can also be affected by issues related to stigma.

However, as an anti-poverty organisation our expertise lies in the lived experiences of poverty, and the focus of our submission is therefore on the links between low incomes and access to period products rather than wider (although equally important) issues that may impact access to these products.

#### **Responses to questions**

- 1. The Bill has been brought forward partly in response to concerns about "period poverty" - difficulty in being able to afford period products. Do you think period poverty is a serious issue in Scotland? Please provide any relevant information you may have to support your views.**

Poverty is gendered and – with women having less income, less financial independence, less access to resources than men and often facing embedded structural discrimination – women are more likely than men to experience poverty.<sup>i</sup> Poverty limits people's ability to access the services and products that they rely upon

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<sup>1</sup> We recognise that it is not just women who menstruate and that some transgender and non-binary people have periods. While this submission refers to 'women' and 'girls' it is intended to be inclusive of any person who menstruates.

and, for women and girls, this can mean that poverty restricts their ability to access period products. With over 1 million people in Scotland living in the grip of poverty<sup>ii</sup>, we therefore know that poverty is one of the most pressing issues facing our society, and that the inability to access period products due to a lack of income is a serious lived reality for many women and girls living in poverty across Scotland.

Being unable to access period products can be a particular issue for certain groups, for example young women, homeless women and refugee women; all of whom are already at heightened risk of experiencing poverty. For young women in particular, it is an experience that can have a profound impact upon a whole a range of outcomes related to education, employment and health.

Given that poverty projections for the coming years are stark – with some estimates suggesting that child poverty will increase to 29% in Scotland by 2023/24<sup>iii</sup> – we should also be seriously concerned that more and more women and girls will be pulled into poverty in the years ahead, and will therefore find it even more difficult to access period products unless action is taken.

**2. Do you support the overall aim of the Bill - that no one in Scotland should have to pay for period products and that this should be set out in law?**

Period poverty is primarily (although not exclusively) a product of women's poverty – and while the provision of free period products must take place in tandem with efforts to boost women's incomes – we fully support the Bill's aim of ensuring that no one should have to pay for period products. We believe that this would not only help to reduce costs for women living in poverty, but also improve health, employment and education outcomes, enable women and girls to participate fully in society, and act in support of human dignity.

It simply cannot be right that half of all people in our society are financially penalised because of their biology. With women already being more likely to experience poverty than men and with, therefore, there being a clear need to reduce the cost of living for women living on low incomes, providing free access to period products for all women – and setting this right out in law - would be extremely welcome.

**3. The Bill would allow the Scottish Government to require organisations other than schools and colleges to provide free period products. Do you support this? If so, what other organisations should be legally made to provide free products?**

Given that a lack of access to period products affects women and girls of all ages, we do support the provisions the Bill makes for the Scottish Government to require organisations other than just schools and colleges to provide free period products.

In order to ensure that as many women and girls as possible are able to access free products, it is important that a wide number of other organisations and bodies also provide free period products. This should include, but not be limited to:

- Community pharmacies;
- Hospitals;
- Primary care services;

- Libraries;
- Any public sector office or premises;
- Any local authority office or premises;
- Community centres;
- Large private sector facilities, such as cinemas and shopping centres.

Ensuring such wide provision will likely require additional financial support for those organisations who are made to provide such free products, and this is something that we would expect the Scottish Government to provide clarity on in due course.

**4. The Bill requires the setting up of a scheme for making free period products available. Do you have any views on what elements a scheme should include? In answering this question, you might want to take account of factors such as the importance of privacy, accessibility, value for money and the environment.**

A key element of any scheme must be that it is easy to access for all, and that accessing free period products should be as simple as possible. We do have some concerns, therefore, that the provision that the Bill makes for the establishment of a voucher scheme to enable access to free products may act as a barrier for some; for example people with insecure immigration status, trans men and people of non-binary gender, and homeless people.

To ensure that any scheme that is established meets the needs of everyone, it is essential that the delivery model is co-designed by individuals who are representative of all groups who will access it. This particularly includes those who may face additional barriers to accessing period products such as young women, refugee women, homeless women, as well as trans men and non-binary individuals who menstruate.

Finally, we would note that it may be helpful to consider how the language around the issue can be reframed and rephrased to ensure that – however well-intended it may be – actions to promote and publicise the scheme do not themselves act as a barrier. For example, the language of ‘period poverty’ may result in some women and girls disassociating with the scheme. Similarly, given that period poverty is primarily a result of women’s poverty, there is a risk that using that language can conceal the wider issue driving women’s ability to afford period products; a lack of financial resources.

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<sup>i</sup> Scottish Government, *Poverty & Income Inequality in Scotland: 2015 – 18*, March 2019, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/poverty-income-inequality-scotland-2015-18/>

<sup>ii</sup> Scottish Government, *Poverty & Income Inequality in Scotland: 2015 – 18*, March 2019, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/poverty-income-inequality-scotland-2015-18/>

<sup>iii</sup> Resolution Foundation, *Wrong Direction: Can Scotland hit its child poverty targets?*, March 2019, <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2019/03/Wrong-direction-briefing-note.pdf>