



Department
for Education

Period product scheme: the learner perspective

Research report

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Social Science in Government

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Executive summary

In spring 2019 the government announced a scheme to ensure that primary school pupils, secondary school pupils and further education students in England have access to free period products in their place of study.

The Department for Education commissioned this research to ensure that the perspectives of girls, non-binary and transgender learners who have periods (hereafter referred to as learners) were considered when issuing initial guidance to state-maintained schools and 16-19 education organisations (hereafter referred to as organisations) on how they can deliver the scheme in a way that recognises the needs of their learners.

This qualitative research aimed to understand the opinions and experiences of learners, with a diverse range of characteristics, on how they deal with periods in their organisations. The research was designed to align with ethical standards outlined in the Government Social Research guidance. A sample of 62 learners aged between 9 and 19 was recruited using a professional market research recruiter. As the research took a qualitative approach, the sample was not designed to be statistically significant, but to ensure that participants came from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible so that a diverse range of views and opinions were captured by the research. Research was conducted through an online discussion forum, which ran from 11th – 14th October 2019. The findings were subsequently analysed and mapped against the research objectives to understand emerging key themes.

Key findings

Awareness and opinions of the scheme

- Generally, participants were not aware of the government's upcoming period product scheme. However, once they became aware of the scheme through this research it was positively received.
- Participants strongly felt that it would be important for their organisation to consult with learners about the period product scheme implementation, so that it best meets their needs.
- There was a common misconception that the government's period product scheme was intended to mainly benefit learners from low income families.

Current issues when dealing with periods

- Those participants who were aware of existing methods of distribution of period products within their organisation described schemes that ranged from formal to ad hoc initiatives.
- Participants commonly noted that current period product schemes rely on learners asking a member of staff for an item. Participants in sixth-form organisations noted items may be freely available in the toilets.
- Participants expressed embarrassment about asking anyone other than close friends for help with obtaining period products. However, younger participants in primary schools reported being comfortable asking a teacher or other member of staff for help.
- Participants raised concerns about the potential to be bullied should an accidental leak occur or if someone else becomes aware that the participant is having difficulties managing their periods. They also noted that the attitude of teachers towards allowing learners to leave class to use the toilet can make them reluctant to ask, even in an emergency; and participants commonly believed male learners were too immature to deal with issues relating to periods.
- In terms of current usage of period products, generally participants reported using pads. Some participants also reported using tampons. Those participants who prefer not to use tampons mentioned they found these difficult to use or were not sure how to use them properly. Participants' views on reusable pads and menstrual cups were somewhat negative and there was some lack of understanding of how these products should be used. When choosing which period products to use, participants commonly prioritised comfort, familiarity and ease of use over environmental considerations.

Distributing free period products

- Typically, participants preferred to access period products in toilet cubicles so that they could be accessed discretely without needing to ask someone else or be seen taking products by other people. However, participants also recognised that there was a potential for misuse should products be distributed in this way.
- Participants also expressed support for restricting access to period products via vending machines, although they noted logistical barriers to access through this method such as the issuing of tokens. They also expressed concern over use of vending machines being visible to others or monitored.
- Additionally, participants considered that one approach to distribution could be a system whereby period products were easily accessible for all in an emergency

(for example, by being freely distributed in the toilets or via vending machines), and provided in larger quantities to those the learners considered to be in need.

Communicating the scheme

- Despite participants commonly expressing embarrassment when dealing with periods, they also felt that it should not be awkward to discuss a natural process, such as their period, more openly.
- Generally, participants considered single sex assemblies, health education lessons and posters in relevant places in organisations could be used to promote the scheme and make the topic of periods in general more visible.
- Participants also suggested that educating male learners about the period product scheme and menstruation in general was important to foster an atmosphere where periods are nothing to be ashamed of.
- Findings from the research suggest that communications about the period product scheme should be short, informative, easily accessible and present a positive image of periods.

1. Introduction to the research

In spring 2019 the government announced a scheme to ensure that primary school pupils, secondary school pupils and Further Education students in England have access to free period products in their place of study. The Department for Education commissioned this research to ensure that the perspectives of girls, non-binary and transgender learners who have periods (hereafter referred to as learners) were considered when issuing initial guidance to state-maintained schools and 16-19 education organisations (hereafter referred to as organisations).

1.1. Research objectives

The aim of the research was to engage with potential period product scheme users to understand their perspective on the implementation of the scheme.

The research objectives were:

- a) To understand learners' expectations of the period product scheme
- b) To identify any strengths and weaknesses posed by different approaches that organisations may take to make free period products available to their learners
- c) To understand how the period product scheme delivery in organisations can support efforts to tackle stigma surrounding periods.

2. Research methods

2.1. Method

Hopscotch Consulting set-up an online discussion forum, led by an experienced moderator, which would enable learners aged between 9 and 19 to provide their perspectives. The online discussion provided a safe, anonymous forum where the participants could share their views and experiences. The research took place over four days between Friday 11th October 2019 and Monday 14th October 2019. Participants typically spent between 90 and 180 minutes engaging with the questions and tasks in the discussion forum.

The topic guide which was used as the basis for discussion can be found in the Appendix.

2.2. Sampling strategy

Hopscotch Consulting identified a sample of learners aged between 9 and 19 by using the services of a specialist market research recruiter. All participants taking part had to have started their periods and had some experience of dealing with them in school or college. As the research took a qualitative approach, the sample was not designed to be representative, but to ensure that participants came from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible so that a diverse range of views and opinions were captured by the research.

The final achieved sample comprised 62 participants. These 62 participants included a range of locations across England, a variety of school and college year groups, a mixture of ethnicities, some participants with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) and some participants who were eligible for free school meals, free further education meals or in receipt of the 16-19 Bursary Fund. A full breakdown of the participant characteristics can be found in the Appendix.

2.3. Analysis

Iterative analysis was carried out throughout the course of the research, with findings tagged and coded throughout the moderation process, as well as in further analysis phases after the completion of the fieldwork. This analysis was mapped against the research objectives to understand emerging key themes.

Sub-group analysis was carried out to explore potential differences in views between sub-groups: where differences were observed they have been included in the report.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Hopscotch Consulting carefully considered the possibility of any ethical issues affecting the study. The research team were mindful that they were researching a topic that can cause embarrassment and took steps to avoid any potential negative impacts on participation.

Hopscotch Consulting took the following steps to ensure this project was aligned to Government Social Research principles of ethical conduct¹:

- **Sound application and conduct of social research methods, and interpretation of the findings**

The research method (an online forum) was carefully chosen and deemed as the most appropriate way of drawing out responses from the participants without placing any unnecessary burden on them. It allowed the participants to anonymously answer questions in their own time and opt out if they chose not to complete all of the questions in the forum.

This research has been conducted independently of the department and has been written in a clear and accessible way to inform guidance on the period product scheme.

- **Participation based on informed consent**

The research team clearly outlined the purpose of the research, and that it was being carried out on behalf of the department, so participants and their parents or guardians could take an informed decision on whether to participate. It was made clear to participants and their parents or guardians that consent could be withdrawn at any time.

- **Enabling participation**

Participation was facilitated by developing two sets of discussion questions for participants of different ages. Participants in years 5, 6 and 7 completed a shorter set of questions to maintain the engagement of younger participants. Participants in year groups 8 and above completed a longer set of questions. Participants with SEND were allocated to question sets on a case by case basis in discussion with the participant, parent or carer, or teacher.

The research was planned to take place over a weekend when participants would be free of school and college commitments, but catch-up time on Monday was also allotted to reduce barriers to participation and ensure that any participants

¹ Government Social Research (2011) *GSR Professional Guidance: Ethical Assurance for Social Research in Government*. Available [online](#) [accessed 05 November 2019].

who had internet access issues at home were able to use school/college facilities to take part.

- **Avoidance of personal and social harm**

The questions were designed in such a way that the research team did not ask participants to share any of their own personal, financial or medical situations. By making use of projective techniques and focussing on the implementation aspects of the period product scheme, undue embarrassment or awkwardness for the participants was avoided. Additionally, no questions were compulsory to answer.

- **Non-disclosure of identity**

All the research was anonymous and the identities of those who took part have not been disclosed to anyone apart from the recruiter and the lead researcher, for recruitment and safeguarding purposes.

3. Understanding expectations of the period product scheme

This chapter explores participants' expectations of the period product scheme, current approaches to providing products within organisations, individual approaches to dealing with periods in organisations, and period product usage preferences.

Key findings: Expectations

- There was low awareness of the government's period product scheme among participants.
- The period product scheme was generally perceived as being for low income families.
- Participants perceived it to be very important for organisations to consult with their learners about the implementation of the scheme. It was felt this would help to share information about the scheme and encourage more open conversations about periods.
- Participants noted that formal or informal schemes to distribute period products in an emergency were currently available in many organisations. The extent to which existing schemes were used varied. Participants reported some reluctance amongst learners to ask staff members for items.
- Participants expressed some worry and embarrassment related to dealing with their period whilst at their organisation. It was reported that stigma around periods can cause stress and anxiety, especially in circumstances where learners have to deal with an unexpected period or do not have period products available.
- Pads were the most popular period product, as they were familiar and easy to use. There was little interest in reusable period products, and comfort and practicality were perceived as more important than the sustainability of products.

3.1. Current levels of awareness of the period product scheme

There was low awareness of the government's period product scheme among participants.

Those who were already aware of the government's scheme prior to taking part in the research had either been aware of social media campaigning activity by charities and

their petition to provide free period products in education, had seen it mentioned on the news, or had discussed the issue with a family member.

There was also a low awareness of other schemes which distribute free period products. However, the awareness of other period product schemes may have been underreported because several participants went on to describe methods of distributing period products in their organisations which were evidently part of a wider scheme, but there was little awareness that such schemes extended beyond their own organisation.

The schemes participants had heard of were informal or local initiatives run by friends or their organisation, or schemes operated by period product manufacturers or retailers.

3.2. Perceptions of who the period product scheme is aimed at

Participants were told that the government scheme is aimed at ‘those who need them’ and were asked to define who they thought were the intended recipients of the scheme. Common perceptions were that the period product scheme was aimed at low income families or those who may otherwise struggle to afford period products, or that it was aimed at all learners in organisations who have periods.

[The scheme is for] Girls who can't afford to buy the products or who don't want to ask their parents to buy these products for them – *Year 10 participant*

Any misconceptions amongst the participants about who the scheme was aimed at were not corrected during the research process.

A broader observation was that access to period products in toilets should be provided as a matter of routine, in the same way that toilet roll is provided in all toilets, so that those who menstruate are not financially penalised by a biological process.

3.3. Consulting about implementation of the scheme

Participants generally believed that it was important for organisations to talk to their learners about the introduction of the period product scheme, the main reason being that it would raise awareness so all learners are aware of any new scheme being introduced. It was also suggested that by talking openly about the introduction of a period product scheme, more learners would be encouraged to ask for help when needed.

As I have grown up I have become much more open about periods, but I know lower down the school I would have struggled to speak openly. Therefore, I think that consulting students about how to run the scheme is incredibly important, as it increases the likelihood of a

helpful scheme where students are able to receive help in terms they are comfortable with. – *Sixth Form participant*

Participants observed that every organisation operates differently, and it was considered important that the scheme runs in a way that works for a specific organisation and its learners. Participants also considered it important that the products made available through the scheme suit the preferences of that organisation's learners. It was suggested that an anonymous survey asking what products learners prefer to use could help organisations provide the most appropriate items for their individual school or college community.

3.4. Existing approaches to providing period products in organisations

Those participants who were aware of ways they could currently access period products in their organisation talked about formalised 'Red Box'² schemes, asking for products from the office or first-aid room, or informal arrangements where they know which teachers will provide products if asked. Making period products freely available in the toilets was another distribution method that was mentioned. However, those participants who mentioned this tended to be in Sixth Form and there was a perception that these students were mature enough to use items responsibly.

When asked how well current provision worked, a range of opinions were expressed. In some instances, participants felt current schemes worked well. Other participants raised concerns that current schemes did not reach all those who needed them because some learners were too embarrassed to ask staff members for items, or because schemes were not well-publicised within organisations.

A lot of girls feel embarrassed to ask for period products, especially if the pastoral care [teacher responsible] for their year is male. Most of the people I know will just ask friends for spare period products instead of adults so overall I don't think [the current scheme] is very effective, especially as it's not widely displayed or talked about around school. – *Sixth Form participant*

Not all participants were aware of any current provision for accessing period products in their organisation.

² Red Box refers to the Red Box Project, a community-based not-for-profit initiative which provides red boxes filled with period products to local schools. For more information see the Red Box Project's [website](#) [accessed 06 November 2019].

3.5. Dealing with an unexpected period or not having period products available

Participants were asked about the effects of dealing with an unexpected period or not having period products available. They reported feelings of worry and stress. Typical concerns included: embarrassment at the thought of peers becoming aware of their period; fear of experiencing leaks or showing other visible signs of their period; issues around having to excuse themselves from class without their peers becoming aware of the reason why; teachers reacting negatively to requests to use the toilet; and the embarrassment of needing to ask someone else for help.

How can I excuse myself without admitting to the whole class that I just got my period? How am I going to stop myself from leaking? Is it weird if I ask my friends if they have supplies? Will the teacher think it's just an excuse to get out of class? Can I just use tissue and hope for the best? – *Sixth Form participant*

A typical response to dealing with an unexpected period reported by participants was to ask a friend for a period product. This was reported as a usual first response even by participants whose organisations made period products available in one of the ways reported in 3.4. Asking a staff member was perceived as embarrassing.

I personally feel uncomfortable asking the nurse so I'd ask my friends if they had any spare products. – *Year 10 participant*

However, participants who were in Year 5 or Year 6 tended to perceive a teacher or other staff member as being the best person to ask for help and reported less embarrassment at approaching them for help.

Another approach to dealing with an unexpected period reported by participants was to deal with the issue privately. Participants reported cleaning themselves up in the toilets or devising a makeshift solution from toilet roll or tissues as preferable to asking for help. However, this approach to dealing with period problems was less typical amongst those participants who were aware of a current scheme to distribute period products in their organisation.

3.6. Period product preferences

Participants were asked about the type of period products they prefer to use in their organisation. Pads (both with and without wings) were widely used and were generally perceived as being the easiest product to use. Tampon use was less widespread. Anxieties about knowing how to use them properly was one reason why some participants said they did not use tampons.

There was low awareness of the existence of menstrual cups and amongst those who did recognise the item, there was a general lack of understanding about how to use them.

There was little reported use of reusable pads and some participants perceived them as being less clean and hygienic than other period products.

With any reusable period products (such as menstrual cups or reusable pads) there was some confusion amongst the participants about what organisations might offer. Some participants thought that these items would be 'lent', rather than given to them, so some of the negative reaction could possibly be attributed to the misconception that they may be given a previously used and cleaned product.

When asked what products organisations should provide in this scheme, a common view was that organisations should provide pads, panty liners and tampons. It was suggested that organisations carry out an anonymous survey to understand period product preferences in their own organisation so that the appropriate period products can be stocked in the correct quantities.

Whilst support was expressed for environmentally friendly policies in general, on the issue of environmentally friendly period products there was a general lack of support for making this a key priority of the period product scheme. Participants felt that the comfort of learners should be a higher priority than being environmentally friendly.

I think in terms of something as personal and important as periods, comfort should take priority over being environmentally friendly. For example I think a lot of people wouldn't be comfortable using a menstrual cup, and just prefer to use a standard pad or tampon ... As much as I believe environmental awareness should be talked about and encouraged in schools, comfort should definitely take priority for something that we have to deal with every month – *Year 11 participant*

The view was expressed that minor adjustments to be environmentally friendly were acceptable (e.g. ordering applicator tampons that use cardboard instead of plastic), but the suggestion that participants use menstrual cups or reusable pads was generally negatively received. One theme that emerged was the need to ensure that the budget allocated to the period product scheme was used appropriately, and as participants perceived environmentally friendly products as being more expensive than standard options it was typically felt that the priority should be making sure that as many period products were available as possible to all those who need them.

In addition to period products, it was observed that organisations sometimes kept a stock of items such as spare pants or spare school skirts in case of leaks and accidents and this was considered helpful.

4. Strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to distributing free period products

This chapter explores a range of potential approaches to distributing free period products that organisations may choose to adopt, and outlines participants' perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of these approaches.

Key findings: Approaches to distribution of free period products

- When considering methods of distribution for free period products, participants reported that having products that are available discreetly, and at the time and place that they are most needed was important to them.
- Making products available through teachers or other staff was felt by participants to be potentially embarrassing as they would have to ask for period products. However, participants perceived the advantage of this approach to be that the scheme could not be misused.
- The approach of making period products available in a central location was perceived to be inconvenient if this location was not near the toilets, and potentially embarrassing if other people were around. Participants perceived the advantage of this approach to be that the scheme could not be misused.
- Having products freely available in the toilets was received positively by participants who observed that products would be available at the most appropriate time when needed. However, participants perceived the disadvantage of this approach to be that there was the potential for products to be misused.
- The approach of having period products available by restricted access (e.g. vending machine) was considered to be advantageous as period products would be available in a convenient place but could not be misused. However, participants perceived the disadvantage of this approach was that learners may feel embarrassed being seen taking a product.
- Participants suggested a two-tier system for distribution of period products may be appropriate, with small quantities of products made freely available for learners in emergencies and larger quantities of products given directly to those participants perceived to be in need.

4.1. Making period products available through teachers, tutors, school nurses, support staff, or other named contacts

Participants generally perceived the distribution of period products through teachers and other staff as being potentially embarrassing if they had to ask a staff member for a period product. This potential for embarrassment was magnified if participants imagined being in a situation (e.g. in class) where they would need to ask a male member of staff; with some participants saying that they would not ask a male staff member for period products. Participants also reported an additional worry about asking a staff member for a period product in front of other people, whether that was in a classroom or an office situation.

I don't think this is a good idea because students wouldn't want their teachers to know their business. – *Year 10 participant*

Participants considered whether it was preferable to ask a staff member who they already know, or a staff member who they did not know for period products. For some participants, they felt that it was easier to ask a staff member whom they already know because there was an established relationship with that person. Other participants felt that it was less embarrassing to ask a staff member they did not know because that was perceived as being more anonymous. Analysis of the differences in preference on this topic did not reveal any trends in which sub-groups of participants held which preference, indicating that this preference depended very much on the individual.

Participants perceived that the main advantage of this method of distribution was that it avoided potential misuse of the system, for example, period products being taken in larger quantities than needed, or products being tampered with rather than being used for their intended purpose.

4.2. Making period products available at reception or in another central location

A common view from the participants was that it was awkward and inconvenient to collect period products from areas within the school or college that were not located near the toilets. Participants commented that they worry about accidental leaks, and so having to spend additional time walking around the organisation from one area to another would potentially cause problems. Some participants also observed that leaving class during a lesson, needing to go to one location to obtain a period product and then go to the toilets to use the product would increase the time they would be absent from the classroom.

A commonly held view amongst participants was that it would be potentially embarrassing to be seen collecting period products from a central location. Participants reported feeling uncomfortable asking for, or being seen taking, period products in

common areas where there may be other people around. It was noted by the participants that central locations, such as reception, are typically high traffic areas with a lot of people around.

I personally don't think there are any pros to this as it means that boys would see and may start to make fun of you. – *Sixth Form participant*

Participants tended to perceive a first-aid room as being a more appropriate central location to use for the distribution of period products than other central areas, as this was generally thought to be a more private space.

Participants observed that the main advantage to this method of distribution was that period product usage could be monitored and misuse would be avoided.

4.3. Making period products freely available in the toilets

The perceived advantages of making period products freely available in the toilets were that period products would be available at the time and place where they were most needed, and participants would not need to feel embarrassed by asking anyone for a product. A further suggestion was that period products could be stored in individual toilet cubicles (e.g. in a container on the back of each door) so that they do not need to be taken in view of other learners.

It means that girls don't have to go through the embarrassment of asking a teacher. It reduces the stigma of periods as it is easily accessible and it is always there. – *Sixth Form participant*

The main disadvantage of this method, as reported by participants, was the potential for misuse of period products. Participants expressed concern that period products may be 'messed around with' or that some learners may abuse the system and take more than they need, leaving no products for other people.

Participants suggested an approach to mitigating this issue may be for organisations to educate learners on the importance of the period product scheme and issue sanctions to those misusing the provision.

They could possibly be misused but if so it should just be dealt with because you can't suggest taking that privilege of free sanitary supplies away because as girls we do not choose to have a period. – *Year 11 participant*

The research explored the specific configuration of the toilets at the participants' organisation and whether this would impact on how period products could be distributed. Where toilets were gender-segregated it was not perceived that there would be any issues. For those participants whose organisations provided gender-neutral toilets, it was suggested that a disabled toilet or similar space could be designated 'girls-only' and used to make period products available.

4.4. Making period products available via restricted access in the toilets

The perceived advantages of making period products available via restricted access in the toilets (e.g. in a vending machine) were that it was felt to be a hygienic way to distribute period products and participants perceived that the risk of people taking large quantities of products, or messing around with them, would be reduced.

There would be less misuse of products and it is an easy way of accessing [them]. – *Year 10 participant*

A perceived disadvantage was that participants felt it may be embarrassing to use a vending machine in front of other people, if they were in an area visible to others, such as by the washbasins.

If there are a lot of people in the toilet then some people may be not as likely to take the products from restricted areas. – *Year 10 participant*

Participants were unclear about the logistics of how vending machines distributing free period products would work in practice. Several disadvantages that were raised by the participants related to logistical challenges of issuing tokens to learners or applying existing organisation-wide cashless systems to a period product vending machine. There was low awareness that 'free vending' options were possible.

4.5. Other solutions

One alternative solution that participants suggested during the research discussion was the idea that organisations could introduce different distribution methods depending on need. For example, participants thought that organisations could distribute some period products by making them freely available in the toilets for emergency use, but that period products could also be distributed in larger quantities to those that the participants perceived to be in need. Participant considerations of need focused on learners from low income families. Participants felt that this approach would ensure there was a sufficient supply of products for those who they considered to need them.

A disadvantage of this approach mentioned by participants was that it may cause some stigma unless the organisation handles it sensitively, and they felt that some learners may be reluctant or embarrassed to ask for help.

I do believe the school should help provide for students who have worse financial situations. This could be done by having a drop in that is discreet and allows students to pick up extra products. – *Sixth Form participant*

5. Helping to tackle stigma surrounding periods through the period product scheme

This chapter explores the participants views about how the period product scheme should be communicated within organisations and how the stigma around periods could be reduced.

Key findings: Tackling stigma and communicating the scheme

6. Participants reported the existence of stigma and embarrassment surrounding periods. Participants commented that they feel reluctant to talk openly about periods with anyone in their organisation except close friends.
7. Participants felt that because periods are a natural biological process, it should not be something that people ought to feel embarrassed about discussing.
8. Participants suggested assemblies, health education lessons and posters could be used to promote the scheme within their organisation. There was some demand from participants for boys to have more education about periods as well.
9. Research suggests that communications aimed at learners should be short, informative, easily accessible and present a positive image of periods.

5.1. Participants' perceptions of stigma surrounding periods

Participants said that it was generally difficult and awkward to talk openly about periods within their organisations, particularly outside their immediate friendship group.

Participants said that they sometimes worry that other people may guess that they are on their period, and there was a fear that other learners may make fun of them. There was a particular worry amongst the participants at mixed schools about the reaction of boys, who were generally perceived to be 'silly and immature' about periods.

Participants also reported that they would prefer not to feel awkward talking about periods, and there was a feeling that it *should* be acceptable to talk openly about periods.

Half the planet is female and has periods and yet there's so much embarrassment when it's totally natural. – *Year 8 participant*

Everyone should be educated on period poverty, we need to take away the embarrassment. – *Year 8 participant*

In some instances, participants reported feeling unable to ask for permission to leave class. They felt that organisation rules that result in permission to go to the toilet during lessons being frequently denied had negative impacts on learners experiencing difficulties with their period.

Participants also commented about the potential stigma of periods related to the period product scheme. Concern was expressed that if usage of the scheme was monitored – i.e. if organisations recorded how many period products were taken by each learner – it may result in a perceived increase in stigma for those who needed more items. Participants thought that any such monitoring could negatively affect those who were unable to afford period products, but it could also negatively affect those who have particularly heavy periods and therefore use products at a greater rate than others.

5.2. Best approaches for communicating this scheme to learners

Participants suggested that the period product scheme should be communicated within organisations through single sex assemblies, health education lessons, incorporating information on it in school planners, and by putting up posters in single sex spaces (e.g. toilets, locker rooms, changing rooms etc.).

More broadly, another suggestion from participants to break taboos around periods was to educate boys about periods too, to reduce negative reactions from boys towards those on their period.

I think [boys] should have a separate lesson without girls to explain about periods, how it affects women emotionally and physically and just to take away the mystery. – *Sixth Form participant*

5.3. Presenting information about the scheme

As part of the research, participants were shown four different posters that represented different approaches to promoting free period product schemes. These posters are all examples that currently exist and were chosen for their varied approaches to communicating an existing period product scheme, which would provoke discussion and a reaction amongst the participants. A guide to the visuals used is included in the appendix to this report.

5.3.1. Words and phrases

Participants reacted positively to messages which they perceived as being positive and reassuring. They reacted particularly positively towards messages they perceived as being empowering, such as ‘Don’t let anything get in the way of your learning’.

It's not making a period into a massive issue. Which it is for your first few times, but you don't want to feel like it is. – *Year 8 participant*

Participants tended to prefer language to be straightforward and to the point, for example, preferring to talk about 'periods' and not 'time of the month' or other indirect references.

Participants felt the most important information to convey on any posters were practical details about what period products were available, where they were available from, and who they were for.

There were some suggestions from participants that posters could be used to manage expectations of the scheme and avoid misuse of the system. For example, it was suggested that a headline which read 'Take what you need' be changed to 'Take **only** what you need'.

A poster which referred to people finding it difficult to afford period products tended to produce a negative reaction in participants. They suggested that this wording could contribute to an increased stigma surrounding the period product scheme.

Participants noted that any use of the word 'scheme' could suggest a level of bureaucracy and form filling that may be off-putting to potential users.

A poster which used puns and word play was largely misunderstood by participants. It was suggested that text needs to be clear and unambiguous in its meaning.

5.3.2. Imagery

Participants had mixed opinions about whether it was appropriate to show pictures of period products. Those who thought it was a good idea tended to think it was helpful to show what the period product scheme is about, and which period products may be available to learners. Those who did not think it was a good idea tended to think that such images may be embarrassing to look at. This reaction was more prevalent towards those visuals which included a large quantity of period product images on the poster. Participants tended to feel that any images of period products should reflect the products that learners are most familiar with and use regularly. Participants who reacted negatively towards images of period products were most negative towards an image which showed a menstrual cup. These participants tended not to know what the image was depicting or perceived it as being off-putting because it was outside their own experience.

Images of a teen girl received a mixed reaction. Those participants who responded to the image positively felt that the relaxed pose of the girl suggested that periods were not something to worry about, and that by showing a happy and relaxed girl it helped to present a more positive image of having a period. Those participants who responded

negatively to the image of the girl tended to feel that the image was not relevant to the subject matter, or they criticised a lack of ethnic diversity and reinforcement of gender stereotypes.

5.3.3. Colours

Participants perceived paler or pastel colours on posters as 'calming'. Vibrant colours were perceived as attention-grabbing, which participants felt was a positive way of attracting attention to the scheme. The use of red on a poster provoked a mixed reaction among participants. Those who reacted positively felt that the colour was identified with blood and periods and was therefore appropriate to use. Those who reacted negatively to the colour red felt it was 'off-putting' and 'graphic'.

5.3.4. Layout

Participants reacted very positively to headlines and poster captions that were short, catchy and easy to read at a glance. They tended to like the fact that essential information was clear and could be conveyed quickly. There tended to be a more negative reaction to any posters which contained long blocks of text. Participants said that they would not necessarily read all the information, and that it could be embarrassing to be seen by other learners to be paying too much attention to a poster about free period products.

5.3.5. Directing users to further information

There was a generally positive reaction to any sample posters shown to participants that included a website address. Participants thought directing learners to further information was a good idea, and suggestions for website content included information on different types of period products, the pros and cons of each product, and advice on how to use them.

6. Conclusions and recommendations for scheme guidance

Learners' expectations of the period product scheme

Participants reported low awareness of the period product scheme. Misconceptions existed about who the intended target beneficiaries of the scheme are, with participants expressing a belief that the period product scheme was largely aimed at low income families, rather than all who need it.

Participants felt that organisations should consult their learners to ensure that the period product scheme is implemented in a way that best suits the individual needs of that particular organisation.

Strengths and weaknesses posed by different approaches that organisations may take to make free period products available to their learners

Distribution methods such as making products freely available in toilets or via restricted access like vending machines tended to be more positively received by participants than those which relied on face-to-face interactions with staff members, as these were perceived to be more awkward and embarrassing. However, the weakness of these distribution methods was often felt by participants to be the increase in potential for misuse by other learners.

The advantage of distribution methods where products would be available in a central area, or via a staff member, was that participants perceived these approaches to be less prone to misuse. However, the disadvantage was perceived to be a potential increase in embarrassment for those learners who find it awkward to ask for help. Participants also thought there would be additional logistical difficulties if nominated central areas were not located near the toilets.

How the period product scheme delivery in organisations can support efforts to tackle stigma surrounding periods

The research shows that embarrassment exists around the topic of periods, and participants can experience awkwardness in discussing the topic outside of their immediate friendship group. Participants expressed a desire for periods to be a less taboo topic and would like to feel more able to discuss period-related issues more openly.

Participants felt that the period product scheme should be discussed openly within their organisation so that learners are aware of what is available and how the scheme works.

Ways of discussing the scheme suggested by participants included single sex assemblies, talking about it in health education lessons and having information posters displayed in the toilets and other single sex spaces. Participants also suggested including boys in education about menstruation to reduce taboos.

Research showed that communications may be most positively received if they convey a positive attitude about periods and avoid negative messages around affordability.

Appendices

Sample characteristics

The characteristics of the final achieved sample were as follows:

Table 1: Location of participants

Location	Number of participants
East Midlands and West Midlands	12
London	18
North East and Yorkshire and the Humber	4
North West	13
South East	9
South West and East of England	6

Table 2: Ethnicity of participants

Ethnicity	Number of participants
Black African	3
Black Caribbean	7
British Indian	3
British Pakistani	5
Other British Asian	2
Mixed ethnicity	5
White	37

Table 3: Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)

Location	Number of participants
Participants with SEND	8
Participants without SEND	54

Table 4: Year group

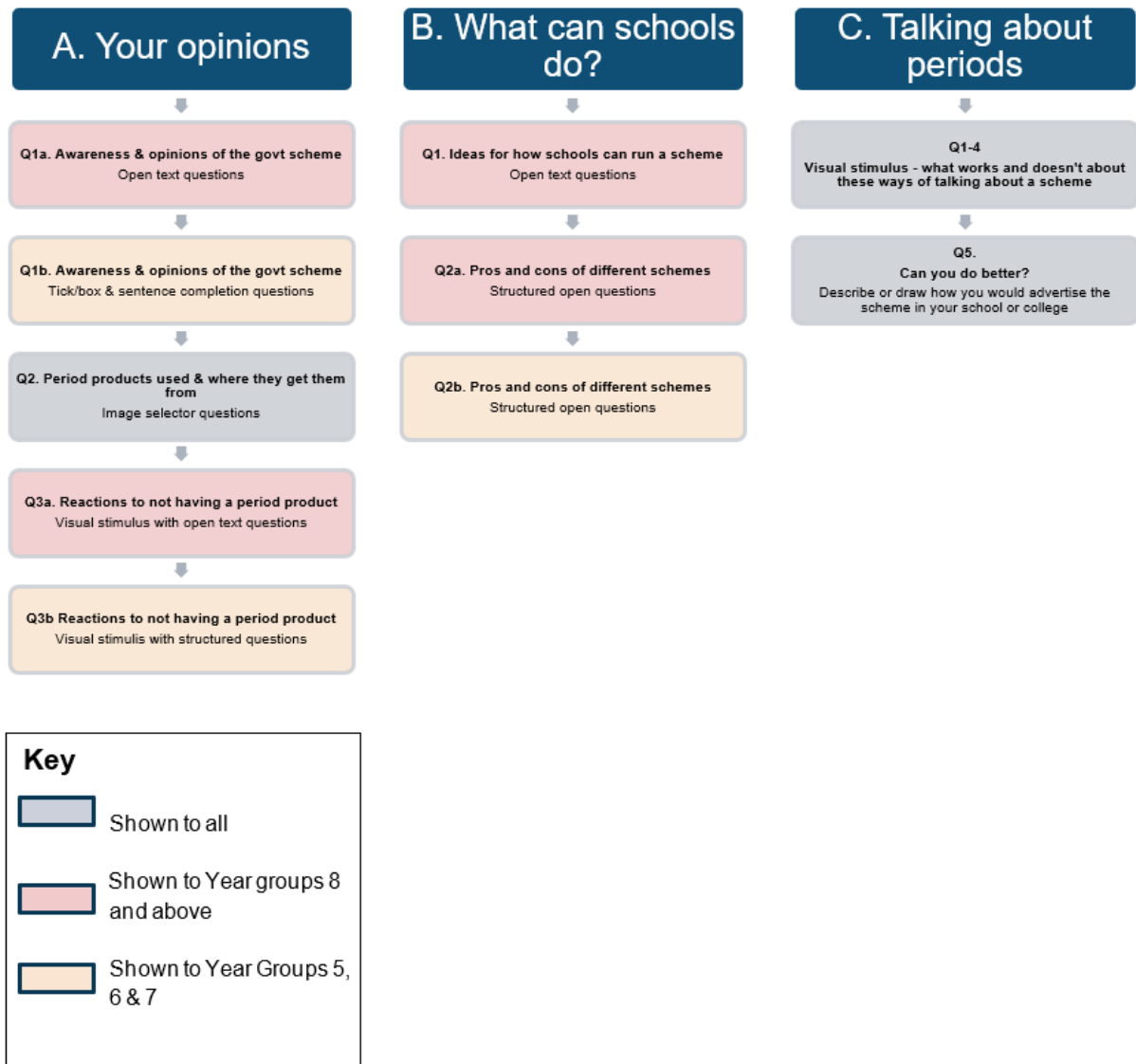
Year group	Number of participants
Year 5	3
Year 6	1
Year 7	5
Year 8	11
Year 9	9
Year 10	7
Year 11	6
School sixth form	17
Sixth-form college	1
Further education college	2

Table 5: Free School Meal (FSM), free further education meals and the 16-19 Bursary Fund eligibility

Location	Number of participants
Participants eligible for FSM, free further education meals or the 16-19 Bursary Fund	9
Participants not eligible for these initiatives	53

Topic guide outline

The below chart shows the outline of questions that were asked during the online discussion forum and which questions were routed to learners with different characteristics.



Poster examples used during the research

Four sample posters that were used as visual stimulus during the research to encourage discussion about how best to communicate and present the period product scheme.

The four samples included were from the following locations:

1. West Lothian College (2019) *Free periods for all!* [Poster]. Available [online](#) [accessed 05 November 2019].
2. University of Edinburgh (2019) *Take what you need, when you need it* [Poster]. Available [online](#) [accessed 05 November 2019].
3. University of Bradford (2016) *Free period* [Poster]. Available [online](#) [accessed 05 November 2019].
4. Great Yarmouth Borough Council (2019) *Having a tricky period?* [Poster]. Available [online](#) [accessed 06 November 2019].



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