



Submission

Executive Office Provision of Free Period Products Consultation

September 2023

homelessconnect.org

Homeless Connect Response to Consultation on the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (NI) 2022

Introduction

1. Homeless Connect has been working to prevent and alleviate homelessness in Northern Ireland since 1983. As a membership body, we represent organisations working with people experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless and provide direct support to service users through our projects.¹

2. This response is made on behalf of Homeless Connect as an organisation. It has been informed by the contributions of seven women with lived experience of homelessness and several frontline staff in the homelessness sector who responded to an online survey conducted for the Northern Ireland Frontline Network.² Some of the seven women had experienced chronic homelessness including experience of living on the streets while others had stayed in temporary accommodation. Several of the women are currently still in the homelessness system while others are now in settled accommodation. The Frontline Staff who responded to our survey all work in the voluntary sector.

3. The response will not seek to answer all the questions posed in the consultation response document. However, it will seek to broadly follow the order of the questions asked.

Would you use free period products if they were available?

4. All seven of our respondents with lived experience of homelessness indicated that they would use free period products if they were available. A number of them had experience of being unable to access period products. Two of the respondents said the following:

“They are important to have. I didn’t have them as a teenager growing up, my mummy never bought them. Or if she did she bought them for herself and not us. We had to use toilet roll and it wasn’t good.”

“Toilet roll? – weren’t you lucky I had to use a sock and hope for the best. My mummy died when I was young and I was the only girl in the house with three boys. Back then we just didn’t talk about it. You just had to get on with it. I remember the first time I saw a pad, in my friends bathroom, I used to go to her house and use the toilet when I could.”

These quotations highlight the importance of this legislation and the importance of ensuring widespread accessibility to these products.

**What, if anything, would STOP you from accessing these free period products?
Please remember that these products will be available for everyone whether or not they can afford to purchase them themselves.**

5. Our seven respondents with lived experience of homelessness gave variable responses to this question. The most common response- given by five of the seven- was that nothing would stop them. One respondent indicated that embarrassment could be a barrier. She said the following:

“Maybe embarrassment if I had to ask for them – if I didn’t have to ask – like if I could just go and lift them it would be ok. I wouldn’t like to have to ask for them. And I think if it was a woman too – I’d be embarrassed with a man – the wee shop in my street doesn’t even sell them because its ran by a man.”

The seventh respondent pointed to a potential practical barrier around accessibility. She said the following:

“I don’t really like to go out, so if they could put them somewhere like a chemist and everyone could get them then, without having to go too far. And you know your wee chemist too so you wouldn’t be embarrassed. Like if I have to go there to get my tablets anyway I can get them when I’m getting my tablets. “

This response highlights the need to ensure that there are a range of options available in terms of accessing these products.

6. Our respondents who are frontline workers in the homelessness sector indicated that they believed that the key barriers for people experiencing homelessness accessing these products relate to affordability; embarrassment over having to ask for these products; and potentially too few places to access them. Some of the comments made included the following:

“Even when they’re free, it takes courage to ask. We personally do keep open packs of pads in all our toilets for those who don’t want to say so they can take some with them and we’ll replenish after each open door session. However, we’d love to see even better ways to make this more accessible and reduce panic for many women each month who are dreading the week their period comes early and they don’t have any money until the week after”

“Finances, having free products available in hostels or public spaces would remove this barrier. Having no safe space/ home, allowing them to buy and store products in advance so they have them available when needed means that they may have no products available to them when their period arrives. Having gone through the stress/ trauma of being made homeless can impact on their cycle, or they may have a chaotic lifestyle in which they don’t track their cycle which can lead to them having no period products when their period starts.”

Consequently, frontline workers who responded to our survey welcomed the fact that these products will be freely available and that a wide range of different facilities are being considered as possible places to access these products.

What free period products do you think should be available?

7. The seven respondents with lived experience of homelessness gave a wide range of responses to this question. All seven of the women indicated that they believed that pads should be available. Three indicated that they believed that applicator tampons should be available, while one indicated that non-applicator tampons and pantyliners should be available. None of the seven indicated that they would use reusable products. Two of the women indicated that they should be available for those who would like to use them. One respondent indicated that all of the products listed should be available.

8. Frontline workers who responded to our survey also gave variable responses to this question. All of the respondents indicated that pads and applicator tampons should be available while the majority of respondents indicated they thought non-applicator tampons and reusable period pants should be available. A small number of respondents indicated they thought the other products should be available.

How do you think period products ought to be made available?

9. The most common response among respondents with lived experience of homelessness was that these products should be available in a wide range of locations. Specific examples given included the importance of having these products in toilets in cafes and restaurants as well as chemists.

10. Frontline staff who responded to our survey gave a range of responses to this question. All of our respondents believed that local shopping centres and chemists should have these products available. Respondents also pointed to libraries, public buildings, community venues, drop-in centres for people experiencing homelessness and temporary accommodation sites as places where these products should be available.

11. It is the view of Homeless Connect that these products should be provided free of charge at temporary accommodation sites right across Northern Ireland and day centres for people experiencing homelessness where they support households who need these products. The Executive Office should engage with the Housing Executive staff who administer the Supporting People programme to determine how best to provide period products to these facilities. We agree that these products should be freely available in a wide range of facilities.

How would you like to access these products?

12. The seven respondents with lived experience of homelessness all indicated that they believed the products should be available to collect. Six of the seven indicated that they would like to be able

to access these products through delivery. The one respondent who indicated that she would not like to access these products by delivery said the following:

“I wouldn’t like them to be delivered – like what would that even cost? Can they even do that? Just go and pick them up yourself. Would we have to pay for delivery? That kind of defeats the point.”

It will be evident that this respondent was opposed to utilising delivery because of the possible cost associated with it. If delivery was to be used as an option, it would need to be free.

13. The majority of frontline workers who responded to our survey favoured either the options of delivery or click and collection while a minority also believed they should be available from a physical location.

How do you think the provision and location of free period products should be publicised?

14. We believe that a wide range of communication mediums should be used to publicise the provision and location of free period products. One specific point we would make around advertising is that it would be vitally important to ensure that frontline staff and services in the homelessness sector- in public, statutory and voluntary sectors- are informed about the provision and location of free period products and able to signpost how to access these products to those they are working with. These staff and services are a point of connection to some of the most vulnerable people living here who will be most in need of these products. Staff in the homelessness sector itself may also want to be able to access these products for themselves and this should be borne in mind in any engagement with organisations in the sector.

Conclusion

15. It is pertinent to conclude by quoting one of our respondents to our frontline worker survey:

“The provision is so incredibly important to those who are experiencing homelessness. Often, if women don’t have enough money to purchase sanitary products for that month, they have to try “stretch” the length of time they use a pad or tampon and that in itself is both dangerous/hygienically not great. It drastically impacts confidence and there’s enough going on in their lives without needing to worry more.

Open availability to sanitary products means that those who need, will only take what they need - not hoarding them or taking multiple packs at a time (because they know they will always be available and able to return for more.) Even by limiting how much is set out can heighten the fear factor of not getting any if they come back but actually being able to display a sign that says “these will always be available here, for free!) brings a reassurance and calm to the individual knowing there’s a place that’s always open and available to access an essential need.”

This quotation amply illustrates the importance of this provision and the need to ensure that people experiencing homelessness can access it.

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References

¹ 'Homeless Connect' is a registered charity in Northern Ireland (charity number 103325)

² For more information on the Northern Ireland Frontline Network, see <https://homelessconnect.org/frontline/>.



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