

Period equality: Breaking down the barriers

Period equality research in the UK

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phs Period Equality

Now we're talking	03
Periods - the impact on learning	04
Access to sanitary products	09
The bigger picture – key changes	12
The barriers	13
Raising awareness	19
phs Period Equality – what we're doing	20



Talking about periods has long been a taboo topic with many too embarrassed or ashamed to discuss this wholly natural process.

Now we're talking

It is no surprise, therefore, that important issues surrounding poverty have – such as access to period products and period poverty have gone unheard, muffled by the stigma. As a result, young girls and women in our communities have been and continue to be denied proper access to essential basic products – adversely impacting their everyday lives.

But things are changing. Voices are no longer silent. Opinions are being heard. The issues are coming to the surface and the period equality agenda is moving slowly forward. However, as our latest research demonstrates, much more needs to be done so that our girls and young women aren't being failed.

Our previous Period Equality study (undertaken in the UK in 2019) suggested that the inability to access period products can have a detrimental impact on school attendance and academic achievement.

In April 2021, we went back to 13 to 18-year-olds at school or college to ask them again about how their period affects their day-to-day lives, how it impacts their learning, whether period poverty is a real issue, what they think the barriers are to period equality, and what action they believe is now necessary to break them down.

The findings offer key insight not only in terms of the experiences of teenage girls during 2020-21 but also changes in period equality perceptions over the last two years since our last survey, the impact of the COVID pandemic, and how the period poverty landscape looks across the UK – and, for the first time, the Republic of Ireland, too. This report looks in detail at the UK results*.

*Based on research conducted in April 2021 of 253 girls (13-18) at school or college in the UK. The wider survey comprised 253 girls (13-18) at school or college in the Republic of Ireland.

Periods and their impact on learning

Our research for the UK reveals that:



More than a third

35%

of teenage girls have had to take time off school or college because of their period - a 7% increase on from 2019.



Just over a quarter

28%

were forced to take time off more than once as a result. **

** Questions and options presented in the 2019 and 2021 surveys varied to reflect the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2020-21.

More than 1 in 4 (27%) have been unable to do their schoolwork because of their period, while 26% have felt they cannot leave their home as a result.

On average, girls have taken off three days off school each term due to their period - that's more than for any other single reason, including a cold/flu (2 days) or stress (2 days). The vast majority (82%) say period cramps leave them unable to attend school.

Missing school due to their period remains the biggest cause of absence for girls, remaining the same since 2019. However, as many as



of girls blamed a cold, flu or general illness for their period related absence.



told their school they had a headache.



did not feel able to give the real reason.

Two-fifths of girls (40%) in the UK are now likely to miss school or college over the next year due to their period - a considerable rise from a quarter (25%) two years ago.



5

Key figures

Which of the following has ever applied to you?

39%

I have had to miss out on day-to-day activities because of my period.

35%

I have had to take time off school/college more than once because of my period.

27%

I have been unable to do my schoolwork because of my period.

26%

I have been unable to leave the house because of my period.

21%

I have had to take time off school/college once because of my period.

21%

None of the above.

2%

Prefer not to say.

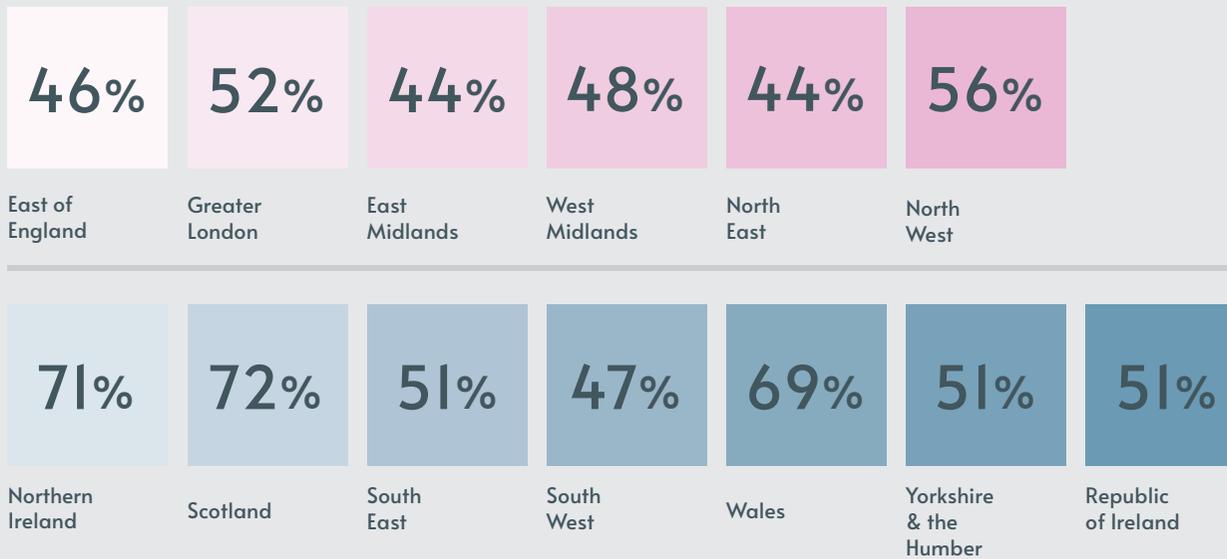
2%

I haven't started my period.

Key figures

How many girls have had to take time off school/college more than once because of their period?

Regional split: UK plus Republic of Ireland



How likely are you to miss school/college over the next year due to your period?

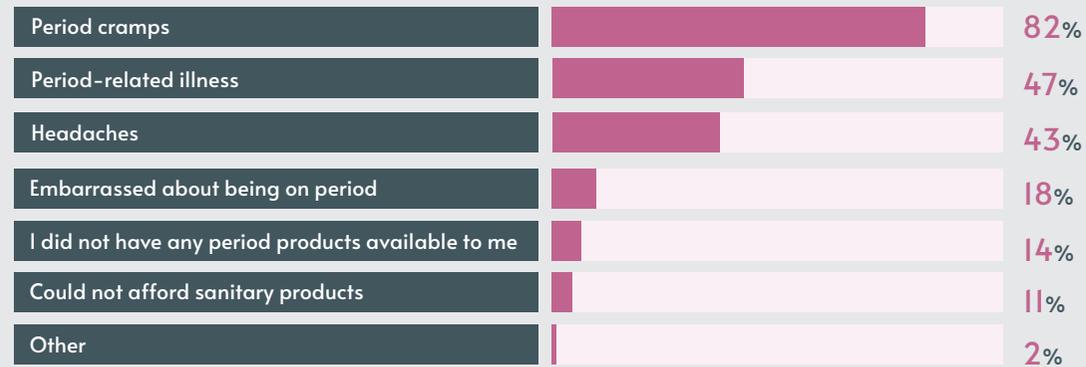
Very likely	Quite likely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Unlikely	Very unlikely	Prefer not to say
11%	29%	24%	13%	22%	1%

Key figures

If you have had to take time off school or college due to your period, what reason(s) did you give?

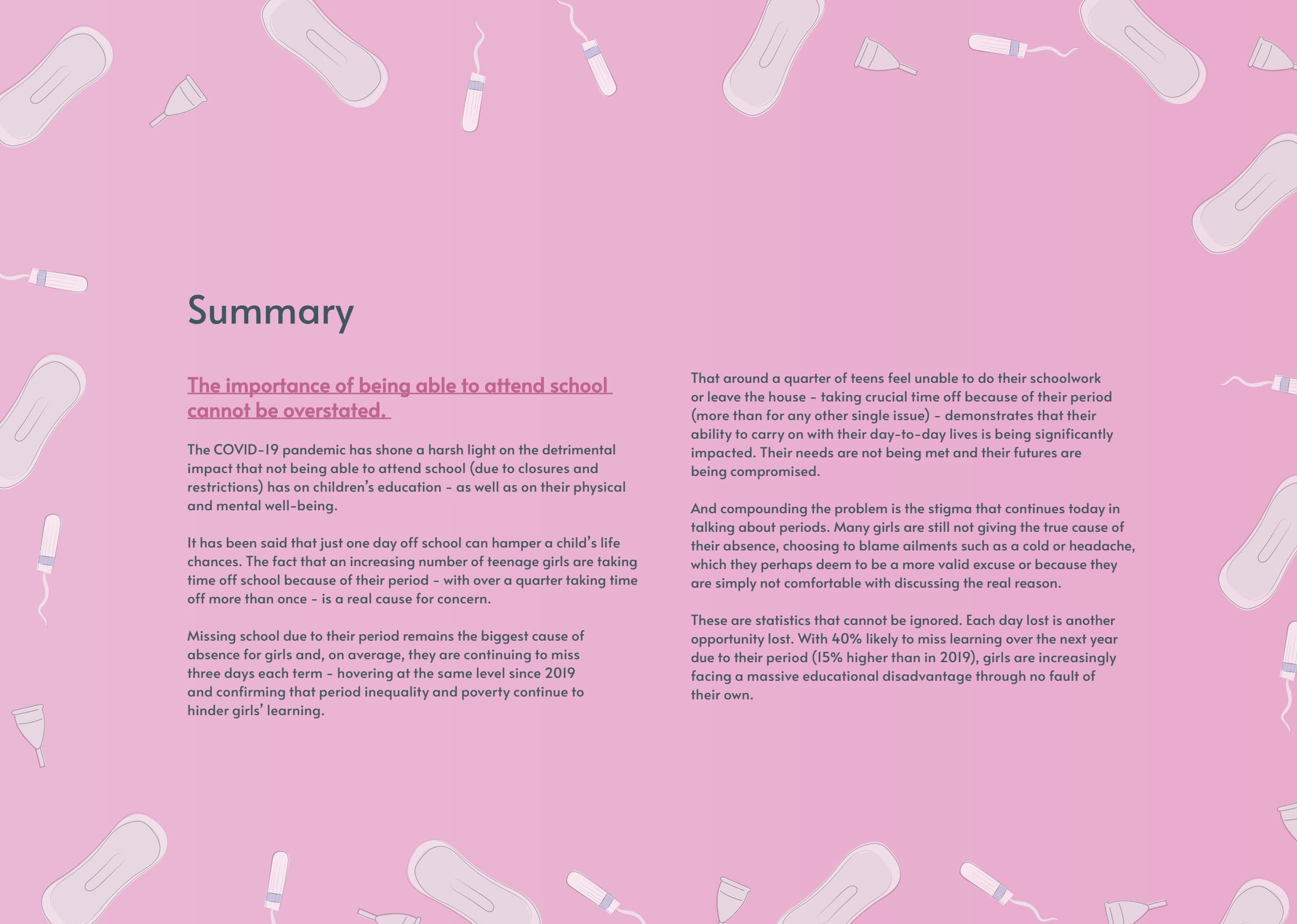


What were the reasons for missing school because of your period?



Average number of school or learning days lost each term for the following reasons:





Summary

The importance of being able to attend school cannot be overstated.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a harsh light on the detrimental impact that not being able to attend school (due to closures and restrictions) has on children's education - as well as on their physical and mental well-being.

It has been said that just one day off school can hamper a child's life chances. The fact that an increasing number of teenage girls are taking time off school because of their period - with over a quarter taking time off more than once - is a real cause for concern.

Missing school due to their period remains the biggest cause of absence for girls and, on average, they are continuing to miss three days each term - hovering at the same level since 2019 and confirming that period inequality and poverty continue to hinder girls' learning.

That around a quarter of teens feel unable to do their schoolwork or leave the house - taking crucial time off because of their period (more than for any other single issue) - demonstrates that their ability to carry on with their day-to-day lives is being significantly impacted. Their needs are not being met and their futures are being compromised.

And compounding the problem is the stigma that continues today in talking about periods. Many girls are still not giving the true cause of their absence, choosing to blame ailments such as a cold or headache, which they perhaps deem to be a more valid excuse or because they are simply not comfortable with discussing the real reason.

These are statistics that cannot be ignored. Each day lost is another opportunity lost. With 40% likely to miss learning over the next year due to their period (15% higher than in 2019), girls are increasingly facing a massive educational disadvantage through no fault of their own.



Access to sanitary products

When asked the reason for missing school,

1 in 7 girls (14%)

say they don't have any period sanitary products available to them - in 2019, the figure was only 5%.

1 in 9 girls (11%)

say they missed school or college because they could not afford sanitary products - two years ago, just 2% said this was the case.

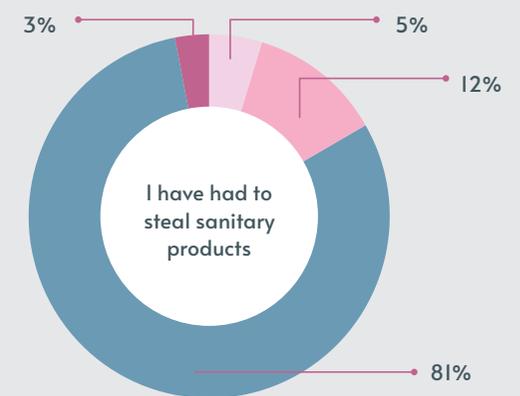
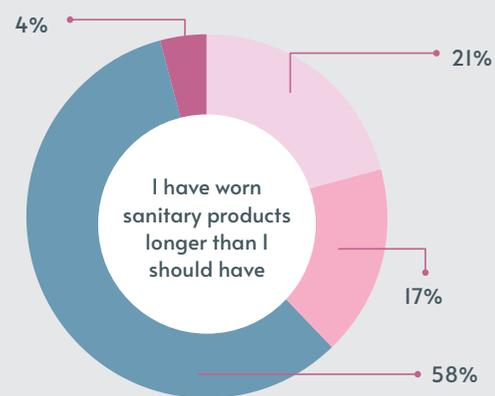
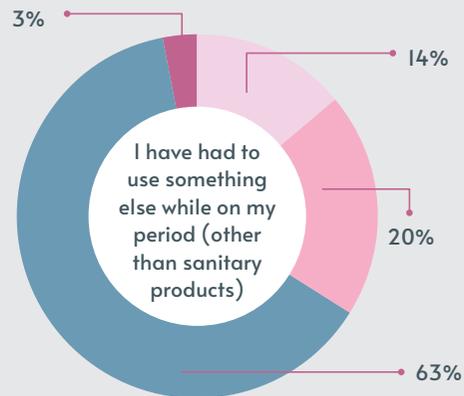
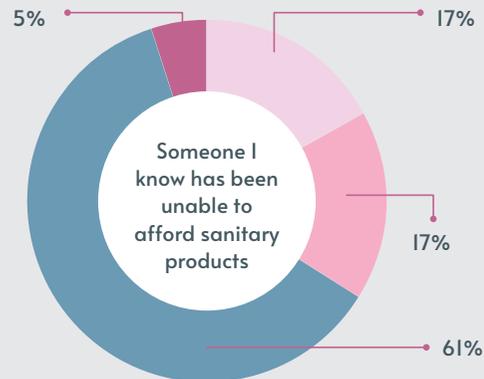
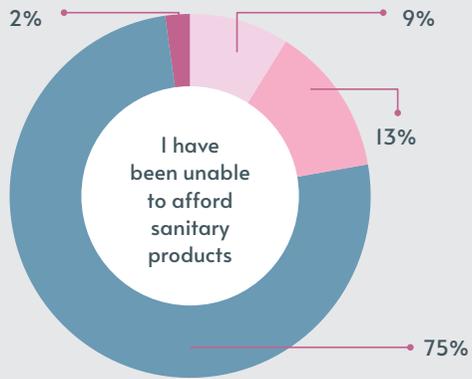
25% of students

have had to make do without sanitary products during their period - 10% within the last 12 months. Again, this compares starkly with 2019, when only 3% of girls said they had gone without.**

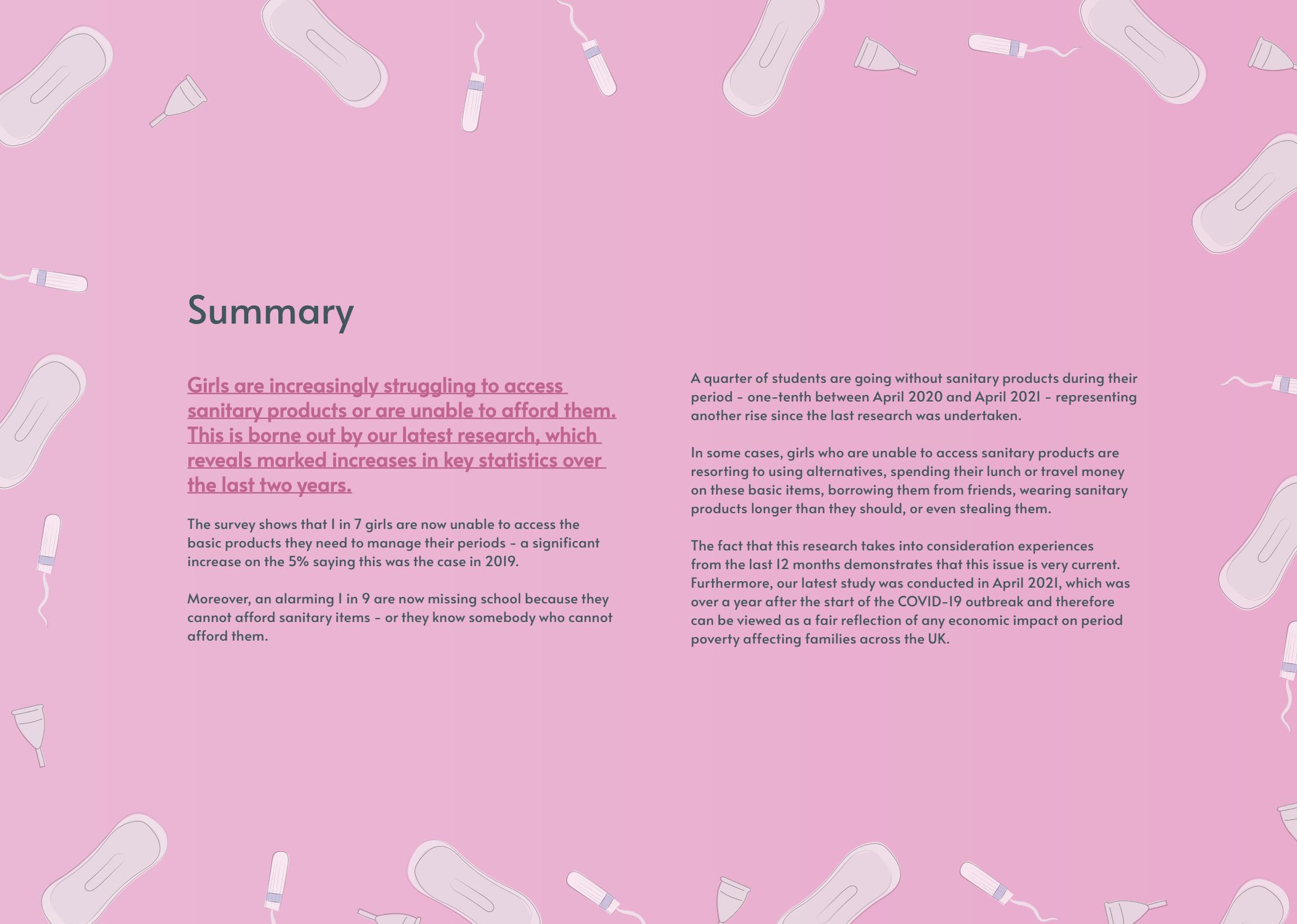
As a result, more than a third have resorted to using something other than a sanitary product during their period, with 1 in 7 (14%) saying that had been the case within the last 12 months.

And just under 2 in 5 (38%) have worn sanitary products for longer than recommended, with more than a fifth saying they had done so over the previous year.

Key figures



■ Yes, within the last 12 months
 ■ Yes, but not within the last 12 months
 ■ No, never
 ■ Prefer not to say



Summary

Girls are increasingly struggling to access sanitary products or are unable to afford them. This is borne out by our latest research, which reveals marked increases in key statistics over the last two years.

The survey shows that 1 in 7 girls are now unable to access the basic products they need to manage their periods - a significant increase on the 5% saying this was the case in 2019.

Moreover, an alarming 1 in 9 are now missing school because they cannot afford sanitary items - or they know somebody who cannot afford them.

A quarter of students are going without sanitary products during their period - one-tenth between April 2020 and April 2021 - representing another rise since the last research was undertaken.

In some cases, girls who are unable to access sanitary products are resorting to using alternatives, spending their lunch or travel money on these basic items, borrowing them from friends, wearing sanitary products longer than they should, or even stealing them.

The fact that this research takes into consideration experiences from the last 12 months demonstrates that this issue is very current. Furthermore, our latest study was conducted in April 2021, which was over a year after the start of the COVID-19 outbreak and therefore can be viewed as a fair reflection of any economic impact on period poverty affecting families across the UK.

The bigger picture – key changes

Based on UK research statistics from the last two years, there has been a:

7% increase

in the number of girls taking time off school or college more than once because of their period.

As many as

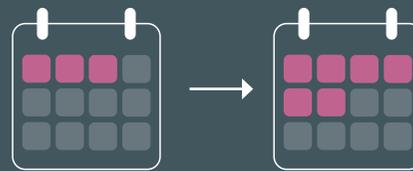


1 in 7 girls

now miss school due to a lack of availability of sanitary products - up from just 5% in 2019.

25%

increase in the number of girls going without sanitary products during their period (two years ago, it was at just 3%).



The number of teens likely to miss learning over the next year due to their period has also gone up - from 25% to 40%.

Summary

It is pertinent to observe the changes that have taken place since our last survey in 2019.

What we can see are marked rises in the number of girls missing school because of their period and a lack of access to sanitary products.

It is shocking to report an increase from 3% to 25% in the number of students going without sanitary products and a 15% rise in teens who say they are likely to miss learning due to their period.

This research starkly demonstrates that, far from diminishing with time and increased awareness of the issues, the need to tackle period inequality is more pressing than ever.

It is also important to note that the effect of COVID-19 has impacted the number of learners that have been able to access free products at their school, due to most schools being closed.



The barriers

When asked the reason for missing school,

9 in 10 girls (91%)

in the UK think that period poverty – where people find it difficult to afford sanitary products – is a real issue.

More than half (56%) of girls

agree that period poverty is not taken seriously enough by the Government (interestingly higher than the figure of 39% from the Republic of Ireland survey), while 41% say that period poverty is not fully understood by the Government.

To tackle period poverty, 7 in 10 girls

think that free sanitary products should be provided at schools and colleges while 45% believe they should be made available to everybody. Nearly 2 in 5 (39%) say that the stigma around periods must be removed.

However, only 6%

say they do have access to free sanitary products – a large drop from 21% in 2019.

Just over a quarter (26%)

currently have access to free sanitary products while learning, although 3 in 5 (61%) think that free sanitary products should be made available in school and college toilets.

Less than 1 in 5 (18%)

have access to free sanitary items in an open basket in the school washrooms, while only 1 in 8 can get them from a free vending machine – even though 45% think they should be made available there.



During the pandemic,

more than half of students (59%) who normally have access to free sanitary products while at school or college said none were sent home for them to use.

As many as 44% feel that access to

free sanitary products when needed would be by far the biggest help to them while on their period at school, followed by having a dedicated member of staff they could approach (18%).

Half of girls (50%)

think that being unable to afford or access sanitary products holds them back from attending school every day - a rise from 46% in 2019.

36% believe that

there is a lack of education over matters such as periods and contraception (just 2% fewer than in 2019).

In fact, 17% say that a lack of education

is the biggest barrier facing young girls at school - more than double the 8% who thought it was the case two years ago - along with a lack of access to sanitary products.

Key figures

Do you think period poverty is a real issue?

Age of respondents

	Total	13-14	15-16	17-18
Yes, definitely	56%	49%	63%	55%
Yes, somewhat	35%	37%	27%	40%
No	9%	14%	11%	5%

	Yes, Definitely	Yes, Somewhat	No
East of England	59%	33%	9%
Greater London	60%	33%	7%
East Midlands	70%	24%	7%
West Midlands	51%	38%	12%
North East	75%	25%	0%
North West	68%	17%	15%
Northern Ireland	72%	11%	17%

Scotland	58%	37%	6%
South East	64%	27%	8%
South West	63%	24%	14%
Wales	42%	50%	8%
Yorkshire & the Humber	61%	22%	17%
Republic of Ireland	40%	47%	13%

Key figures

What action do you think needs to be taken to tackle period poverty?



What do you consider to be the biggest barrier facing young girls at school in the UK?

Having to miss school due to a lack of access to sanitary products	Lack of education when it comes to things such as periods and contraception	Social media pressures	Pressure to do well	Sexism
17%	17%	17%	10%	9%

Did you know?

Schools in England can access free period products through the Department for Education Period Products scheme, in partnership with **phs** Group.

If you are a school or college in England, contact us today at periodproducts@phs.co.uk or call 01827 255500 to find out how you can order your free products for your learners.

Free sanitary products

Just over a quarter of schoolgirls (26%) in the UK have access to free sanitary products in school or college.

When girls were asked where they thought they should have access to free sanitary products outside the home, the school or college toilets was the most popular choice, with two-thirds supporting the move.

61%

believe free sanitary products should be provided in school or college toilets.

46%

would like to see them in pharmacies.

43%

suggest sending them directly to girls at home who say they need help.

45%

favour an open basket in the school toilets.

45%

would like to see them available from a free vending machine in the school washrooms.

41%

say it would be helpful to find them in public toilets (outside of school/college).

40%

would like to access them at a gym or leisure centre.

Has your school sent period products home to students during the pandemic?

27%
Yes

59%
No

14%
Not sure



Summary

Clearly, big steps are still needed to tackle period poverty and inequality, but what should be done?

There is no more valid an opinion than that of the very people this study has reached out to, once again, in a bid to achieve greater awareness of the issues and campaign for a better deal: our girls themselves.

If nine in 10 girls in the UK are saying that period poverty is a real issue, there is a problem – and a significant one, at that. While most learners across the UK can access free products, there is still some work to do around the education and awareness of these products to ensure the products are being accessed by the learners, when they need them.

Most girls in the UK feel they are being let down and that those making decisions that can affect the quality of their lives are not giving period inequality and poverty the priority it deserves or failing to understand how it impacts their learning.

Seven in 10 girls think that providing free sanitary products in schools and colleges – among other places – will tackle period poverty, along with raising awareness and improving education. So, there is hope on the ground. Whatever the barriers, we need to make sure that we are listening

to girls and young women in our communities, that real experiences are considered, that changing opinions and perceptions are noticed and taken on board, and that prompt, measurable action is taken to continue bringing them down. With half believing that being unable to afford or access sanitary products is holding them back from learning, too much is at stake to allow the status quo to continue.

The more we talk about their needs, the more the stigma is removed. But we also need to back up more talking with more action. Two years on, and in spite of the unprecedented challenges and impact of the pandemic, there has been some progress. However, there is also a notable limbo and even more urgency required to address some areas – such as the rising perception that a lack of education is contributing to period inequality and poverty.

During the pandemic, more than half of students who normally have access to free sanitary products while at school or college said that none were sent home for them to use. Not only have girls lost invaluable, irretrievable time at school due to closures and restrictions but there has been a double whammy of not having been provided with sanitary products they would otherwise be able to access.

The economic impact of the pandemic itself will have undoubtedly exacerbated period poverty, with many families in the UK finding it increasingly difficult to provide essential products for their children while losing their jobs or unable to work.

Raising awareness

More than half of girls (59%)

in the UK are not aware of any national schemes to provide free products in schools and colleges, although awareness is better in Scotland (62% aware) and Wales (58%).

However, of those who are aware,

almost 9 in 10 (88%) say that their school or college does not take part in any such scheme.

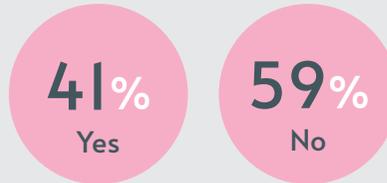
And the vast majority of teens (85%)

would like their school or college to participate in a national scheme providing free sanitary products.

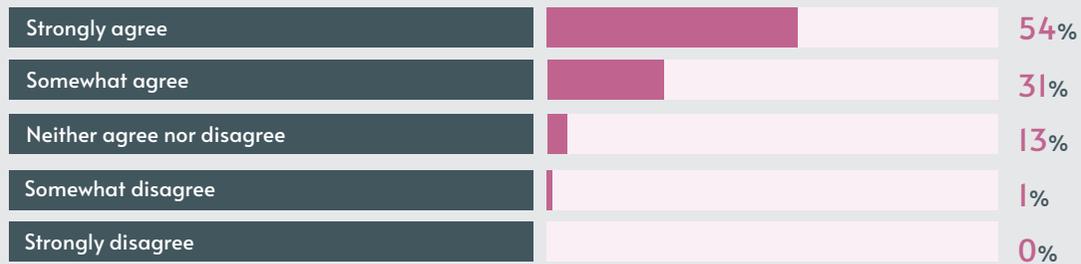


Key figures

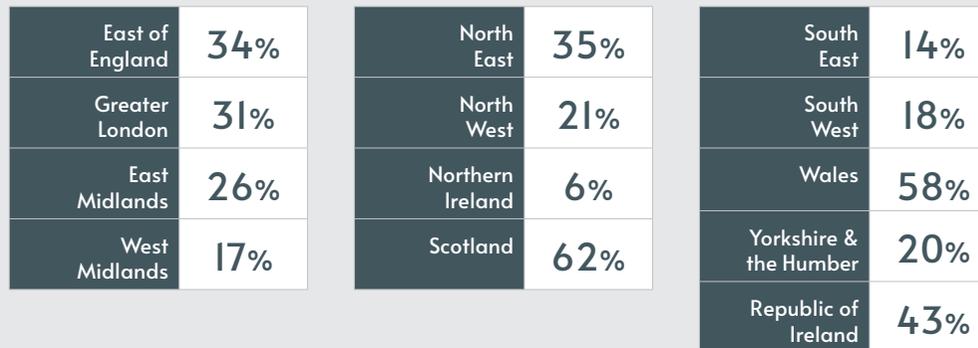
Are you aware of any national schemes to provide free period products in schools/colleges?



I would like my school/college to participate in a national scheme providing free sanitary products:



Awareness of any national schemes to provide free period products in schools/colleges:



phs Period Equality – what we're doing

In response to our research findings in 2019, we created a free-vend sanitary dispenser for washroom installation, providing girls and women with instant and discreet access to products.

We have also been working with the UK's Department for Education to implement a new Period Product Provision scheme with the aim of ensuring free period products are available to students who need them in state-maintained schools and colleges in England.

Our latest research into the experiences and opinions of girls surrounding period equality furthers our efforts to shine a light on the issues, raise awareness, develop further initiatives and achieve tangible improvements in support.

We were appointed to the UK Government's official Period Poverty Taskforce with one common goal; eliminating period poverty. In partnership with Bloody Good Period, phs is leading one of just three workstreams tasked with improving access to period products for those who need it. We believe that bringing together our expertise, experience and resource will create a force to be reckoned with.

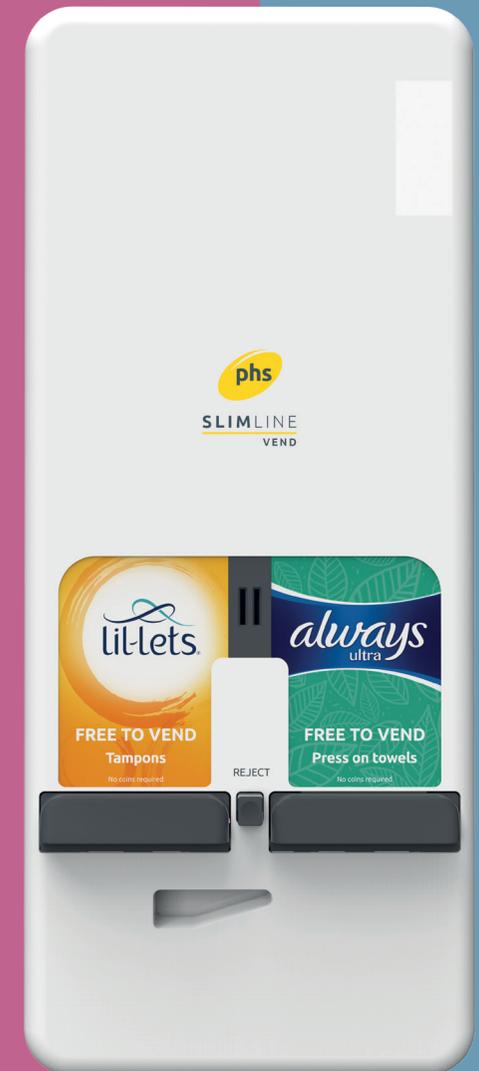
But we're not just talking about period equality, we're taking action, too.

In consultation with schools, local authorities and FM providers, we developed a free-vend sanitary machine that we believe is the best solution to provide free sanitary products to girls.

Located within washrooms, girls can simply open the vending drawer and take their choice of product whenever they need to. It's not only convenient; it's also discreet and offers schools a managed and hygienic method of distributing products without the embarrassment of having to ask a teacher or staff member.

What's more, we've pledged to offer the phs free-vend sanitary machines free of charge to the education sector. We believe every girl should have access to free sanitary products - because they are a necessity, not a luxury.

Together, we can make a difference and prevent periods from holding young people back!





Advice for teens

At **phs**, we understand that, as great as it is to be a teen, it's not always easy. Therefore, we have partnered with Lil-lets to provide support and advice for schools and teenagers to find out more information on "Becoming a Teen", "What is Puberty" and much more.

Download the "Ultimate Guide to Becoming a Teen" today.