

Period Poverty:

Understanding the hidden struggles of young women in Luton



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Introduction

This document presents a focused evaluation of period poverty among young women in Luton, carried out by Healthwatch Luton through engagement with students at Luton Sixth Form College. The evaluation forms part of a broader exploration of women's health needs and aims to shed light on how period poverty affects access to education, health equity, and personal dignity.

The evaluation identifies key barriers experienced by young women, including the affordability of menstrual products, stigma surrounding menstruation, and a lack of awareness about existing support services. It also highlights how these issues disproportionately affect students from underrepresented and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Healthwatch Luton conducted this work through structured focus groups, surveys, and discussions with students from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The engagement was designed to explore personal experiences and gather insights on current sources of support, levels of awareness, and unmet needs.

Findings from this evaluation emphasise the importance of providing discreet, repeated, and culturally sensitive access to menstrual health products. Participants voiced strong preferences for peer-friendly support systems and called for greater visibility of external services, such as council initiatives and national provision schemes.

This report offers practical recommendations to reduce stigma, improve access, and inform local strategies aimed at addressing period poverty. By amplifying the voices of young women, it supports a more inclusive and responsive approach to menstrual wellbeing across Luton's education and community settings.

Methodology

To evaluate the impact of period poverty among young women in Luton, Healthwatch Luton employed a mixed-methods approach centred on direct engagement with students, with a particular emphasis on understanding the experiences of those from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds. The aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of awareness, accessibility, and the personal and educational impact of limited access to menstrual products.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held at Luton Sixth Form College with female students aged 16–19, alongside a third group with female staff members. These sessions utilised Tommy’s Toolkit to facilitate discussions around planning a healthy pregnancy, lifestyle considerations, and access to information and support.



Partnership Working

This review was delivered in partnership with Luton Sixth Form College, whose collaboration enabled Healthwatch Luton to engage directly with students in a safe and supportive setting. Their involvement was vital in creating space for honest conversations about menstrual health, stigma, and access to support. The review also draws on Healthwatch Luton’s wider partnerships with local healthcare providers, the Maternity Voices Partnership, and public health teams across the Integrated Care System. These relationships help position period poverty within broader women’s health priorities, supporting a more joined-up, community-driven response.

Surveys and Questionnaires

As part of this evaluation, Healthwatch Luton distributed structured questionnaires to students at Luton Sixth Form College, with over **30 female students aged 16–19** participating. The questionnaire explored topics such as affordability of sanitary products, awareness of available support schemes, the use of alternatives during periods, and the impact of period poverty on education and wellbeing. Responses included both multiple-choice and open-text questions, allowing for both quantitative insights and personal reflections. This approach provided a clearer picture of the prevalence and consequences of period poverty among young women in an educational setting.

The methodology aimed to ensure inclusivity and representation, with a focus on engaging students from a range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, including Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Black African communities—groups that often face additional barriers to accessing menstrual health support. Cultural sensitivities and the need for discretion were carefully considered throughout the engagement process.

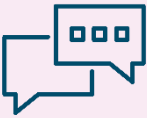


Key Themes and Findings

Summary of Perspectives

Young women in Luton shared a broad spectrum of experiences, concerns, and expectations related to menstrual health and access to period products. These perspectives revealed common challenges—such as stigma and affordability—as well as distinct needs shaped by cultural background, age, and personal or family circumstances.

Young Women



Many younger participants expressed limited awareness of support available for managing period poverty. While most accessed sanitary products through their college, few knew about wider services—such as council schemes or national apps designed to offer free menstrual products. Several students reported embarrassment or uncertainty about how to ask for help and indicated that their needs often changed over time, with no follow-up support offered later in the academic year.



“We filled in a form at the start of the course, but I was too embarrassed to ask for anything.” *(Student, Luton Sixth Form College)*

“I wish they’d asked us again later in the year—things changed at home.” *(Student participant)*

“No one told us about any apps or places to get help outside college.” *(Student, focus group)*



Women from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds

Participants from Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and African heritage shared specific concerns around accessing period products in a way that felt culturally sensitive and discreet. Some highlighted that conversations about menstruation were considered taboo in their households, making it harder to ask for help or access support at home. Others noted that information about available services was only provided in English, creating barriers for family members who spoke other languages. While many students expressed trust in college staff, they felt that external support was less accessible or visible to their communities.

Summary of Perspectives

Impact on access and attendance



Period poverty directly affected students' ability to attend and engage in college. Some missed lessons entirely due to lack of access to products, while others felt too anxious or uncomfortable to focus. Fear of leaking or being unprepared led students to stay home, especially when support wasn't clearly advertised or easy to access. Reliable, discreet provision is essential to ensure no student misses out on their education because of their period.



"The products came in a brown paper bag. It's awkward."
(Student describing her experience accessing support)



Views on Service Access and Delivery

Access to menstrual health support was often dependent on the visibility and proactivity of service delivery. Several students remarked that unless products were clearly advertised or actively offered, they were unlikely to seek them out—particularly in the absence of direct, non-judgemental communication from staff. Inconsistent or passive approaches to delivery meant some students went without support despite services technically being available. Participants emphasised the need for routine, normalised provision embedded within student services, rather than relying on individuals to initiate requests in potentially uncomfortable situations.

Key Feedback



33%

of those consulted, reported struggling to afford menstrual products.

17%

of women said they missed school or college due to a lack of period products

57%

stated they relied on the college's supply of menstrual products.

Summary of Key Findings

The evaluation identified several critical themes affecting women's access to and experiences of menstrual health in Luton:

Key Themes Influencing young Women's Experiences:

Widespread Impact on Education

Nearly 1 in 5 students reported missing school or college due to a lack of access to period products. Others described feeling distracted, anxious, or unprepared during lessons, which affected their ability to participate and engage fully.

Limited Awareness of External Support

Although 57% of students had accessed college-based supplies, **none** were aware of local council schemes, food bank support, or national initiatives like *Pick Up My Period*. The gap in signposting and outreach left students reliant on a single point of provision.

Stigma and Embarrassment

Embarrassment was a recurring theme. Some students avoided asking for help altogether, even when it was available, particularly at the start of the academic year. The packaging of products (e.g. brown paper bags) sometimes amplified discomfort.

Changing Needs Over Time

Many students pointed out that their circumstances changed throughout the year—due to shifts at home, financial insecurity, or health challenges—yet product access was only discussed once, at the start of term.

Cultural Silence and Family Barriers

Students from Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and African backgrounds shared that menstruation was rarely spoken about at home. Some noted that older family members struggled with language barriers, making it harder to advocate for or access help.

Summary of Key Findings

The evaluation identified several critical themes affecting women's access to and experiences of menstrual health in Luton:

Key Themes Influencing young Women's Experiences:

Lack of Menstrual Health Education

Several participants said they had not received any meaningful education on periods beyond basic biological explanations. There was confusion about what products to use, how often to change them, or how to manage menstruation during health conditions.

Use of Improvised Alternatives

A small number of students admitted to using toilet paper, socks, or old clothes during their periods when they couldn't access products. This highlights the real and immediate consequences of period poverty on hygiene and dignity.

Desire for Discreet, Ongoing Support

Students wanted easier, stigma-free access to products throughout the year—ideally without having to ask. Suggestions included making supplies available in toilets or at reception areas without formal requests.

Trust in Staff, but Inconsistent Access

While students felt able to approach certain staff for support, they stressed that this depended heavily on individual relationships and wasn't always reliable. The offer of help needed to be proactive and normalised across the setting.

Recommendations

Normalise Access

Place free menstrual products in accessible, discreet locations such as toilets, changing rooms, and common areas—rather than requiring students to request them in person. Avoid packaging that draws attention (e.g. brown paper bags), and ensure a regular supply is maintained without the need for gatekeeping.

Offer Ongoing Support

Revisit support for menstrual health at key points throughout the academic year—such as after term breaks or during wellbeing weeks—not just during induction. Use a simple re-offer mechanism like opt-in reminders, anonymous feedback forms, or drop-in sessions.

Improve Visibility of Schemes

Actively promote local and national support schemes—such as the Pick Up My Period app or council initiatives—using posters in high-traffic areas, digital screens, student newsletters, and social media. Consider integrating this information into PSHE lessons, induction packs, and tutor-led sessions.

Train and Empower Staff

Equip staff with the confidence and sensitivity to discuss period poverty, respond to disclosures, and signpost students effectively. Engage young women early to build knowledge and confidence.

Strengthen Community Partnerships

Collaborate with local organisations, such as food banks, youth groups, and public health teams, to widen access to menstrual products and support services beyond the college setting.

Expand Scope of Research

Explore period poverty across Luton's wider community, including other schools, community centres, and vulnerable groups, to gain a fuller understanding of the scale and variation of need.

Involve Young People in Solutions

Create opportunities for students to co-design support—such as anonymous ordering systems, awareness campaigns, or peer-led education—to ensure services are relevant, accessible, and empowering.

Conclusion

This review has highlighted that period poverty is a real and persistent issue affecting young women in Luton, with clear consequences for education, wellbeing, and dignity. While many students rely on college-based provision, access is not always visible, consistent, or sufficient to meet their changing needs.

Barriers such as stigma, lack of information, and cultural silence around menstruation continue to prevent students from accessing essential support. The use of makeshift alternatives and reports of missed education due to lack of products make clear that period poverty is not a personal issue—it is a structural one that demands a coordinated response.

Responsibility for identifying and addressing period poverty should not fall solely on individual institutions. Local authorities, education providers, health services, and community organisations all have a role to play in assessing need, promoting awareness, and ensuring access to products and menstrual health education. Period poverty must be treated as a public health and equity issue—with systems in place to identify gaps, reduce stigma, and provide ongoing support.

Although this review focused on a small group of students at one educational institution, the findings point to wider systemic challenges that are likely to affect many others across Luton. Further research is needed to explore the extent of period poverty in other settings—such as secondary schools, youth groups, and community organisations—and to develop targeted responses that reflect the full scale and diversity of need.

Through listening to young women from diverse backgrounds, this review makes clear that meaningful change is possible—if action is shared. By embedding menstrual wellbeing into policy, planning, and community delivery, stakeholders can help create a future where no one is excluded or held back because of their period.

About Healthwatch

Healthwatch Luton is the local champion for people using health and social care services across Luton. We promote choice and influence the provision of high-quality health, social care, and wellbeing services for all in our community.

Healthwatch Luton (HWL) has significant statutory powers to ensure that the voices of local people are heard and acted upon by those who commission, deliver, and regulate health and care services. HWL engages with all parts of Luton's diverse population to ensure that a broad range of experiences and views are considered, understood, and reflected in decisions about care. Our work is rooted in strong community connections and grounded in the real-life experiences of the people we serve.

Healthwatch Luton is part of the wider Healthwatch network across England, one of three local Healthwatch organisations in Bedfordshire. We belong to a national network supported by Healthwatch England, which provides guidance and oversight to ensure local Healthwatch work consistently and effectively in each of the 152 local authority areas in England.

As the only independent body focused entirely on people's experiences of health and social care, our role is to make sure that these services—and the decisions surrounding them—are shaped by the people who use them. At Healthwatch Luton, we believe that everyone's voice matters and should be at the heart of care.