



Irise International

Free products are only the beginning: Irise International responds to new Government commitments on periods in schools

Irise International welcomes the Government's decision to continue the Period Product Scheme for Schools and Colleges through the 2026–27 and 2027–28 academic years. This longer-term commitment provides welcome certainty for schools, colleges and the young people who rely on free period products to participate fully in their education. This progress follows years of campaigning by young people and menstrual justice organisations. Through our campaigns including Every Period Counts, young people have shared hundreds of experiences of struggling to access toilets and period products at school – and have consistently called on the Government to protect and improve the scheme. We celebrate this progress and the role that young people's leadership, testimony and persistence have played in securing it.

We are also delighted that the Department for Education's updated guidance, published on 21 September 2026, now addresses access to period products during exams and sports events – an issue Irise International, researchers and young people have evidenced, responded to and campaigned around for several years. The guidance recognises that pupils may be separated from their usual facilities during these events, may be unsure whether period products can be taken into exam rooms, and need clear information and accessible provision in advance.

Since 2024, Irise has championed youth-led solutions to these challenges through our UK Schools Toilet Policy Toolkit. Developed with young people and educators, and informed by Dr Maria Tomlinson's research with 77 teenagers, the toolkit provides practical guidance on implementing the scheme effectively and ensuring access to products during exams. Young people told us about leaking during exams, being unable to bring pads into exam rooms and fearing that carrying products would lead to accusations of cheating. Evidence submitted by Irise and Dr Tomlinson to the Women and Equalities Committee specifically highlighted these barriers and called for action.

The inclusion of exam access in national guidance is therefore an important and welcome step. It demonstrates what can happen when decision-makers listen to young people and act on evidence generated with them.

Provision must be matched by awareness and access

Extending the scheme is essential – but funding products is only part of the solution. A scheme cannot remove barriers to education if young people do not know it exists, cannot find the products, are required to ask an adult in front of others, or feel too embarrassed to access them.

The Government and the Women and Equalities Committee should therefore examine:

- how many eligible schools and colleges actively communicate the scheme to pupils, students and families;
- what proportion of pupils know that free period products are available and where to find them;
- whether products are available when and where they are needed, without requiring young people to ask;
- whether provision protects privacy and avoids reinforcing stigma;
- whether young people are involved in deciding which products are ordered and how they are distributed; and
- whether communication and provision are reaching pupils who face additional barriers, including disabled and neurodivergent pupils, LGBTQ+ young people, pupils from different faith and cultural backgrounds, and those experiencing poverty or exclusion.

The updated guidance rightly asks schools to consider protected characteristics and the needs of pupils with SEND, medical conditions or English as an additional language. But schools also need practical, evidence-based support to translate these commitments into inclusive everyday practice. This is why we are adapting our Period Confident Schools programme to specifically support pupils with SEN in mainstream schools as well as SEN-specific contexts. By working with young people with SEN, alongside their educators, we are identifying the specific barriers these young people face when using toilets and managing their periods at schools, creating solutions by and for young people with special education needs.

Products and education must work together

We welcome the Government's commitment to invest an additional £1 million in menstrual health education through the renewed Women's Health Strategy for England. The strategy states that this funding will support targeted work in schools and community settings, delivered in partnership with voluntary and community organisations, to improve girls' knowledge of menstrual health and when to seek healthcare. This is an important opportunity. However, further public detail is needed about how the programme will operate and how it will complement existing education and period-product provision.

We ask the Government to clarify:

- how and when the £1 million will be allocated;
- how voluntary and community organisations will be involved in designing and delivering the programme;
- whether funding will support teacher training, curriculum resources, public-awareness work and community programmes;
- what outcomes the programme is intended to achieve and how success will be measured;
- how it will reach underserved and marginalised groups; and

- how it will align with the Department for Education's Period Product Scheme and statutory health education.

Free products and high-quality menstrual health education should not be treated as separate interventions. Young people need to know that support exists, understand how to access it without stigma and have the knowledge and confidence to recognise when something may be wrong and seek appropriate help.

Stronger guidance needs practical, evidence-based resources

We also welcome the strengthened menstrual and gynaecological health content in the revised statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education guidance, which came into effect in September 2026. The greater emphasis on menstrual health, recognising symptoms and accessing appropriate healthcare is an important step forward.

But guidance alone does not give teachers the confidence, training or practical materials they need to deliver this education well. Schools are being asked to strengthen menstrual health education while often having limited time, expertise and capacity to identify and assess suitable resources. Without clear implementation support, provision will remain inconsistent, and pupils' access to high-quality education will continue to depend on the confidence and resources of individual schools and teachers.

Evidence-based solutions already exist.

Irise's Period Confident Curriculum is a practical, age-appropriate menstrual health programme co-designed by primary school teacher Belszki and Dr Maria Tomlinson at the University of Sheffield. It is grounded in research with young people about what they want and need to learn, including:

- practical experience of different period products;
- understanding menstrual health symptoms and when to seek support;
- honest and inclusive discussion of menstrual experiences;
- building confidence to communicate about periods; and
- enabling pupils who do not menstruate to become informed and supportive allies.

The curriculum has already been delivered to more than 250 pupils and is being developed into a comprehensive resource pack, including structured lesson plans, worksheets and teacher-training materials for Years 4 to 7. It directly supports the revised RSHE guidance, including the need to provide menstrual education before some pupils begin menstruating. Yet there is currently no clear route within the Government's guidance for schools to discover or access this existing, evidence-based provision. The Government has stated that the Department for Education does not proactively endorse or mandate third-party RSHE materials. However, it also recognises that schools need effective training and resources, and the statutory guidance already references some established external materials.

If the Department for Education will not directly signpost quality-assured third-party curricula, the Government must establish another transparent mechanism through which schools can identify evidence-based, inclusive resources and the organisations equipped to support implementation.

Otherwise, there is a risk that public funding will be used to recreate resources that already exist, while overlooking the young people, educators, researchers and voluntary organisations that have spent years developing, testing and improving them.

Keep the evidence – and young people’s voices – current

The [research section of the Period Product Scheme guidance](#) continues to rely primarily on evidence gathered when the scheme was established in 2020. Six years later, an entirely new cohort of young people is experiencing secondary education. More recent evidence – including Irise’s research and direct work with pupils, educators and schools – provides important insight into how the scheme is operating, where barriers persist and what inclusive implementation looks like.

As a leading UK menstrual justice organisation working with young people across the diversity of menstrual experience, Irise provides current research and practical, youth-led solutions. Our free [resources](#), [UK Schools Toilet Policy Toolkit](#), [Period Confident Schools programme](#) and [Red Report 2026](#) are designed to support this work.

We therefore ask the Government to:

- signpost Irise’s free, evidence-based resources in relevant national guidance and implementation support;
- regularly incorporate current research and learning from pupils and schools;
- provide practical guidance on inclusive implementation of the Period Product Scheme;
- involve diverse young people in the design, monitoring and evaluation of policy;
- explain how schools will be supported to identify high-quality menstrual health curriculum;
- establish a transparent process for assessing and signposting suitable resources;
- invest in teacher training as well as curriculum content;
- involve young people and youth-led menstrual justice organisations in developing the promised £1 million menstrual health education programme;
- build on, rather than duplicate, proven work already developed by the voluntary and community sector; and
- recognise and reference the organisations and researchers whose evidence and solutions inform national policy.

And finally - a vulnerable share

Recognition matters - not only as a question of transparency and good evidence practice, but because it enables small charities to demonstrate their impact and secure the funding needed to continue their work. At a time when charities across the UK are under intense financial pressure, appropriate attribution helps sustain the organisations generating evidence, developing solutions and supporting schools to put policy into practice. It also helps ensure that future public investment builds on what has already been learned, created and tested.

The Government and the contract holders should not start from scratch. Young people, educators, researchers and organisations such as [Irise International](#), [Love Your Period](#), [The Menstrual Health Project](#), [All Yours Period Box](#), [Girls Friendly Society](#), [Sex Ed Matters](#), [Cysters](#), [WEN](#) have already created and tested solutions. They should be recognised, signposted and resourced as partners in what comes next.

Young people helped make this progress possible. They must remain at the heart of what comes next.

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