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I: So, the way that it's been working with other people that I've spoken to, it kind of goes into the pre-COVID, so what would you normally do to support people that are experiencing period poverty, or that need products? And then what happened during lockdown, and if there were any changes? And then a bit about how things are at the moment, 'cause obviously we're in and out of tiers and lockdowns and everything else, so...

R: Okay, would you like me to start?

I: Yeah, can you first of all, can you tell me about the work that you do, and the sorts of things that you provide, like the services that you provide?

R: I am the Inclusion Manager here. I am responsible for things around attendance, behaviour, safeguarding vulnerable children, admissions, welfare, pupil welfare, special tuition and the wellbeing of children basically. And part of that covers period poverty or period dignity as it's being called now. Before the pandemic started, each local authority was given a grant with regards to sourcing sanitary products and dispensing machines for schools. We utilised that grant to purchase, vending machines; vending machines with free sanitary products included in them, were made available for all of our secondary schools, and in the primary schools as well, for years five and six, well I mean, if younger pupils required them, obviously they would be able to use them as well, and our special school and PRU.

We have bought into a service, so that the bins get cleaned and taken away on a monthly basis, and then we would fill the sanitary products as required.

I: So, did you have a contract with someone to do that?

R: Yes, we've got a contract now, a three-year contract. We've also, since then, sourced some environmentally friendly products. So, we now have these available for the young females as well, and as part of that we had an environmental [campaignist/campaigner 00:02:08] go out to our secondary schools to meet with some of our young females to discuss the various options, and to make them aware why it would be better switching to products that didn't contain plastic, et cetera. We aimed to support them with their female needs, but also to make them more environmentally aware, so they that they are more informed to make choices.

Since then, when we went into lockdown, obviously all of the sanitary products were in schools. Some headteachers took some home, and distributed them to the young females as part of their keeping in touch visits, they could, or where they perceived a need. We then distributed some to some of the communities that we work with (EAL, GT, EHE) and through the youth services, so that young people could access them actually in the

community. We've delivered them to some of our gypsy traveller community and for some of our more vulnerable pupils, looked after those eligible for free school meals, so that whoever we were made aware that required the products, got the products, and also, we had them available in the community, so people could access them should they need to.

I: So, how did you go about giving the products to the travelling community and...?

R: Well, that's one of the groups that we support, so we have a team here who support them, so they went out and delivered them on a house-to-house basis. We've got a site here, so some were delivered up to the site, and then others were delivered to the houses, along with learning/wellbeing resources, some of those young people didn't have laptops and things, so, paper resources were delivered. And one of the positives of that, is that we've been able to forge better links with the gypsy traveller community. The other community that we've delivered them to, are those who have opted to electively home educate their children. Again, it's been a way of being able to forge better links with them, so sanitary products have been delivered to some of those young females, when we've been made aware of their particular needs.

We set up a Vulnerable Learners Panel, right at the start of the pandemic, that was meeting weekly. It then met monthly, when schools reopened, but now meets weekly again. At this panel colleagues from Health, Children's Services, Education, YOS, Police, CLA, were providing information on vulnerable families, so we knew those that were most in need, and possibly those young females who would need products that we could then deliver.

We had another delivery go into schools last week, to replenish the stocks that were available, and we continue to buy environmentally friendly products as well, so that there is a choice in school. And we've got products here, so if somebody comes here, or we're made aware of a family that's not in school, we can get a delivery of products out to them.

I: So, people can contact you, as well as you contacting people that might need them?

R: Yes, they don't tend to contact me necessarily, they might contact the team leader, or the team will be out and about and they will hear that somebody is struggling financially and that they need some support. It might be that they need some food, they might need some school resources, and also they might need some sanitary products. So, we've been able to support each other to make sure we get things out to different families of need.

I: So, do people specifically ask for products, or do you kind of include them, just in general, as a just in case?

R: It's been a bit of both actually. I mean, for example, we're quite a small local authority, so we all tend to wear several hats, and we all tend to know each other, so we're quite a strong team. When, at the very start, colleagues were delivering free school meals in vans, a couple of colleagues came back, and said, look, there's a family here, they're struggling, they're needy, they've got two teenage girls, I think they would benefit from some sanitary products. And the next time they went up with the school dinners, they took some products with them. And then there's been the other case, when young people have spoken to their support workers, and have said, look, you know, we're struggling financially, we do need some things, we need some sanitary products, and so they've sort of come two ways.

I: And have you been giving reusable products as well as disposable ones?

R: Yes.

I: And, have you got any sense of how the reusable ones have been received?

R: They've been received quite well, to be perfectly honest. Like I said, we did a consultation with some young people, [when they went into school 00:06:33], to make them aware exactly what they looked like, you know? We basically bought, they're nicely packaged, got little bags, zipped compartment, and in the bags there's a pair of pants, and there are two reusable clip on pads. They have a life-cycle of about 30 washes or something along those lines. So, they last for a while.

Possibly not for recording, but just for your information, we did have feedback that actually the pant sizes, we could do with some larger sizes, so we just went for the run of the mill, the middle size and so then based upon that, next time we placed an order, we made sure we had a variety of sizes. So, we just sort of evaluate things as they go along.

I: Yeah, that's great. So, do you have a mechanism for giving, so you've talked about how you would explain about the different reusable products and that, so is that something that's happening in the schools, are they doing that kind of education alongside?

R: Yes, with the actual products, posters and leaflets, were circulated to the schools, as well as links to small videos that have been put together by certain suppliers of products, talking about the benefits of, a, how to use the products and, b, the benefits of using reusable products. So, it's all been a part of an education, you know, for the young females as well as, you know, an education on how to use the products, but also an education on why using products with less plastic is a more sustainable lifestyle. And it fits in with the curriculum as well, as part of their pastoral support and their global citizenship.

- I: Yeah. So, were those sorts of resources still available when schools were shut?
- R: Well, they're available online, so people could look for them online themselves. But, I don't know whether...schools probably didn't, it was probably not top of their agenda, when they were first of all in lockdown, to have that discussion. We'd already had those discussions with the young girls, so they would have been aware that actually, those resources are available online.
- I: So, do you have any kind of sense of what normal uptake of the free products was, and if that changed at all, during lockdown?
- R: We certainly found there was more demand, more people came upfront and said they required free school meals than prior to lockdown, for various reasons, people were struggling more financially. So, as a result of that, we were more aware of more families that would need, or possibly need sanitary products as well as free school meals.
- I: That's interesting. Yeah, there's so many reasons, aren't there, why that demand's gone up?
- R: **Yes.** And the other thing to bear in mind is obviously, since then, with everything that's been gone on, there have been redundancies, so people who might not have been eligible for free school meals prior to lockdown, are now eligible for free school meals, and obviously with Christmas coming up and the financial pressures that that all brings, sometimes families might be more inclined to buy a box of biscuits and a box of crackers, because they want to keep the festive spirit going, and then forget that actuaor for using that particular word, but, you know, mundane items, so we've been able to provide that for them.
- I: That's good. So, how is stuff now then? So, obviously we keep going in and out, and schools are back?
- R: Well, since March, we've been able to establish good keeping in touch processes. These are undertaken, either by the schools, team staff or via the key workers. And like I said, the Vulnerable Learners Panel that we have set up, earlier in March 2020, has been very crucial. For example, **[Sarah Bowen 00:10:17]**, for pupils on our vulnerable register, we know who the key worker is. The Keyworker and other panel members are able to feed into the meeting with information, so that we can confirm the pupil's welfare; has the pupil got everything she/he needs etc. The group will ensure that somebody has seen the children, and where not possible this is escalated to the Police. It might be something totally nothing to do with sanitary products, it might be, substance misuse in the family, mental health or are there are concerns because there are strange comings and goings next door. It is about making sure that we have eyes and ears everywhere, because with the children not being in school, we need to try

and keep in touch with them as best we can, while they are out and about in the community.

I: So, how are kids referred to the panel then, is it like a...oh, I can't think of the word here.

R: Just at the start of lockdown, using the information that we hold and that provided, all vulnerable pupils are on a database, so we were able to categorise them as children looked after, children eligible for free-school meals, those with behavioural needs, those with additional learning needs, etc. And, from that, based upon professional judgement and need we were able to identify the most vulnerable.

I: So that's reviewed regularly then, isn't it? Yeah.

R: Yes

I: And then you said that the products are back in schools now anyway, now that they're open?

R: Yes. Well, secondary schools shut last week. The primary schools are open until today, but then there's the Christmas period, so schools would have been able to make sure that young girls could take things home with them.

I: Okay, and are you still going to be doing that system of people can contact, like all the different points that you mentioned, as well?

R: Yes, you know, we shall be keeping in touch with people over the Christmas period and beyond should schools not re-open.

I: Yeah. In that case, I don't actually think there's any much more that I need to ask you, 'cause as I say, the project's mainly looking at what's been done to continue to support people that might be needing access to products, or receiving the education side of things.

And it sounds like, from what you're saying, that you've got a lot of different ways that you can keep tabs on people and support them throughout everything that's going on.

R: Yes.

I: But, is there anything, so thinking about the future and what that might look like, is there anything that you think you'll keep or that you might need to re-evaluate or have another look at, or another think about at any point?

R: Well, I mean, it's something we'll re-evaluate, you know, as time goes on. It might be that, we will have more products delivered to all the youth centres, which we didn't to begin with, because all the products were

available in schools, but, there are some children who don't go to school on a regular basis, for whatever reason, and there are some children who maybe feel more comfortable in accessing products outside of the school environment. So, we have found that that's been a useful way of making sure that these products are accessible to more people.

I: Yeah, so you'll keep that in place then?

R: Yes, definitely.

I: Yeah, that's interesting, and the different ways that you say people access things, or they might not want to access them in different environments?

R: Yes.

I: Yeah. And you said that you've got the contracts for three years, with the people that are providing the products?

R: Yes.

I: And the grant funding that you get from the government, how long is that for, is that for a year?

R: The grant funding is reviewed annually. We did have our allocation confirmed this year, but then with COVID it was reduced by half, because of WG having to spend money elsewhere, which is understandable, so we're hoping, when and if things improve next year, that the full allocation will be resumed.

I: Do you know when you'd find that out?

R: We normally get that towards, I would have said about February time, end of February, the beginning of March next year, as the financial year finishes at the end of March, so it's usually towards the end of the period.

I: So, if it was to be the case that you'd still carry on getting half of what you would normally get, what would be the impact of that? Is that going to have a big impact or...?

R: Well, we would be able to carry on with the commissioning service for the actual products and the cleaning side of things. We have less money to spend on actually filling up the vending machines.

I: Right.

R: But, I have just heard from one school this morning, because like I said, there was a delivery went last week, to say that they've got plenty of stock, so I'm hoping that most schools are, or I know some schools are in a similar boat, particularly the primary schools. So, it might be that what

we do, is we will move things around. Where they're being used less at that school, we can make sure they can go to another school.

I: Yeah. Are you keeping tabs on that sort of thing, or have you not really started to look at it yet?

R: We have to a certain degree, and in all fairness some schools have come and said, that they are running short, can we have an order etc. But because we hadn't had an order go into schools for a while, we just sent out an order for all of them, to make sure they were all topped up, and we had the money available, but next time we'll see whether we can move some of the products around before we place another order.

I: Yeah, and so hopefully, if you got the full grant again, what would you be able to do that you hadn't necessarily done this year?

R: Well, what we could do, is we could buy more environmentally friendly products, because they are more expensive. So, you know, I know they last longer, but they're still expensive products to purchase, and more expensive products to purchase than the disposable products, so we could purchase more of those.

I: Yeah, it's the upfront cost isn't it, is...?

R: It is, yeah.

I: Yes, which I think a lot of people don't realise, is that they're expensive to start with, and then they start saving you the money.

R: Well yes, exactly.

I: But if you don't have that money in the first place?

R: That's part of an education thing, isn't it, just to make people aware, yes?

I: Yes, right, is there anything else then, that you wanted to add or...?

R: No, I mean, I assumed it was going to be that. It was just something that you were going to ask us how we'd been managing. And like I said, I would like to stress that one of things it has done, is we've been able to forge stronger links with different communities, that maybe we struggled to engage with previously, because we have been able to offer them things that they need in difficult times.

I: Yeah, yes definitely. Someone I was speaking to the other day, was saying exactly the same thing, that you've got better links with groups that you hadn't necessarily had strong links with previously?

R: Yes, it's unfortunate that it's taken something like this to do that, but, out of every cloud comes a silver lining, albeit a very small silver lining.

I: We've got to take them where we can, haven't we?

R: That's very true, it's very true, yes.

I: Well, thank you so much for your time then, [REDACTED]

R: No problem, thank you, and will you be sending a copy of the report around, or the research around?

I: Yes, so what I'm hoping to do is do some, I'm going to be doing a mixture of online dissemination events, as well as sending around summaries. I'll also send you a copy of the consent form, and a copy of your transcript as well, when I've got it back.

R: Great, okay, brilliant. Okay, well thank you for that.

I: So yes.

R: And I'll wait to hear from you.

I: Okay, thank you so much for your time.

R: No problem, take care.

I: [REDACTED], take care, bye-bye.

R: Bye-bye.

End of transcript