

# Transcribed by: 1st Class Secretarial Services

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R: Hello.

I: Hello, how are you doing?

R: I'm good, thank you. Sorry, I couldn't answer your call, I was just finishing off another call.

I: Oh, that's alright. Has it been one of those days?

R: Yes.

I: It feels like every day's like that at the moment.

R: It does, yes, it's from one call to another, to a Zoom meeting, to another call so, yes.

I: Oh, bless you. Well, thank you for agreeing to do this and...

R: No worries.

I: ...it'll be as painless as possible, hopefully. So can I just confirm, have you received the participant information sheet that I sent over?

R: I believe I did.

I: Have you got any questions at all about the research or the interview?

R: No.

I: Do you give consent to be part of the research?

R: I do, yes.

I: Thank you, and do you consent also for this to be recorded?

R: I do.

I: Brilliant, thank you very much. So can you start by telling me please about what organisation you're with?

R: I am the chair of The Homeless Period Wolverhampton.

I: And that's in Wolverhampton.

R: Yes.

I: Can you tell me a bit more about the sort of work that you do and the services that you provide?

- R: Sure, yes, so we have been operating for three years now, since January 2018 and our aim is to tackle period poverty in the city of Wolverhampton and how we do that is by collecting donations of menstrual products and toiletries and new underwear and other essential items. Then we distribute those out to people who need them, who are experiencing period poverty so whether they are homeless, rough sleeping, in a hostel, in a shelter, if they've been victims of domestic abuse or if they're just families and individuals who are struggling at the minute. We also donate through food banks and a range of different organisations across the city who support those in need.
- I: Brilliant, thank you. What did kind of normal provision and services look like before COVID-19 lockdown?
- R: Well, before COVID, and we're in lockdown three now, aren't we?
- I: Yes.
- R: So before COVID, we had a really good network of individuals and businesses who supported us who regularly donated products. We had our pink bins at different locations across the city that people could pop their donations in so whether that be in a pharmacy, in a local business, in a coffee shop et cetera, that's how we would collect things and then we'd go along and empty those bins as they got full. We would run community packing sessions where we would get lots of volunteers and people who were interested in supporting us into our offices and we would spend a lovely day learning all around period poverty just through general discussion and things and packing up all the donations to then be distributed out to the different organisations and the individuals who need them.
- I: So do you provide services directly to people or via the kind of food banks, drop-in centres et cetera?
- R: The majority of our support does go to food banks and different organisations. We do one to one support but we find we don't get as many enquiries of that because people...I don't know whether it's stigma or what it might be but we do get people come to us directly and then we go and drop them off but by far, our biggest sort of work is via other organisations.
- I: Is it mainly the period products that you provide or do you also do education and other services?
- R: So we...probably mainly products but we do workshops with schools. So we've spent, as I say, it's been difficult, as you'll know in research and academia, it's difficult to make those connections with schools but we have got now strong relationships with three schools in the city and we've been in and done a variety of different things in terms of workshops and education provision and obviously providing them with products as well.

- I: So you support quite a wide range of groups then, you've mentioned homeless people as well as school children.
- R: Yes, so we started out, obviously we've got the title, The Homeless Period. We started out with the intention of supporting homeless and rough sleepers and we did do that in the early days when we were very, very small. It was really just me and my wife collecting products or buying products and having donations from friends and family and taking those out with the homeless outreach team and then it just very quickly grew. We realised there is a lot of hidden period poverty and that period poverty can be experienced in different ways by different groups and so we sort of formalised and we became a registered charity. We work directly with different organisations because we found that was the best way to reach the people most in need on the biggest scale.
- I: Do you rely on donations then?
- R: We do, yes.
- I: How do you get them?
- R: So as I said, before COVID, we had our pink bins and things and since COVID all the places where our pink bins are have shut apart from pharmacies but we've noticed a huge decline in donations going into those bins.
- I: Right, okay, so there has been a decline in donations as well then, yes.
- R: Yes, so we've found that people have tended to give us money to buy products because they can't access our bins or we have gone and collected them directly from people who would normally put them in the bins but as I say, they can't do that so they've either brought them directly to our office or we've collected from them but that's on a small scale. So, yes, so we've become more reliant on funding to allow us to purchase items. What we're finding is that we're using places like In Kind Direct but their stocks are really limited in terms of what you can order from them at the minute and a lot of wholesalers have quite limited stock. So we have got quite a good relationship with a local supermarket who allow us to order in bulk from them and they often throw in donations to us as well on top.
- I: Do you rely on volunteer support to deliver the services?
- R: Yes, we're all volunteers; no-one gets paid.
- I: How many of you are there?
- R: So there's four trustees and then we have a few regular volunteers who help us by picking up any donations if there are any bins that are open, driving round to deliver donations, things like that. Then when we had our

period pack sessions, we'd usually get sort of ten volunteers turn up to those but obviously they're not happening at the minute.

I: How do you recruit volunteers for that?

R: Just by social media.

I: So you've touched on it a little bit but can you tell me more about how COVID lockdown from March until September affected your service provision?

R: Yes, so our usual ways of collecting donations stopped so we had to look at new ways of doing that. We had an increase in demand from food banks and different organisations but then we also had to change our way in which we could deliver those products to them because obviously different offices were shut, our offices were shut. Yes, so we had to make adjustments with that and then we did support...Wolverhampton had a large food distribution hub, they distributed food packages to households who were on low incomes and we got feedback that they weren't including other essential items in them so there would be one or two toilet rolls and food but that was about it. So we communicated with the hub to ensure menstrual products went into the packs as well and we started donating some of our products to the food distribution hub to ensure that families who needed them were getting products that way as well. That was a big change.

Obviously, our community packing sessions haven't been going ahead. We also have a small youth steering group and we need to do more work to move it online because we were meeting physically bi-monthly and we couldn't do that so, yes, so we did more work to it to move it online.

I: Have there been any changes in how you communicate with service users?

R: Yes, so it's...we communicate with all of our organisations as we would via email and then with service users, people can contact us via our website or over social media so that's been the main way that people have communicated with us.

I: Have they told you anything about how the lockdown has affected them??

R: I'm trying to think. I remember in lockdown one we had people really struggling and especially where, just one family's coming to mind, both parents have quite...are clinically vulnerable so had to isolate for the 12 weeks.

I: Right, okay, yes.

R: Therefore they had...they've got two teenage daughters and they also had to isolate too so they were very, very reliant upon food, the food delivery by the local authority and they reached out to us because they were really struggling because they had three menstruating women in the house and

they couldn't get out the house and they weren't being given products so, yes, that highlighted that issue to us. Just speaking to different community organisations and campaigners around the city, we are being made aware of households where maybe people have been put on furlough or lost their jobs due to COVID and how they're having to prioritise obviously feeding their kids and therefore resorting to...well, one lady's using cut up towels and because they...it's something people don't want to admit to very easily.

Sometimes you're finding out about issues people are experiencing by speaking them about other things first. So it might be that someone's speaking to them around, I don't know, a food parcel and then saying, oh, do you need any other support? What about other items such as...and that's when they'll go, oh, yes, actually, I'm really struggling now. It's not something they'll necessarily speak to you upfront about. It's not the first thing they come to people about.

I: Yes, so they won't necessarily seek out support directly but when it's mentioned with other networks, other organisations, it's something that becomes apparent, it's a need.

R: Yes.

I: So it sounds then that there's been a kind of uptake in demand but a reduction in supply during sort of COVID [voices overlapping 12:52].

R: Yes, so we're directly purchasing and bulk purchasing where we can. We've had...we get support from Hey Girls so we'll get donations from them as well which are really great. We've recently been asked to distribute essential items by the local authority and they've given us £3,000 to purchase items to distribute but we're currently struggling to actually buy them because all the large scale, you know, like wholesalers have got such limited stock.

I: Do you think that's to do with stockpiling or production?

R: I'm not sure whether it's due to, you know, issues with imports now because I know there are different border issues, aren't there, and trade issues because of Brexit. I don't know. I suppose it's all compounding it but, yes, we have one of our trustees just today emailed me because we've been trying to find places where we can get some bulk purchases from and she's really struggling with that.

I: Have you seen any sort of new groups emerge that requires support during this time?

R: One group that we're aware has emerged and this was because we've been working with another organisation who works specifically with South Asian communities in the city and they told us that a group they've seen emerge have been from university students who kind of got stuck here because they couldn't travel back and then the universities have policies around their

student accommodation and all sorts of things so a lot of these students ended up, yes, sort of adrift, really, and they couldn't access their usual support services. Most of their work went because they'd be working in hospitality or retail so their income went. So we've been providing products and different essential items to this organisation who are then distributing the packs to these women. I think it was something like...it's quite a scary number. I can't remember exactly. It was something like 120...

I: Oh, wow, yes.

R: ...they identified so not a handful of people. It was quite a big [15:43] group.

I: Who first identified that, do you know? Like how that became...?

R: Yes, it was...well, I only know that this organisation told me about them, that they'd come to their attention. I don't know how they directly came to their attention. I imagine it would be through community...through that community and maybe through some of their places of religion.

I: Okay, yes, so a more informal kind of routes of support there.

R: Yes.

I: Do you feel you've been able to support the changes in need?

R: Yes, I think so.

I: What's worked well?

R: I think what's worked well is we've been successful with funding which has been a real lifeline. The other thing we had to do, actually was quite a big change is we moved office at the beginning of November because the rent and everything we were paying in our old offices wasn't sustainable and the landlord would not give us any sort of reduction or holiday on that. In fact they made us pay right up to the end of this...they worked in quarters and they made us pay fully up to the end of a quarter. They wouldn't even give us a...you know, even though we weren't in the offices anymore and they could then rent them to someone else, they wouldn't even give us a month off and we ended up double paying rent...

I: Wow, yes.

R: ...for the old office and the new office so we could move but, yes, I mean, it's worked out quite well because we're now paying a third of what we were paying for double the space.

I: What barriers have you faced? Other than having to pay double rent. [Inaudible 18:07] try to support the changes that you've seen during COVID and continuing with providing the services.

- R: I think it's been one of our trustees has had to isolate. That's been a challenge. We've had to obviously move all of our meetings and everything else online so we can't physically...we've had to...when we moved offices, for example, you know, you've got all your social distancing to be aware of, you've got limited number of people because we haven't wanted to get volunteers in because, you know, social distancing and keeping people safe. Yes, so as I say, there's only four of us and whenever we go into lockdown, we have one trustee who has to self-isolate because of her health conditions. Then we've had another trustee who was isolating, one, because her husband was very ill and, two, because she found she'd come into contact directly with someone who then tested positive. So when you've got a very small team, this has quite a big impact in terms of who then is available and my other trustee doesn't drive so...
- I: Right, oh, gosh, yes.
- R: Yes, so a lot of the operational management and actual delivering things and getting things out there, just then tends to fall just to two people.
- I: Like you said, it's voluntary as well so...
- R: And it's voluntary, yes, so we all do it because we believe in it and we've all got day jobs.
- I: Yes, so has it been a lot of extra work for yourself and others on the team?
- R: Yes, so it's not something we just do occasionally. It's sort of something that we have to put time into daily, so it's, yes, it's a daily consideration.
- I: What do service...?
- R: The other challenge actually, the other challenge has been that the funding that we have secured has been very time limited. So we had one pot of money that we had last...when did we get the funding through? I think it was around September time, October time and it has to be spent by next week.
- I: Oh, wow, gosh.
- R: And then we had another one shortly after that, that has to be spent by the end of March. So they're all very time limited amounts of money which is great in terms of an immediate COVID response but in terms of sustaining the organisation or imagining that the issue is suddenly going to stop by that time is...yes, so that's been challenging. Trying to continue supporting people in this whole environment, yes, is...yes, and just knowing you've got this pressure of you've got to spend these funds or you've got to return them, that's been the challenge.
- I: Is that from the council, that one?



- R: No, it was from Rosa and from the National Lottery. This £3,000 from the council, we can't use it for any overheads, it can only go on items purchased for beneficiaries and again, that has to be spent by the end of March.
- I: Right, and you're having difficulty being able to locate the items.
- R: Yes, so we've...yes, we're having to go to different places and try and buy as much as we can online and, for example, there are limits on how much you can purchase. So one of my trustees went onto Boots today and she filled up the shopping trolley with all these products and got to the till to say, you can't have that many, and they emptied her trolley and rejected the order and she had to start again. So she had to do it in several transactions.
- I: Is this funding income, like this funding stream, is this quite typical for you since you began or has it changed during COVID?
- R: The focus of funding has been very much on COVID relief rather than long-term funding or long-term projects.
- I: Yes, so it's much more short-term directed on to just COVID response.
- R: Yes.
- I: What does service provision typically look like now?
- R: I think it's just being responsive when someone wants something. With the funds from the local authority that...how to explain it. So we're going to make up packs that we'll then distribute and it's slightly different in that none of it's means tested so it's anyone who just needs support. So I'm hoping it might be a positive thing in that it might actually bring people forward who might not necessarily reach out for support and we're actually tapping into a few different networks to help distribute these. So I'm seeing that as a positive as it's broadening up our reach and the types of people we therefore might be able to assist so that's good.
- Other than that, our service delivery is just very remote at the minute. We're just doing that very remotely. So that's been the major change, I think, and just having to check with organisations before we take donations and put more plans in place for that. It all has to be very much more organised and pre-planned. It's not a case that we can just turn up because there's not going to be anyone at reception. There's not going to be anyone there just to hand it over to. So it's all fitting in with the risk assessments and the procedures of other organisations.
- I: You've mentioned that you've received some support from the council and other places and it's been quite short-term, do you feel that the support has been sufficient?
- R: I think it has for us, in terms of finances. I think it would just be...I think, yes, the only area where we felt we weren't supported was by our landlord.

- I: Is there any other type of support that you think is needed?
- R: I'm not sure. I think it's just having that...just not having such short timescales on any funding because it's...I think it's just unrealistic. I think, you know, it's not like by 31 March, COVID's going to have stopped, period poverty is going to have ended, we'll have eradicated it. Yes, I think just longer-term sustainable funding would be better and that's just in terms of COVID. I think when we look at period poverty more widely, there's a lot more to be done there.
- I: Is that a concern that because it's now been wrapped up with COVID that perhaps if we ever see the end of COVID that there won't be that continued focus on period poverty?
- R: Yes, well, I think there's still pressure going on, isn't there, in terms of obviously we've had tax removed so that was a bit of a win. I think there is still a lot of work to do with the free menstrual products in schools and other areas such as universities and colleges. So there is still that sort of battle to fight and a lot of the schools haven't taken up their free menstrual products. They haven't signed up so I think it should be...schools should opt of it rather than have to opt in. I'm not sure why so many schools are being reticent about that. It would be great if schools were more open to working with organisations although I understand the incredible amount of pressure they're under at the minute.
- We did actually try and deliver some workshops online and the school technology just wouldn't work and the school couldn't make it work so that was a bit disappointing because I think there's a lot more that we could do if we could actually do it remotely with schools. We have probably got some really good programmes we could probably assist the teachers with actually and maybe take a bit of pressure off for some things. Also what we're finding from running workshops in schools is the really low level of understanding and poor level of knowledge that young people have about their bodies in general, let alone menstruation, let alone period poverty. I mean, it's just mind-blowing the lack of knowledge young people have about their bodies.
- I: So it's part of a wider issue.
- R: [Voices overlapping 28:37].
- I: Yes.
- R: Yes, I think there's a wider issue. I think, you know, actually getting proper resources into schools and getting...you know, just getting that information out there. I know again, pre-COVID, they were looking to improve sex education and all of this in schools but that all seems to have been put on a backburner.

- I: Do you feel that the organisation's prepared for any kind of further COVID related issues, such as if we keep going into lockdown or have yet another wave?
- R: Yes, I think as an organisation, because we are quite small and because therefore we can...we've adapted because we can be flexible, I think if we keep going into lockdown, it's difficult to say. I think if we can't sustain funding and donations continue to drop off and support continues to drop off, then, yes, we might struggle.
- I: Are there any other things or comments that you think are important to highlight about period poverty during the pandemic?
- R: Not that I can think of, [REDACTED]. I'm sure something else will come to me after.
- I: It's always the way.
- R: It's always the way.
- I: That's great, thank you very much, [REDACTED], that was really interesting.
- R: Okay, do you have any more questions or do you feel you've got everything you need?
- I: I've done all of the questions so I think that would be good and if there's anything then I'm sure we can quickly chat again at some point, but, yes, no, I think that would be great.
- R: Okay.
- I: So, brilliant, thank you very much and I hope you have a nice evening. I hope you can get some rest at some point.
- R: Thank you. Brilliant, take care, [REDACTED] bye.
- I: Thanks, bye-bye, bye.
- R: Bye.

**End of transcript**