

# Transcribed by: 1st Class Secretarial Services

---

<b>File Name(s)</b>	59122_ID120091
<b>Total Recording Length</b>	49 minutes
<b>Number of Participants</b>	2
<b>Final Word Count</b>	8,934
<b>Total Number of Pages</b>	19
<b>Date Completed</b>	25 January 2021

I: ...the recorder on, yeah, so the recorder's on. Okay, so here we go. We have sent to you the participant information sheet and you understand that participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

R: Mmm.

I: And here at BCU, only us on the team will look at the data as in, like, your transcribed interview.

R: Yeah.

I: And then we'll hold all that personal data, like, we've got your name and your email, we'll keep that all in line with GDPR guidelines and get rid of it once the study's done, dispose of it. Let's see. Are you okay if I record the interview?

R: Yeah, that's absolutely fine.

I: Great.

R: Just to let you know that because I'm phoning the office school phone it will automatically record at our end as well and then likewise it will all be, kind of, deleted and stored in terms of GDPR guidelines.

I: Oh, gosh.

R: But all school phone calls are automatically recorded.

I: Oh, that's fine. I feel my life's recorded because everything's on MS Teams now too, and that's all recorded so, yeah, we've got records of everything now. And then we'll use anonymised quotes in any reports or publications and we'll remove your name and your organisation's name.

R: Okay.

I: And that was for publications and conferences. I understand that the transcript of the audio recording will be anonymised, yes?

R: That's fine.

I: So are you okay to take part in this study?

R: Yeah, that's fine.

I: Great, thank you. So I've added my signature to that and then I just send that to you as your record. All right. So first things first, what's your organisation's name again?

R: It's Milford Haven School in Pembrokeshire.

- I: Great, in Pembrokeshire, great. What's your role there?
- R: Last academic year I was the school and community engagement officer. This year my job role has slightly changed though, so I am now the communications and PR officer, so there's an overlap in the content and the job, but there are little bits that have changed.
- I: Great, thank you. Right, now we just get into the discussion of what did normal provision look like before the COVID lockdown? What kind of things were you guys doing around period poverty before COVID?
- R: Okay. The last academic year, so that would have been September 2019 to summer 2020, we had been issued a period poverty grant from the Welsh government and we were using that in a variety of ways. We were targeting certain groups, so your free school meal cohort for example and vulnerable groups of children that we knew were significantly disadvantaged and more likely to be affected by period poverty, but there were resources that were available across the whole school to everybody. What we started off with was the Red Box scheme, so this is something that you've probably heard a lot about from other organisations.
- I: Yeah.
- R: We started off, we were basing around school several boxes that were stocked with sanitary products and sanitary related products that the girls could just have access to as and when they needed, and we were using some of the money that we had then to just, kind of, keep those replenished. We quite quickly realised that there was a huge demand and that the boxes were being run down quite quickly.
- I: Wow.
- R: Because some of the girls were solely relying on that for their sanitary product needs.
- I: Right.
- R: They actually had virtually no access other than what we were supplying and they had previously been trying to get what they needed every month through a combination of visiting the school nurse, visiting the first aider. Some of the food parcel referrals that our really vulnerable families get also include sanitary products if they've asked for it, so we realised that the girls were, kind of, hitting up various people within school and outside agencies that we link with to every month try and put together what they needed to cover their sanitary needs for that month.
- I: Oh, goodness.
- R: Which meant that every month they were, kind of, back to almost, kind of, a starting point of, like, now I need to do all of that again so, yes, we realised

quite quickly that there was quite a high demand and also products initially that we hadn't thought to include. So things like nappy bags so that if the girls, kind of, had started their periods or had had a period that they weren't expecting and either their underwear or their trousers had been, kind of, stained, they needed something to put those items in to have in their schoolbag, so the contents of the boxes evolved as well over the first year.

So we had a starting point and then the feedback that we were getting from some of the girls in terms of what they were asking for or what they were saying, oh, you've run out of X, Y and Z, we started to be able to streamline the contents a bit more effectively. So we weren't obviously buying things that weren't being used as much but we were able to stock up a bit more on the items that we were going through a lot quicker than we'd anticipated.

So, yeah, the Red Box scheme I suppose was the initial whole school and targeted approach that we had in terms of trying to get something out there for the girls that we could really promote. Prior to that it was only really, I suppose, typically...it was probably like when me and you were in school, if you didn't have what you needed, you'd either ask your friends because somebody would have something in their bag or you might just have to ask a teacher or, you know, a member of staff that you felt comfortable asking. But that was really just chancing that those people would have what you needed, you know.

So when I was in school, you know, you just asked and hoped that people had something if you were short. We just didn't really want the girls to be in a position where they weren't clear on where to go, so the red box system was a really easy starting point because the boxes were in set locations, they were really visible and we were able to promote to the girls and say, look, this is where the boxes are, this is what you'll find in them and if there's something isn't there that you need this is the member of staff that you go to who is responsible for those boxes and that will either give you what you need or can go and restock the boxes. So that was a really simple starting point for us to be able to effectively publicise here's where you can go to get what you need.

I: Fantastic, thank you. It sounds like it started with the red box and then it grew to be quite responsive to hearing what their specific needs were after that. And so, my next question is how did that start to change under the first lockdown?

R: At the start of the year as in the start of 2020...

I: Yeah, so it would've been in March when the lockdown first happened.

R: ...just before March we'd started to have conversations. Although we run an academic year we also run to the standard financial year, so we were hopeful that we would get another grant for another, kind of, pot of money for period poverty, and once that was confirmed we'd really started to explore reusable options. It's been a huge asset to us to really put some

time and effort into exploring those reusable options for several reasons. The obvious is because of the environmental benefits of reusable sanitary products, you know, so that's a huge selling point if you are environmentally conscientious. Exploring, you know, a menstrual cup instead of a tampon or reusable pads instead of single use pads, you know, you start to be able to quite quickly see the benefits for the environment of those products.

However, what we then did was looked at, like, if you are a low income family or a young person affected by deprivation, we started to look at the practical and financial benefits of using reusable products, we really did and we were able to quite quickly see that if we were in a position financially to absorb the initial cost of some of these higher purchase items...you know, for example the menstrual cups that we purchased for the girls, they're around £20 to £25 per cup. Most of our girls who are either free school meal or experiencing hardship, they would not be able to make an initial investment of £20 to £25 for a menstrual cup. However, by making that investment from our period poverty grant money we're effectively offering a solution where they have cost free periods for five years plus, whatever the guarantee is on the product that they selected.

And then we started to see actually the longer term impact of absorbing the cost of some of these reusable items means that the girls can then, by the time they would need to replace the items, hopefully be in a more financially stable position to then either budget for the replacement or would potentially be working if they were older girls and they would have left us and entered the world of work by then, by the time they needed replacing, so the big shift for us this year. And I suppose we'd started it just, kind of, prior to COVID, thinking about it, but it's been expedited massively, this investigation, and then the investment in reusable sanitary products for the girls.

And that's made a massive difference in terms of the girls essentially being equipped, not just for one period but for multiple periods, and so there isn't that, kind of, month on month struggle in where am I going to source what I need for this period? We've, kind of, offered them now the opportunity to have reusable items which means that once we've provided them with those products, they then have a much more positive experience I would say with their periods because there isn't that, kind of, four weekly cycle of I have what I need now but I know in four weeks' time I'm not and where am I going to get those items from and who am I going to go to? Yeah, they're much more prepared and it's just become a much more positive experience. We still have the red boxes because, you know, we have all sorts of people that access. There's some visitors might need them, staff might need them, you know, you might get caught short, so we still run that as well. But, yeah, the big shift for us I would say has been really investigating and investing in reusable items.

I: Wonderful. I've got lots of follow up questions because this is just so fascinating.

- R: Go for it.
- I: Yeah. The first one would be the reusables, was it mostly menstrual cups or was it reusable pads or period pants?
- R: No. The three products that the girls have mostly requested have been period pants. They've been especially beneficial for our children with additional learning needs. So when we provide products to the girls obviously they have to be able to independently use those items. What we found is that in particular some of the girls who have higher additional learning needs, even when we're able to provide them with the items that they need, they are actually not independently able to use those items in a way that they need to use them. So we found that period pants are a great solution in terms of allowing them less disruption during their school day, a little bit more independence and just like I say that's been a fantastic asset to that department in particular. Also, I would say with our younger girls, so the year 11/12 year olds in year seven, they particularly like the period pants just because it very much does feel like you're just wearing a pair of pants. You know, they're almost oblivious to the fact that there's anything related to their periods happening.
- We also have a high demand for the reusable sanitary pads, those have been extremely popular. And then the menstrual cups, the take up rate was phenomenal in the older girls. The sixth form in particular we have about 60 per cent of our sixth formers are using menstrual cups as their, kind of, preferred method of sanitary product.
- I: Wow.
- R: So, yeah. And they were far more clued up than I was to be honest at the start of this process. That is a very popular option for the older girls, not so much lower down the school. So, yeah, those are the three main I would say, like, resources that are requested is the period pants, the reusable pads and the menstrual cups.
- I: This is really incredible. Because the past work Gemini have done there's often been this notion that girls from marginalised communities won't know how to use reusables and won't be interested in using reusables. And so to hear that actually the older girls were asking for the products that take a little bit more learning have a bit more of a sharper learning curve than the period pants is really fascinating.
- R: What I would say with that is that a lot of the girls...I think a lot of the success has been down to how we've presented it. When I was in school you really did just have two options; there were pads or tampons and that was it, you took your pick, but those were your two options. What we've found was that before we could even really, kind of, say to the girls what would you like, we had to offer some sort of education about the products that were available. So we held a brunch, we called it The Big Bloody Brunch, and we held a brunch where we had a local restaurant who provided free brunch. People came and they paid with a donation of sanitary products

and no money was exchanged, so we collected those products and then used them to re-fill our red boxes. But in the brunch, we held one specifically for our sixth form girls initially and then rolled it down the school.

But the brunch was basically me saying, look, girls, here are some products. I talked them through it, we did a little demonstration, they all had samples to touch and feel and they asked questions. And we spoke about, well, why would you use maybe this one over this one and, you know, kind of, how would you insert a menstrual cup? We talked about it all, so then they had a chance to ask questions. I developed a little information leaflet which they went home with, with some samples, so they were able to talk to their mums and their sisters and do a bit of research. There was a lot of work that went in, groundwork before we got to the point where we said, now place your orders. What would you like from us? You know, we didn't go in blind. We put a lot of foundation work in to say, right, first of all we're going to raise education on this topic, we're going to open the conversation and the dialogue so everybody feels comfortable with this, and then we built up to, right, now we're going to offer you the chance to have whatever you need.

And like I say the feedback from the girls was particularly positive in terms of they felt like a lot of the taboo was removed because I think by seeing that we weren't embarrassed to discuss it with them they realised that, well, if they feel comfortable having this conversation then maybe we can all be comfortable in having this conversation. And I think they had just assumed that it would be an awkward conversation and so had avoided it, so that was really positive. And I think it helped to have, you know, products there for them to touch and feel and some of them had never seen a menstrual cup before but were intrigued.

Some of them had, you know, no idea what a reusable pad would feel like and assumed it wouldn't feel that nice so, you know, I think having the samples there was a massive benefit. And they were great tools as well when you're having that conversation rather than try and describe the difference. We just said, here's the difference, you can physically see and touch. This is a plastic pad, this is a reusable pad, so when we talk about them this is what we're talking about and, yeah, it was really fantastic.

I: Oh, lovely. And so how would you say...because I'm thinking about the red box and I'm thinking about when the first lockdown came. I'm based in England, so I only have in my head when schools closed here. In Wales when did schools...in Pembrokeshire when did schools close down and did that affect the girls' access, well, at least to the red box and did some of them have the reusables to use?

R: Yes. We shut down at the start of April and we immediately realised that there was going to be an issue in terms of...so we'd already identified at this point that period poverty existed in our community and we'd come up with a solution which is fantastic when you're in school, but if you're not in school you cannot access the red boxes. Now luckily, we'd offered reusable resources to the whole school community. The take up was extremely high



in year seven and then again in the sixth form years, in year 12 and 13. We weren't really concerned about those girls because we knew that the girls who were affected had reusable items at their disposal. But the take up had been quite low in those middle year groups and so there was a concern there. So what I did was I put in a bid to The Big Lottery and said that we need really the resources to be able to take sanitary products out to the community during this lockdown period.

I: Oh, wow.

R: We were successful, we got some money for that. So initially the first week that we rolled it out the take up was extremely low. We were based at the local community centre and we basically put together packs that contained...I don't know if you...do you know the company in Cardiff, it's TOTM?

I: No.

R: They do really responsibly made single use products, so they're all organic, all the packaging is biodegradable, recyclable. They're the most I would say ethical single use products that we could find.

I: Oh, great, thanks. I've only known of Hey Girls, so that's really great. It's TOTM.

R: TOTM.

I: Right.

R: Time of the Month, but TOTM and they've been fantastic. So we reached out there, we got some stock, we had period pants, you know, reusable pads, we had it all. We put these packs together. We basically said, look, you know, we've got these packs, they're really high quality items, we, kind of, promoted them, we said, you know, just come and get them. But people wouldn't come and then we realised it was because of the embarrassment of if you go and collect the packs, it's basically you saying, isn't it, like, I'm not in a position to fund my period.

So then I said, well, what if we just added a chocolate bar and a face pack to every pack because then you've got the excuse of saying, oh, I collected a pack but only I just wanted the face mask and the chocolate bar. But we know these girls need the products, we know they do, but you're giving them a get out of jail free card. So if somebody sees them on the walk home with a bag and they say, oh, aren't they the bags, you know, that the school were giving away? Or, you know, like I say if somebody just questions, well, what's in the bag or they could see the contents for any reason, the girls just had that get out of jail free card to say, oh, yeah, I did pick up a bag but I only did it for the face mask.



And the demand just went crazy. All the girls that we were worried about and we expected to come out of the woodwork did. Their mums were asking us for packs, we had aunties saying, you know, look, I've got...I don't...I've been...I don't know, you know, we haven't been paid or they've been [inaudible 00:19:58] universal credit or they didn't...usually they'd go and find a food bank but they couldn't get there because of COVID and blah blah blah so, like, that was probably the best move in terms of giving people that option to say they had an excuse to come and get the packs and it just made it I think a little bit less embarrassing if they were then, kind of, seen with the packs. So, you know, we distributed...I could send you the figures but we ended up distributing, like, over £1,000 worth of sanitary products over a five week period.

I: And that was made possible through the lottery.

R: Yeah. We got the money for that from The Big Lottery and, yeah, they've been fantastic. They were, like, really, really supportive and the majority of the money was spent on reusable items which was, yeah, fantastic.

I: Fantastic, thank you. Because most of your work had to be centred on how to get these products out, I was wondering, were there any opportunities...did you hear from the girls or the families or from teachers, you know, what were the realities for people that you know were struggling before COVID with being able to afford products and access products? Did you hear anything about accessing them during the lockdown and how COVID impacted that?

R: I know that the girls that we have spoken to, it was just the worry. They'd reverted back to that stage of worry of not knowing if...I saw that, an anxiety not knowing, you know, will I be able to get what I need next month? Where am I going to go to get what I need next month? And it felt like we'd almost gone back in time, kind of, a year or so when we became aware that there were a lot more girls feeling that way than we could ever have guessed. I think that there was a huge amount of support for the packs we provided. I think it was something like just over 130, you know, like, reusable sanitary pad packs were given out and I think that the relief was...especially related to the fact that a lot of the items were reusable is that...I think once you're in possession of those reusable items, if you have access to single use items as well and you want to mix and match, that's fantastic.

But as soon as you give people reusable items it's almost like you're giving them, like, a longer term solution and relieving them of that monthly stress of, you know, if we are still in lockdown next month and I cannot get to the food bank because of COVID or if I cannot get to Tesco's for whatever reason, you know, because of COVID related circumstances, I found that once we'd given people the reusable items, that was where you saw the genuine relief of, oh, well, that's great because I can wash this item and sanitise it and I can reuse it next month if I need to. And it was almost like giving somebody, yeah, kind of, you know, a magic pack that regenerates

but it's just the same items once you've washed them and you've sanitised them, they're fine to use again.

But I think a lot of people had underestimated the power that that would give them in terms of being able to take back some control over managing their own periods. Because it wasn't habit because they were so used to just using single use items, I think that there was definitely a sense of panic at the start of lockdown. I know that there were people panic buying single use items because there was a fear that they wouldn't be able to get, you know, what they needed. And I know that, yeah, there were girls that...when we realised that we were going to go into lockdown, full lockdown, nobody knew how long that was going to go on for. So I know that there are girls that had gone to the red boxes around the school and taken, kind of, stashes, you know, to essentially take home and stock up because they didn't know how long they would be home for and not be able to get what they needed.

I: Yeah, fantastic, thank you. So next I want to move into, like, present situations in our lockdown, like, the more severe lockdowns over and now in the present lockdown that we have. Well, here in England at least kids are still going to school. What is, you know, the service or the provision of the initiative, what does it look like now?

R: At the moment we're back in school, slightly different to you guys. We had a two week firebreak which was one week of our half term and then the first week back in school after half term the rest of Wales was in lockdown except for essential services and schools, so we've been back to semi normal for a little while now. The girls are back using the red boxes where they need to. The sixth form have requested...last year they all had the option like I say with the rest of the school to get reusable items. Some of the girls are actually requesting more because they've maybe opted for a menstrual cup and now would also like some reusable pads or, you know, their friends have had reusable pads and now actually want to try a menstrual cup as well. So we're almost getting, like, a second wave of demand from the people that accessed it initially.

What I'm currently working on at the moment, the period poverty money that we have, is actually, kind of, focused. It's called a feminine hygiene grant, so what I'm currently in the process of at the moment is putting together 120 feminine hygiene packs, so every girl in year seven will receive from us this year a feminine hygiene pack. In that...and I've got one on my desk. I can tell you what we've got in this so far. In the feminine hygiene packs, we have got single use pads from TOTM, so they've got light pads, medium pads and large pads. These are all organic cotton and like I say the packaging is recyclable, the plastic packaging of the pads is biodegradable, so that can just go in your, kind of, food waste. They're fragranced, no chlorine, bleach, they're all hypoallergenic so, yeah, they get a pack of a large, medium and small of those. They've got a face mask, they've got biodegradable face wipes and scrunchies, a deodorant, a

hairbrush. They've got a washable bag. I don't know if you've seen these. There's the washbags that the reusable pads go in to wash.

I: Yeah, yeah.

R: So they've all got a washbag. They've got three reusable pads and then they've got another washbag which contains...

I: Oh, wow. Three, that's great.

R: Yeah, they've got three pads. We were advised that the minimum really that you can do is three because hypothetically you should have one in the wash, one that you're wearing and one in your bag ready to change into, so three is the minimum that you would need otherwise it's not really effective for you to use reusable pads. And then they've got three pairs of period pants in their size.

I: Oh, wow, that's incredible.

R: So those packs are in the process at the moment. It's been slightly slower than I would've liked because we have had some trouble. During different lockdown periods it's been really hard to source items because, you know, people were on furlough or you couldn't get a hold of different companies. But hopefully by the time we break up for Christmas all 120 of those bags will be distributed.

The reason that we focused this on year seven is because last academic year the whole school had the option to have...they were effectively given an order form after they'd had all the information and the drop in sessions and things and they had the option, if you would like any of these items, all the girls had an order form and they could tick what they wanted and what their sizes were, and then they had their own little pack that they were given. Year seven have come to us this September, so they've never had access to this funding before, so they will first have these packs so that we know that they've had the opportunity for reusable items. And then if there's any funding left, that would then be opened up to the whole school to say, right, if anybody has had some but would like more or missed out last time and actually would like to try some now, we'll put those order forms back out then to the whole of the years, kind of, eight to 13. But the priority spend is for year seven this year because they have not had access to this funding with us before.

I: Yeah. And I'm also thinking just pragmatically then they have it and it could last them the entire...while they're in high school and onward...

R: Exactly, yes.

I: ...and it actually saves money in the long run.

R: It will save us money because the demand will be lower on the red boxes. If we were to go into lockdown again, we know that the girls have got access to reusable items. We're trying to normalise these products as early down the school, kind of, journey as we can, so rather than introduce it...it was very successful but rather than introduce this to girls who are 15/16 and have already been having periods for a couple of years, what we're trying to do is now introduce this as I say and normalise it and say to year sevens, you might choose tampons, you might choose single use pads, that is your prerogative. But for you to make an educated decision you have to be aware of all of the things that are on offer to you. And so we've, kind of, said, well, you know, there are single use pads and there are tampons but there are also X, Y and Z that you may not have heard much about before [voices overlap 00:29:23].

I: Or been able to access because I think...

R: Exactly.

I: ...a lot of people don't even know where to buy them if they can afford them.

R: Exactly. The feedback that we've had from a lot of the girls is that actually they would...in particular the period pants and the reusable pads, they are really receptive to it and they want them. It's a finance issue, it's that initial investment, you know, to buy a pack of three reusable pads. The cheapest that I've seen is, you know, probably around the £20 mark for good ones and they say, you know, with the period pants, a pack of three, the minimum that you're going to pay is about £20 if you're, kind of, sourcing them from Welsh government approved places which we have to use because of the funding.

And a lot of our families just don't have £20 spare but they've got 50 pence to go to Tesco's and buy a packet of single use pads but that isn't necessarily what they want to be choosing for their body. And what we're, kind of, saying is if it's a choice that's fine but if your chosen preference is reusable items, we're trying to eliminate that barrier where finance is preventing them from choosing what they want to use and what they feel is comfortable for their body. So all year sevens, all the girls in year seven will be given a pack that will include a mixture of ethical...well, organic and, you know, ethical single use items and the reusable items. And then I would imagine the underspend, there won't be muckloads, but there will be some that will then be spread and offered to any of the girls that are interested in having more items or trying them because they didn't feel like they wanted to last year. But now that some of the girls have had them, they chat about it and you can see some of them are, like, oh, I wish I'd had a pack last year.

I: Fantastic. I was wondering, you were saying that the Welsh government has approved products, so the funding that you have, there are stipulations on which products you can buy?

R: There's, kind of, guidance when we get the funding through, so there is guidance. I'll see if I can pull it up on my email really quickly because it does tend...for example you can't use it to purchase uniforms.

I: Oh, okay.

R: But you can use it to buy leggings, pants, trousers and tights.

I: Oh, I understand. I thought it was going to be, like, you can only purchase these items from, like, these companies.

R: No.

I: Oh, I understand.

R: They did send out a list and this year when we got the first round of period poverty funding, they did send out a list to say, look, these are, kind of, reputable sources for period pants.

I: Great.

R: I think because a lot of schools just had no idea where to start from when this money first came through. One of the stipulations from the Welsh government was last year that a minimum of 10 per cent had to be used on reusable items. We had I think a 78 per cent overall spend on reusable items, so well over 65 per cent more than the government had requested. But like I say it was more the stipulation for the things like...so you could buy nappy sacks and wet wipes because they were potentially required and linked to period poverty, but you couldn't buy deodorants last year because it was, like, well, that's nothing to do with your period.

I: Right.

R: This year the funding is slightly different. They've renamed it. The money that we've had through now is a feminine hygiene grant, so we're able to slightly expand what we look at.

I: Great.

R: But there are always stipulations with the funding that comes through.

I: Yeah. Because I know [REDACTED] she'll read this transcript. Hi, [REDACTED] ...actually on feminine hygiene and she'll go, oh, no. But actually, the term...because we were trying to avoid using the term feminine hygiene for menstruation and periods because periods aren't dirty, but actually by using the term feminine hygiene it actually expands the kind of products that can be provided that girls actually need, so soap, deodorant et cetera, so that's really interesting.

R: Yeah. We've included some bits in the bags for the year sevens. We went to the girls and we had, like, a sample group from each year group and we asked them and said, you know, if we talk about, you know, feminine hygiene what is it that, you know, you could be provided with that would help you feel like you could better look after your feminine hygiene, you know, and look after yourself? And one of the things...so, yeah, there's a little hand gel and...the hand gel because they were saying that they wanted to have their own...there are pumps in all the classrooms. But they were saying when you leave school, some of the places that they would go don't have sanitising stations, so we've got some of those in there.

Deodorants, some of the girls were saying that, yeah, they don't always have access to deodorant at home and that can be quite embarrassing to them, so they've all got their own deodorant. A hairbrush, just bits and pieces, so we, kind of, did a pupil voice and said we have our own ideas of what to include, but we've definitely taken on board what they wanted. And if it fell within the remit of the funding and that, kind of, umbrella of feminine hygiene, we've tried to provide what they wanted and what they felt they needed really to, yeah, kind of, look after their feminine hygiene positively.

I: Great, fantastic, thank you. So my last question is just...and you've already, sort of, touched on it, thinking ahead to who knows what's going to happen with all the uncertainties with lockdown and how long it's going to last, how is that changing the project looking forward?

R: I think it's just really...it's definitely sped up our response. So I think if it wasn't for lockdown I think this would've all happened far more gradually over a longer period of time. I don't think there would've been a sense of urgency, so I think probably the biggest change for us would be re-prioritising and looking at actually diverting manpower and resources to get this done as quickly and effectively as possible, so that if we are in a similar situation to lockdown again, you know, as many children as possible that want them have got those reusable items, and because we've seen now the positive effect that that can have. And then I suppose, yeah, just making sure that we address this wave of pupils that have come to us this year. I don't know that we would have looked at that wave so quickly. You know, they've only been with us since September, you know, and it's been a very turbulent start I suppose to secondary school for our year sevens.

But I think because of the circumstances related to COVID and seeing the benefits in the last lockdown that the reusable items in particular had and being prepared for that, I think that there's very much a sense of the more prepared we can get the girls now if it ever were to happen again and there's a lockdown scenario, I think that...like I say it's not the kind of thing that you can pull off last minute with short notice. You know, if Boris, you know, was to say today we're all going into lockdown on Friday, you know, I cannot pull 120 packs of reusable items just out of thin air, it's just not there to be sourced.



So I think that, you know, whilst we've got the capacity to do it now we're trying to address it so that if we're in that situation again we're not looking back wishing that we'd put something in place that would've helped to minimise that disruption to the girls in regards to, kind of, looking after themselves and their hygiene, especially meeting their needs for their period. So, yeah, I think that lockdown and COVID have just sped this process up for us quite dramatically.

I: Great, thank you so much. That's just really so great to hear. Especially part of the reason why [REDACTED] spearheaded the project is because period poverty, we were worried...well, is getting forgotten and isn't seen as a priority. So to hear that actually the school and your response has been, no, we need to act even faster and it's even more important, is just incredible to hear.

R: Can I pick up one thing though.

I: Yes, do.

R: Just something that I'm imagining that you will see across your study. One of the things that has always concerned me with this is the potential lack of consistency. So when schools get allocated their budgets, you know, whether they call it period poverty or feminine hygiene grants, whatever it's named, once the schools have been allocated that money it really is up to the schools to come up with their own spending plan in terms of how they want to allocate that funding and what provision they're going to offer their students. And one of the concerns that I've had is that it's almost like a postcode lottery then.

You know, we are not the only school that will have a high number of pupils really negatively affected by poverty and various forms of deprivation. But there is no guarantee that those other pupils in other schools or other areas will have access to the same kind of provision that our school is offering. And I just think that is a slight concern that what you don't want is for grants like this to become a tick box exercise where the government has effectively said, you know, we are addressing period poverty because, look, we've given tens of thousands of pounds to schools all across Wales.

But then it's looking at, well, how effectively is that money spent and is everybody making the most of the money that they're being given? And really it shouldn't be, you know, so different, you know, depending on what school a child accesses there should be some element of consistency in terms of what support they can expect from their school and from their, kind of, school community. And I'm sure that's a thing that you will see across your study is that people have got very different interpretations of what to do with the money that they're given.

And some of them will be doing things far better than we are here, you know, they'll be doing really innovative and fantastic things and some schools might not be doing very much at all and that is a concern that I



have. It's very similar to when we started getting extra resources in for young carers. You know, when that got added to the [inaudible 00:39:33] agenda a lot of people jumped on the bandwagon as well, you know, we really must do things for our young carers.

I: Yeah.

R: But when you look at the provision for that it's very similar. It really does depend on what direction the school choose to go in. And if they choose to go in a really positive and pro-active direction, fantastic, you've hit the jackpot. But if they don't those children are still disadvantaged if it just becomes a tick box exercise of we've got money, we need to shift it and we can just say then that we tried to address period poverty. That's partly why, kind of, the head teacher said it was really important that we linked in with you guys because I do think it's really important and hopefully studies like yours will help shine a light on what you can do with the funding and resources that are available to you, and how you can really maximise what you have at your disposal to make a big impact for some of these young girls.

Yeah, the more I've looked into it, you know, it's a huge, huge topic that when you think... You know, I remember when we first started looking at this, one of the first quotes I came across was that on average a woman will spend just over £18,000 over her lifetime on sanitary products.

I: Oh. And how much of that is tax?

R: Well...and when we spoke to the girls in sixth form, because so many of our families are free school meals a lot of the girls were saying even in year 12 and 13, they are financially responsible for their own sanitary products, and the girls were saying to us, Miss, we get about £30 a week EMA which is your educational maintenance allowance.

I: Yeah.

R: And the girls were saying we probably spend at least £5, maybe up to 10, but between five and £10 on our periods we, kind of, estimated when they all said how much they would spend. And they said, that means out of our EMA that one week the boys have more resources for things like pens, paper, books, they might be able to afford tuition that we can't afford because we're having to use that money to fund sanitary products and that isn't something the boys have to factor into their spending. And it's a bit like going down a rabbit hole, once you start to look into it and you start to realise how disadvantaged some of our girls really are, it's quite shocking. And I really hope that we're doing the best that we can with the money that we've got at our disposal, but I do think it's worth looking at, is that comparable to what's happening across the board and is there any element of consistency in terms of what provision our young people are being offered? And I'm not too sure what the answer to that would be.

I: Yeah. Well...no, the answer's, like, no. Like, here in England I know that for...so when England finally announced that they would give free period products in schools the reason why I was so interested when I heard that you were using reusables is a lot of us that were part of the period poverty taskforce really pushed that reusables be pushed rather than contracts going to I think it was, like, Procter & Gamble and Always and such.

R: Yeah.

I: And we weren't sure that we were quite listened to but we were trying to say, like, how much...like, environmental reasons, sustainability reasons, like, long term savings reasons, all of this stuff and that wasn't listened to. And then we found out when they rolled it out, that schools didn't realise they had to opt in to the programme. So a lot of schools didn't even get that funding for the free period products because they didn't know they had to opt in. And then the Department of Education put a call out for a bid to evaluate the roll out and [REDACTED] and I did put in an application but everything's been put on hold because of COVID, so we don't know who's going to win the bid to go and evaluate the roll out of the project.

But I would strongly, like, really hope that you are collecting all the data you can to document the project and how it's going. And I'll send you...we did for Plan International UK...we were supposed to launch these research summaries that we did for their Let's Talk Period initiative. So [REDACTED] and I and a couple of other colleagues did four research summaries on period poverty and menstruation education in the UK and the last one is about how to measure impact. So I'll send all of them to you but especially that one because we need those kinds of stories to show the government and schools that using reusables can work and here's the data to prove it. And I know that people don't always have resource to document the impact because it's a lot of work. You get the money in, you roll out the project and then evaluation. Who's got the time or money for that?

R: Yes. But I think it's really interesting. A lot of the data and the feedback that I've gathered has been from in particular the sixth form girls.

I: Right.

R: Because that was our starting point and, honestly, I think that having listened to them, like, one of the most common things that they said was we've been waiting for something like this. Because I think the assumption was that because some of our staff felt a little bit uncomfortable or they were still a bit of that generation that talking about your periods is a little bit taboo, I think a lot of the staff assumed that the children would feel that way, that the girls would feel awkward and embarrassed if we addressed it. And honestly it was more like relief, it was more like the girls were, oh, thank goodness, somebody's finally having this chat with us because they were interested in the topic, they wanted to know more, they wanted to explore those options and educate themselves.

And I think that sometimes we have been guilty of projecting our own experiences of learning about periods and that journey. And then if they're projecting that onto the next wave of girls...and they just don't feel like that, you know, a lot of them feel really empowered, they feel really comfortable about their bodies and like I say I was quite shocked at how many of them said it's about time that somebody had this chat with us.

I: Yeah, yeah. No, it's heartening, I've got hope because of them.

R: Oh, definitely. I mean, there were a few of them...honestly, I feel so passionately about this. But there were a few of them, I remember the very first brunch we had with the sixth form girls and I realised quite quickly, we were talking about the menstrual cups and some of the girls were, like, oh, I've been using these for, you know, a year or so and, you know, they, kind of, almost took over the presentation at some stages. And they were, like, oh, you know, did you know that you can get this kind of carry case for them and da da da? Then the girls, they wanted to know more and it was...and I thought, oh, brilliant, you know, this isn't an alien topic to you, we just have never discussed it. So I just assumed that you didn't know and you've assumed that I don't want to talk about it and there were just so many assumptions that when we all got in a room with a nice, kind of, brunch and a cup of tea and said, so, period products, let's...you know, and then it was, like, once you've started your talking I realised quite quickly that, yeah, the girls were so ready for this.

I: Yeah, I'm really glad to hear that. And again, that thing that I keep on hearing from...I'll hear from teachers or government officials of, like, oh, well, those in BAME communities and those in marginalised poor communities, they're just not ready for reusables. We have to use these, like, one time...

R: No, no.

I: I'm, like, no, no, that's not...if you actually talk to young people, no, that's not what they're saying.

R: No. And actually, we've got children in our school who are from the BAME, you know, background and some of them have opted out for their own reasons. But equally we've got children who are, you know, your white British background who have also opted out and likewise both have opted in in some scenarios. So there isn't...you know, it's very much...what we've, kind of, said to the girls is you cannot make an educated decision if you are not educated. So you are not in a position, any of you, to choose what is best for your body and what is right for your body if you don't even know the options available to you.

And I think that that's the step that some schools that we try to support...because they cannot understand how the take up has been so big with us and not in their schools, and I think it's because they missed that crucial stage of they went straight to, look, here's the products, do you want

them or not rather than looking at, right, do you even understand what these products are, how to use them, what they're called, what do they look like? And I think if you jump the gun then you put everyone off, even those that are really open minded to it potentially. So I think, yeah, the research that you guys are doing is fantastic and hopefully we'll just, kind of, perpetuate that conversation of people wanting to educate themselves and hopefully then just be a bit more open minded to the options available for their bodies.

I: Great, thank you, thank you so much.

R: I could talk to you all day [voices overlap 00:48:22].

I: I know, me too. I'm like...because...I'm going to send the briefs because...I'm just going to turn my recorder off. I'm going to send the briefs on because...

**End of transcript**