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- R: ...worried that schools wouldn't implement it probably in the way it had...you know, in the manner that probably most of us within the charitable or third sector would have liked it to have been implemented, or working in the period poverty sector. But it kind of felt like, actually, you know what, we've done this, we got funding from DCMS to do it, that funding, we always knew it was going to come to an end after two years and it has ended, but there is something to sort of replace it, it's not just gone. And of course, then schools went into...or schools closed, so it was like, well, what's going on or what's going to happen? And I haven't really been able...and we haven't had any more funding to do any more work, so we haven't done very much with it...
- I: So what was...can we go back to the Let's Talk. Period stuff and that time because that's the pre-COVID...
- R: Yes.
- I: ...situation, isn't it?
- R: Yeah.
- I: So what was it that Brook were actually doing, because are you just based...like cover England or do you cover more of the UK?
- R: No, we are mainly England-based, we do deliver some activities in Wales, but we've only really just started that in the last sort of 12 months or so. And Let's Talk. Period was only England-based because it was funded through DCMS, so it was only for England-based schools. So we got a big chunk of money from the Tampon Tax Fund and it started – oh God, you see, my memory is going, two years ago – well, it was a two year or 18 month project really by the time we got funding and everything was sorted out like it always takes with these things and we did this partnership project with Plan, Plan UK. And the funding, Brook, we were the lead partner and we contracted or partnered with Plan, our role was very much because we are a deliverer – do you know much about Brook?
- I: Yes.
- R: You do, so you know we are sort of based in various towns and cities...
- I: Yeah.
- R: ...across England mainly, and we deliver a range of sexual health, clinical sexual health services and education. So this project was very much about education and it was going in into schools, working with young girls and talking to them about their periods, about what happens to their bodies, talking to them about the sort of myths around periods and providing them with information about the various products that they could use and then providing them with products. So in a nutshell, that was the project. We delivered it in seven locations and engaged I think it was

about 11,000 girls in the end, so it was really positive, and we would have liked to have done it with boys as well and done some education with boys, but because it was Tampon Tax Funding, they were quite strict about who we could and couldn't work with, et cetera, so there were some constraints around what we could do within the criteria of the funding, but it was fine and it was better than not doing anything.

And then Plan, as you know because you would have...Birmingham will have worked with Plan, were kind of more the convenors of the more grassroots period poverty work and bringing together networks of – [interruption] – so Plan was much more about sharing best practice and bringing together the learning from the project and distributing that amongst the sector. And it was a really...I mean, for us at Brook it was quite different to what we would normally do because it wasn't really sexual health and that's always been our sort of area, but obviously it's intimate health and it all kind of goes hand in hand, so it absolutely fitted what we wanted to do.

Yeah, we were involved in the DCMS Period Poverty Taskforce that they set up which was kind of disbanded as soon as COVID came along which I thought was absolutely outrageous but was advised not to make a big fuss by certain people because it wouldn't reputationally probably do us very much good. And, yeah, that's kind of it really, and I think the other thing for us was we had also as a result of the profile of Let's Talk. Period, we had started to talk to a number of local authorities and we'd started to explore to work directly with local authorities, so for them...

So our biggest take-away from Let's Talk. Period was, we're really delighted that the DfE are funding this work, this scheme in schools, but we're really worried that schools are going to do what they... Lots of schools already hold products, we know that, but they're kind of kept behind reception in a locked drawer and someone's got to go up and ask somebody and it's all that sort of stigma and shame. And we were really keen that some work...we wanted to work with the schools to help them implement more period-friendly policies, I suppose, so that sort of stigma wasn't an ongoing issue. And we had started to have some quite positive conversations with a number of local authorities who were quite keen on funding that sort of work, and then we got to COVID and just everything went out of the window.

I: Right. So...

R: And that's where we're at really. We are delivering, we got one local authority, thank goodness, signed up and a contract agreed before we kind of went into lockdown, and that was with Barking and Dagenham in London. They are funding us to do – it's not very much, but to work within their – I think there's about a dozen secondary schools within Barking and Dagenham, so to work in their secondary schools and do some teacher training around period poverty and the impact of that and work with young

people directly and then support for the schools to implement the DfE's free product scheme.

I: Yeah. That's brilliant. So...

R: Yeah, and like I say, we've had quite, you know, we've had some quite positive conversations with two other local authorities, one of them was a London-based one and I don't really want to say the name because I don't think it's fair to do that and I wouldn't want you to publish that. And one was another local authority up in the north who were really, really, really keen and we were absolutely on the cusp of tendering for the work and us being able to submit a tender for that, and of course when COVID hit, everything just kind of went into lockdown – well, literally and metaphorically. So any money that they'd kind of set aside I think had been...was now being diverted to other things.

I: Yeah. So if we focus then on the one that you...like the Barking and Dagenham...

R: Yeah.

I: So you got the contract and the funding and everything all set up, have you actually managed to start doing anything with them?

R: We've started, yeah, we've done some preparatory work and we are going into...we have started going into schools...

I: So how's that working?

R: And we've – sorry.

I: How's that working with all the bubbles and all of that type of stuff that's going on?

R: It's fine, I mean, I don't actually know with Barking schools how we're doing it, but we are continuing. Obviously for Brook we do loads of work in schools which is training teachers and direct delivery to young people, and of course that all ground to a halt in March. But we've adapted our model, so we're now delivering lots of digital work and a lot of that has been training with teachers which is quite straightforward. Because obviously, there's security issues and GDPR and all that kind of stuff, but it's not quite as...you have to be much more aware of that when you're dealing with young people. But we have developed online sessions for young people and schools are bringing us in to do that. And that's through either their own sort of digital platforms that they use which have obviously passed all their relevant security measures and tests and whatever, or using ours which we've also gone through fairly stringent scrutiny to make sure from a security point of view we're safe.

So yes, we are working in schools and it's actually...just before the second lockdown it had started to get really, really quite busy, and I'm not sure that we're going to see any impact of lockdown number two on that work, we don't really know yet, it hasn't happened yet. And hopefully, if it is only for a few weeks, we won't see any major impact of that.

I: Yeah. Because I guess as well schools are carrying on as they were before anyway, aren't they?

R: Yes, yeah. And the other thing that I had sort of started to do, and again it was very, very, very, very early days, so again I'm not, you know, this is not a criticism of PHS at all, obviously PHS have got the contract with the DfE and we have an ongoing...Brook has an ongoing partnership with Lil-Lets and Lil-Lets are one of the providers of products for the PHS scheme. So they had done an intro to us to PHS and I had had some like literally, I'd love to come and talk to you about what we can do, can we work together, type conversation with PHS, and that again was then put on hold.

And I'm actually just going to try and pick up those relationships again with them, but there's nothing guaranteed, but I don't want anyone to be saying, oh, they're not engaging, because I haven't even tried properly yet and I think it would be very unfair to say that. So I would like to work with PHS ideally to offer them some sort of, you know, to provide resources to go into schools and do that directly with them. But what I don't know and what I'm really interested to find out is how are schools, are they taking up that offer, does anybody know that, is there any data out there about it, because I certainly can't...I've googled it and there's nothing. And I did actually ask all of our education teams if they could try and find out if schools are taking up the offer and I haven't really had anything back, so I don't know if they are or not.

I: There was something...so there has been something that's come out, I think it suggested that only 30 per cent of schools have taken it up...

R: Yeah.

I: ...but that was if you bear in mind that it kind of got launched in January, didn't it, and then schools got shut down in March.

R: Yeah.

I: So it's kind of not surprising that there's not really very much take-up. However, I've done some project – well, done one project looking at menstrual health education and product provision in schools in the West Midlands and they just don't know that it's available. And I think it's something that...

R: I mean, I don't know, to me it all smacks slightly of hypocrisy really because obviously there's been this massive, massive campaign about

free school meals which it's brilliant and don't get me wrong, the government absolutely should be providing that. But it's actually more about poverty, isn't it, just more generally than just period poverty or food poverty or, I don't know, it just makes me feel slightly uncomfortable when they claim that they're doing these amazing things and actually there's other areas of poverty that are not being addressed at all.

I: And they're not doing amazing things because it's pressure from...

R: No, no, but that's what they like you to believe.

I: ...pressure from the public that makes them...

R: Watch the news and read the newspapers or whatever.

I: Yeah. So I know that the take-up is low and I think a lot of that is because they just haven't publicised it.

R: No, and I just think...

I: And it's not easy to find out...

R: ...I mean, I can't imagine what it would be...I can't imagine for schools how, you know, they've had to cope with exams being fucked up, excuse my language, haven't they, all of last year, they had to deal with that at the end of the summer, complete balls-up of exams. They've had to try and get the kids back in and catching up on their academic studies and everything else. I mean, there was a report the other day, wasn't there, about social skills of young people have regressed, or for some young people have regressed, I mean. The schools must be completely bewildered by what they've got to try and do for these young people.

I: And we know that from September this year the menstrual health and RSE education changed, didn't it, in England and is now mandatory, so they have got to do stuff on that.

R: Yes, well, that was supposed to come in, it is now mandatory, so relationships, sex, education and health education is now mandatory in schools. But the government have pushed that back, although it's mandatory, they've kind of pushed it back to the summer to kind of make schools comply, I suppose. I think they're sort of saying, you should be doing this, but we're not going to be assessing you on it, I think, until the summer. And obviously we're doing lots of work to try and encourage schools to take up our RSE offers and curriculums and that kind of thing, so... And that's the other thing that we have done at Brook, we've now got...we've done quite a lot of work with regard to developing a fairly robust curriculum for RSE and menstrual health course, all of the stuff that we developed as part of Let's Talk. Period is included in that.

- I: So I guess then in terms of the future in terms of if we're in this pandemic for however many months more, keep going in and out of lockdowns...
- R: Well, [voices overlap 16:23], we'll be fine.
- I: Yeah.
- R: Life will return to normal.
- I: Or if there's a different kind of pandemic situation.
- R: Yeah.
- I: What kind of things do you think period poverty organisations and those that are working with people experiencing it, what kind of things do you think are crucial that need to be available or thought about, things like policy strategy, those sorts of things, what do you think people actually need? Because I think a lot of projects have put in place amazing things, but it's that kind of...the more the government doesn't, the more that everyone else does, and then the government kind of thinks, oh well, it's alright because they'll just pick it up.
- R: Yeah, and isn't that kind of what's happened with the free school meals thing, isn't it, is they've had to do a U-turn because of public pressure, and I think, I mean, period poverty was very much the darling of the media, wasn't it, probably a year or 18 months ago. And our project was delivered...it was just the right time for it really because it was as period poverty was becoming much more of a...awareness is being raised amongst the general public that maybe wouldn't have ever thought of something like that, and it's gone, it's disappeared, it seems to have sort of just, you know. And surely it can only have increased in this pandemic like every other element of poverty has, so I think there's something about raising awareness. I think...I mean, I was really...I didn't sit on the Period Poverty Taskforce that DCMS pulled together...
- I: I did.
- R: ...it wasn't DCMS, was it, it was the Department for...
- I: It was the Equalities Office.
- R: Yes, are they still going...
- I: No.
- R: ...because there was talk about them being disbanded as part of Boris's...?
- I: Oh, I don't know about the Equality Office, I know that...so I was on the evidence and data stream of the Period Poverty Taskforce and we're

trying to get stuff going again from that side of things but it's not being led by the government, it's being led by us.

R: Yeah, you see, that's it, isn't it, that's the bit, it's got to be...if anybody really wants to take it serious, I think, you know, why the hell aren't the government picking this up again? We are now...yes, I get why everyone went into panic, sort of firefighting mode in March, but we are now nine months down the road and we're all working...everybody is used to working in a different way, and we are now coming back to business as usual, and I think the government should be picking this up and driving it forward. And it should be, you know, like free school meals, and I know that they're going to say, well, it is because it's in schools, but if people aren't, you know, it's almost like if they... I think, and this is me because I'm really, really cynical, presumably it's better for the government financially if the schools aren't taking it up because they can say they're offering it but schools don't want it and they're not having to spend any money.

I: Yeah. Yeah. Because the...

R: I just think it's because...and if schools aren't, you know, I know they did...I'm fairly sure there was some guidance that schools got, I never really saw it, but again if they lock those products in a cupboard and it means that some poor girl or young person who menstruates has then got to go and knock on someone's door and ask for a pad and they get given one pad at a time or one tampon at a time, it's just not good enough.

I: No. So...

R: Sorry...

I: No, it's fine. Honestly, yeah, it's fine, everyone says the same things and we all end up having a good old rant about exactly those sorts of things.

R: But I also do think there's something about with someone like Brook we are a national organisation, we probably need to start shouting about this a bit louder because we were very much like, we've got the funding, we did our project, it was brilliant for us, it raised our profile in a slightly different sector to what we normally operate in. The funding has come to an end and it's kind of like, oh well, it feels a bit like even for Brook, and I'm a senior leader in the organisation, oh, we've done that, box ticked, let's think about what else we want to do. And I do think that we need to also be maybe, you know, as a sector, period poverty sector or period poverty activists, whatever you want to call it, we should be probably shouting a bit louder as well about it. And maybe there should be something about is there something that we can do, and maybe it's Plan, maybe it's us, maybe it's another national organisation that can drive this forwards a bit more.

- I: So do you think then in terms of looking to the future, do you feel that with the current stuff that Brook is doing around the menstrual health education, do you think that you'll be able to carry on pretty much unaffected with what you're doing at the moment?
- R: Yeah, I think if school...I mean, basically we will kind of deliver education sessions as, you know, we have a suite of training and sessions that we offer to schools and they kind of pick and choose what they want, so it's really if schools need it or want it. And I think there's probably something that as a sector we probably need to educate schools that they do need it, because I don't think they realise they need it. And we have this even when we were phoning up schools and saying, look, we've got this free session, we can come in, we can give out free products, oh, we don't have...period poverty isn't an issue in our school. So it's so much more...so yes, we can actually carry on delivering, but only if schools want it really.
- I: Yeah. And how about with the local authority buy-in as well, how does that work?
- R: Well, I think, I mean, we will pick up those conversations again, it's kind of...it sort of has become part of our offer, it kind of sits outside of...we normally get commissioned by local authorities through public health money to deliver sexual health services which is clinical and prevention which is the education side, and period poverty doesn't normally come into that, but we would potentially put that into a tender if we could. But it is down to funding as well, although we are a national organisation, we're not any different to any other charity, we don't have money, you know, we haven't got the funds to be able to deliver this without having the funding to do it.
- I: Yeah, I think for a lot of people it comes down to the funding aspects.
- R: Yeah, yeah. And we can lend our voice and we can...and there are many louder voices in the period poverty sector than Brook's, I'm very well aware of that and they're not necessarily from big national organisations, but we're very, very happy to lend our voice to those conversations and that sort of awareness raising activities. But we also...I will say, we try and recognise that we are not always, you know, just because we're a big national charity, does not mean we're the expert in this.
- I: Yeah. So I think we've covered everything really that I wanted to talk about.
- R: Great.
- I: Is there anything else that you just wanted to highlight that we've not talked about or that you think is really important?

- R: No, I don't think so, I think you've probably picked it up, it's just disappointing I suppose that, like I say, it was the darling for a while, wasn't it, and it just felt like real progress was being made in loads and loads of areas, and COVID has come along and impacted on that, as you would expect it to. But it feels like...whereas you'd think actually the impact of COVID would raise the awareness, it seems to have just...it's just gone away.
- I: Yeah, yes, and that's another aim of this project, is to kind of say, hey, it's still here.
- R: Yeah, yeah, and I think that's what we need to do.
- I: Yeah, definitely.
- R: I'm very, very happy, [REDACTED], once your research is...once you've done all your research, I assume you'll be publishing it, won't you?
- I: Yeah.
- R: And if you want any sort of support to do that, then please do let us know because we'd be very happy to, you know, even if it's just social media stuff and tweeting links and putting it on the website and whatever else, we're really happy to do that.
- I: Ah, that would be great, thank you. Right, I'm going to turn the recorder off and then I want to talk to you about something slightly different. Stay on the line.
- R: Okay, ooh, exciting.
- I: Well, it's linked to what we've been talking about, but yeah.

End of transcript