

Family Services

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Document title	Period Poverty & Stigma Survey
Document description	This report provides an overview of the findings from the period poverty & stigma survey available to schools in Barnet between 31/10/2022 and 16/12/2022.
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Prepared for	Public Health

Background

‘Period stigma’ is a broad term for discrimination faced by people that menstruate, from physical problems such as lack of access to period products to the verbal shaming of menstruating people as "dirty" or "unclean". Period stigma results in a lower quality of life for those who are faced with it. Stigma is defined as the shame and disgrace society attaches unfairly to something associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. Period stigma creates a sense of shame, embarrassment, or hesitation to talk about periods.

There is a range of initiatives to tackle the stigma still felt to surround periods and these include campaign groups like ‘Rethink Periods’ and ‘The Natural Cycle Development Programme’ to raise awareness and/ or provide education sessions to schools.

'Period poverty' refers to having a lack of access to sanitary products due to financial constraints. Having access to them is something that many of us probably take for granted. Period poverty is a very real challenge facing many girls in the UK and around the world, it's devastating to hear of the impact it is having on girls' lives, their ability to be themselves, and their self-esteem. For too many girls, dealing with their period each month is proving a tough challenge – and in 21st-century Britain, this shouldn't be the case.

There are a number of initiatives in the UK to help tackle period poverty and in the spring of 2019, the Government announced that secondary schools would get access to free sanitary products. From February 2020, all state schools were able to choose from a range of items using an online system, email or phone through the Department for Education (DfE) free period product scheme. The products, from supplier PHS Group, include single-use and reusable pads, applicator and non-applicator tampons, and menstrual cups.

The London Borough of Barnet wants to support every young person to have access to sanitary products regardless of financial constraints. Also, there is a drive to challenge 'period stigma' and encourage young people to feel comfortable being on their period and all young people regardless of their gender, to have a healthy perception of periods and be able to talk about periods without a sense of embarrassment or shame.

Barnet Council set up an online survey in conjunction with Barnet schools in January and February 2020 to learn more about the borough's young people's experiences accessing and using period products as well as how they obtain them. The purpose of this survey was to help the local authority gauge whether there are problems locally with young people having access to these products, and what if any support is currently available to young people, schools, and professionals. Conclusions drawn from the 2020 survey were that although period poverty prevalence was deemed low (5.6% of pupils reported ever being unable to access period products due to financial difficulties), period stigma was a strong theme identified. Therefore, more information and education should be provided to boys and girls about periods, period poverty and hygiene to help remove the stigma. Additionally, schools should be encouraged to sign up for the DfE-funded PHS period product scheme to support young people in need.

A similar survey was administered between October and December 2022. The purpose of this survey, like the survey conducted in 2020, was to help the local authority gauge whether local young people were having problems accessing period products i.e., experiencing period poverty and what if any support is currently available to young people, schools, and professionals. In addition to this, the 2022

survey also investigated the views and experiences of young people about period stigma. Key findings from the 2022 survey are outlined below:

Key Findings

- **Awareness of the term “period poverty” decreased between the 2020 and 2022 surveys from 87% being either fully or partially aware in 2020 compared to 67% in the 2022 survey. This could perhaps be explained by the lower average age of students responding to the 2022 survey.**
- **37.7% of students said they felt that period products were not affordable and 12% said they have been unable to access period products due to financial difficulties.**
- **Students were most likely to go to a parent/carer when they couldn’t afford period products and were most comfortable discussing periods with their family.**
- **A majority of students (57%) were aware of the support available in their school or educational setting and rated it good or very good. Most students who responded otherwise said it was neither good nor bad (39%).**
- **The most common suggested improvement for the council was the provision of free or reduced-priced period products.**

Method

The survey was created using Survey Monkey and live between the 31st of October and the 16th of December 2022. The survey was promoted to students aged 11- to 19-years-old at all schools in Barnet, except for infant schools; this included junior schools, primary schools, secondary schools, and special schools. By the closing date, the survey had gathered responses from 734 participants from at least 20 different schools. 212 students who took the survey did not provide the name of their school and 6 students said they were home-schooled. According to the 2021/22 school census, there are 32,645 pupils aged 11 to 19 in Barnet, meaning approximately 2% of Barnet pupils answered this survey.

Findings

This section will briefly summarise the key findings of this study. Please refer to **Appendix** for a full breakdown of the number of participants who responded as well as the answers they recorded. Any figures quoted in this section refer only to participants who answered the questions. Participants who chose to skip questions are not included in this data.

89% of responses were received from students attending a secondary school. The highest number of responses were received from Copthall School, representing 30% of all responses received (Chart 1). Every school that showed at least one response to the survey take up the PHS portal for period products. Throughout the survey, participants were given the option to skip any question they didn't want to answer. There was a gradual decline in the number of responses throughout the survey (Chart 2). Question 21 had the lowest percentage rate at 4%; this was an expansion question to question 20 on disability. Questions 4 and 5 had the second lowest response rate at 10% each; these questions asked about the affordability of period products.

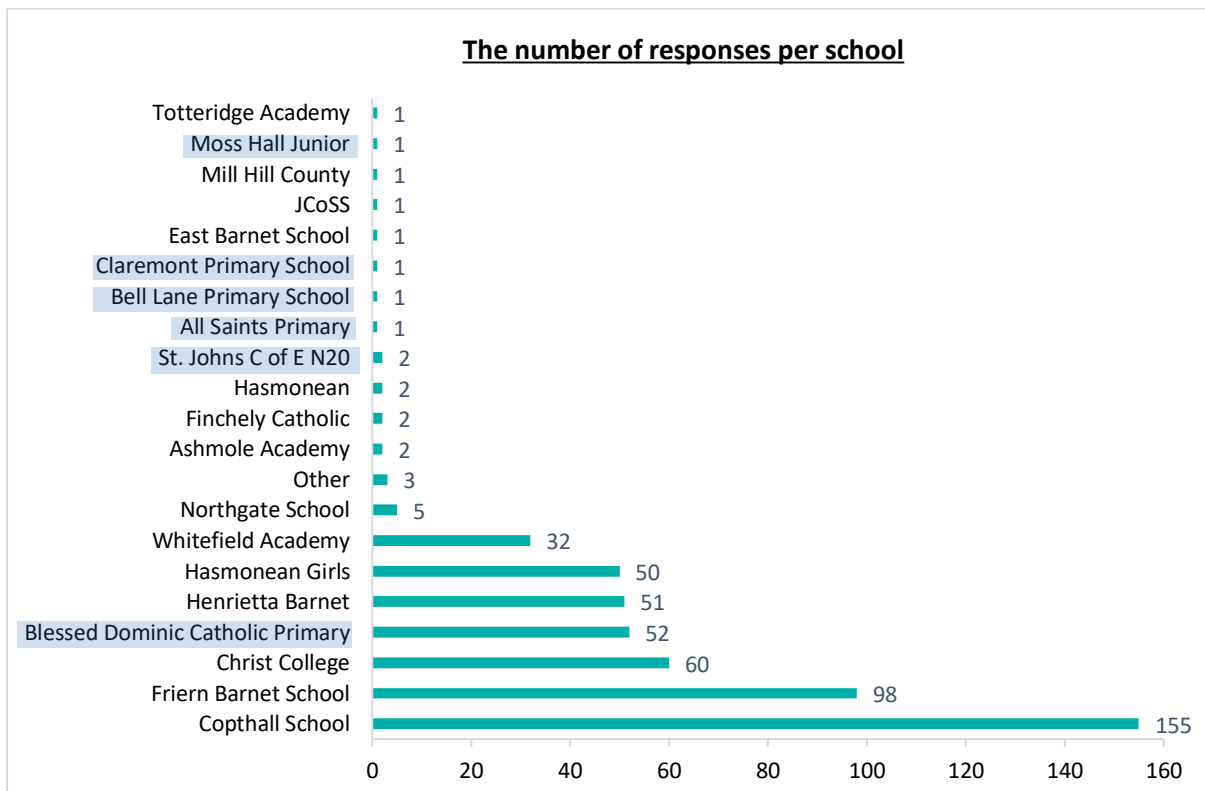


Chart 1: The number of responses to the survey received per school. Schools highlighted in blue are primary schools; overall 58 responses (11%) were received from primary schools.

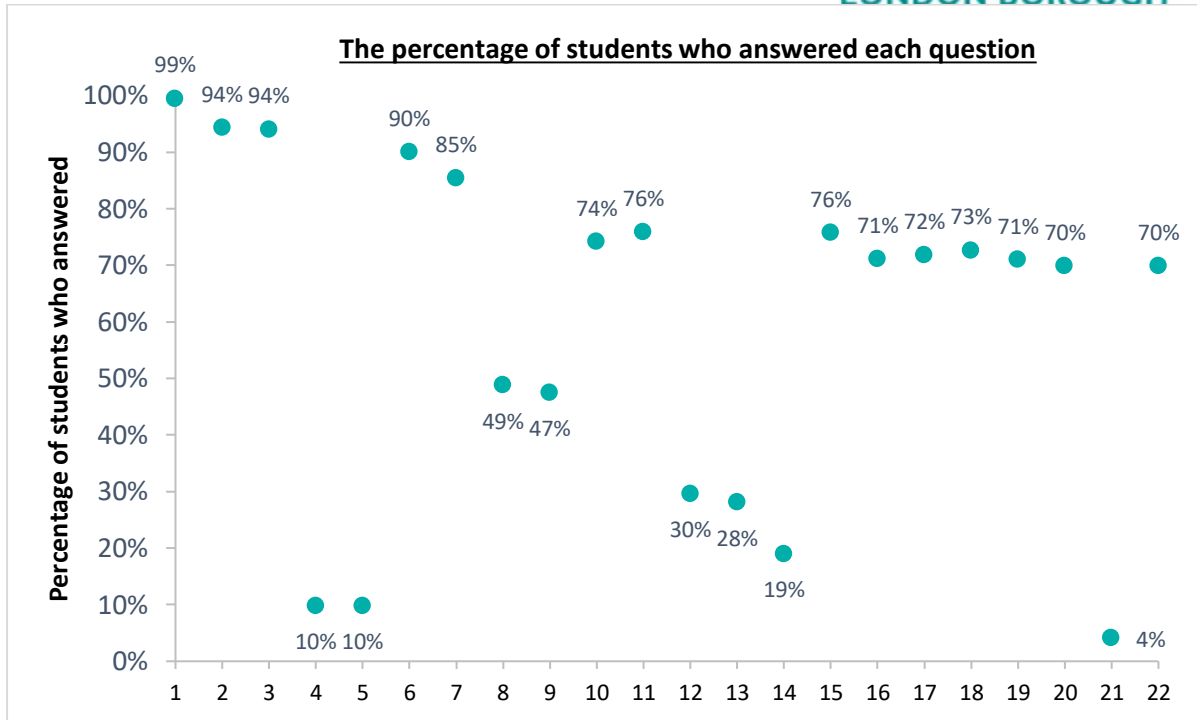


Chart 2: The percentage of students who answered each question in the survey.

The most common age category of participants was 14-15 years old, representing 37% of students (Chart 3). When interpreting this graph it is important to note that the age categories of 11-12 and 12-13 overlap, with students who are 12 years old able to select either option. The majority of participants identified as female (460 students; 86%). 1.5% identified their gender as other whilst 37 students (7%) identified their gender as male. This is lower than the 2020 survey where 62 participants (20.1%) identified as male, though it should be noted in the 2022 survey 28 students (5%) said they preferred not to answer and a further 201 students did not answer the question on gender (Chart 4).

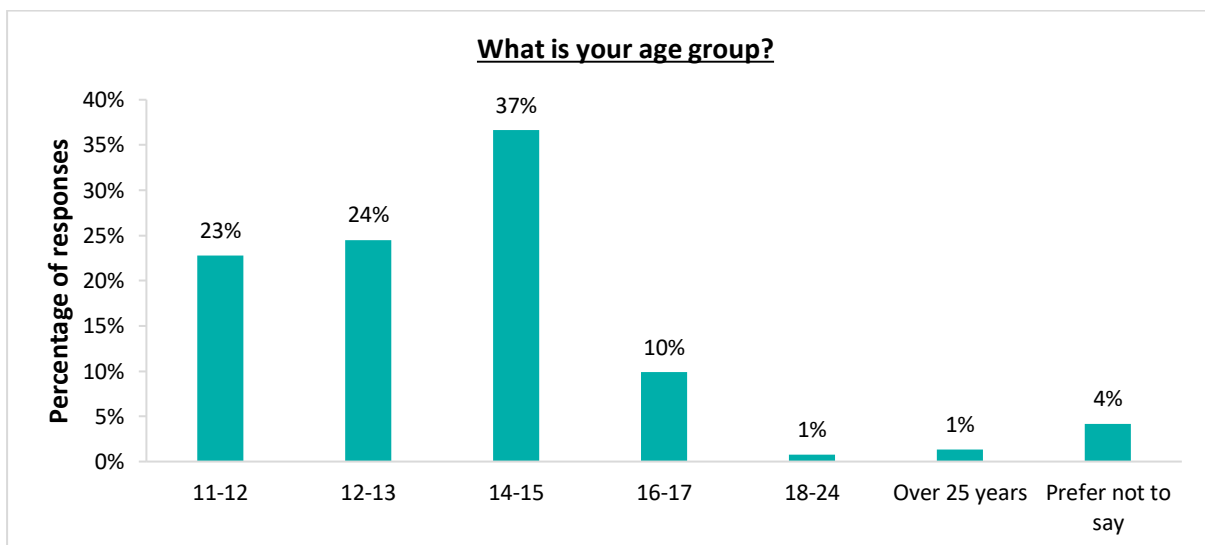


Chart 3: The responses to the question “What is your age group?”.

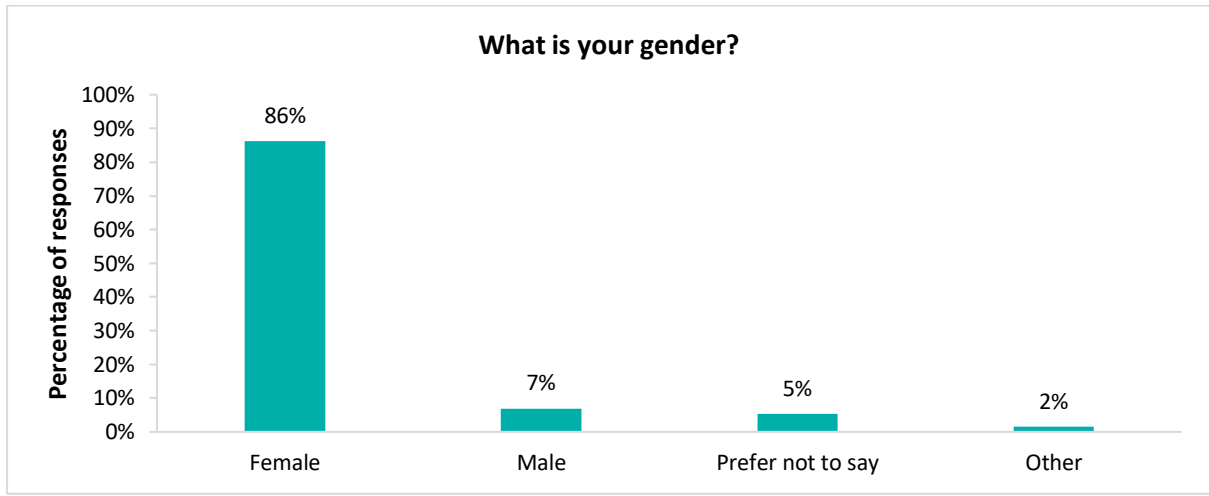


Chart 4: The responses to the question “What is your gender?”.

White was the most common ethnic group, representing 25% of students, followed by Asian (23%), Other ethnic groups (14%), Black (11%), and Mixed (10%). 8% of students who answered the question chose “Prefer not to say”. Of the 70 students identifying as an Other ethnic group, 40 identified as Afghan.

The ethnicity of students who took the period poverty survey and answered the question on the ethnic group was compared to the ethnicity statistics in the 2021/22 Barnet secondary school census. The secondary school census was chosen as this census covers pupils aged 11-16, which accounts for approximately 80% of survey participants. This comparison showed a similar distribution of ethnicity in both the school census and period poverty datasets. The biggest difference is seen in students identifying as White who accounted for 46.4% of the population in the 2021/22 school census and 35.7% of the student population who provided their ethnicity in the period poverty survey (Chart 5).

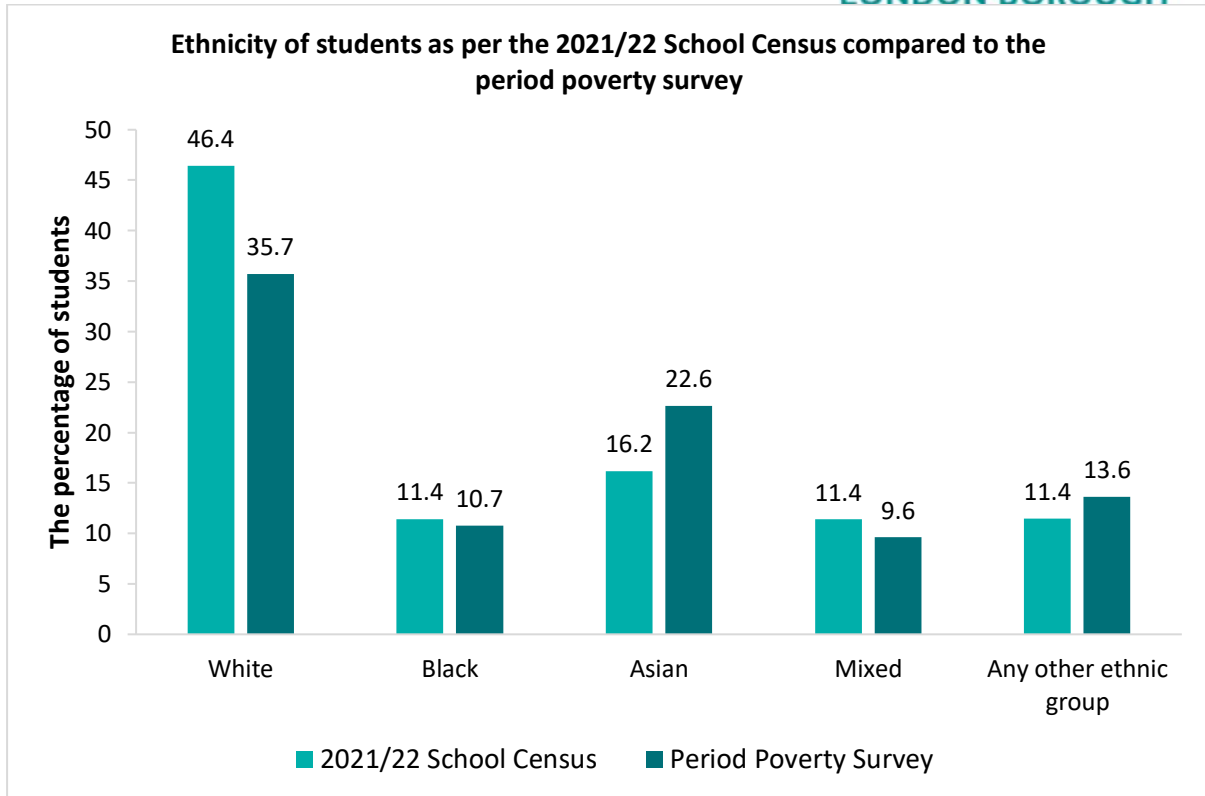


Chart 5: Ethnicity of students as per the 2021/22 School Census compared to the period poverty survey.

Awareness

67% said they were already fully or partially aware of the term “period poverty” before taking part in the survey, down from 87% in the 2020 survey (Chart 6).

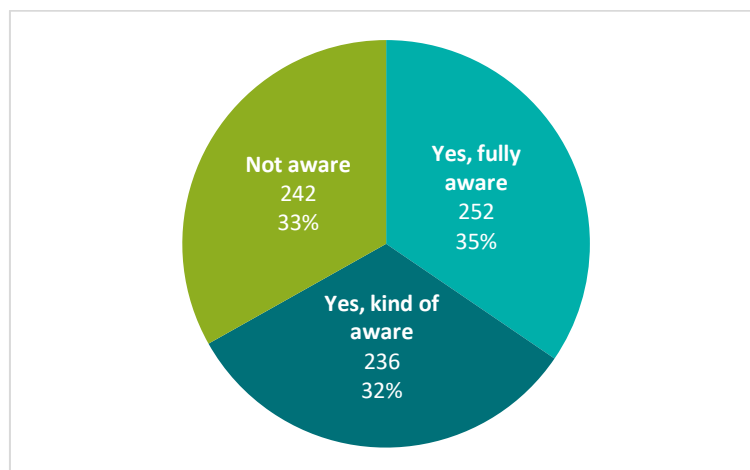


Chart 6: The responses to the question “Before today, were you aware of the term period poverty?”.

Affordability

In the 2022 survey 37.7% of students said they felt that period products were not affordable, compared to 24.7% of students who said that they felt that period products were affordable. In 2020, there was an even split between those who felt period products were affordable versus not affordable, at 50% each; however, whilst “Don’t Know/Unsure” was not an option in the 2020 survey, it was in 2022, and 37.6% of students selected this option.

31.8% of students said they felt that not being able to afford period products is a problem in their school / educational setting whereas 27.2% said they felt that it wasn’t a problem. In the 2020 survey, a higher proportion of students thought that not being able to afford period products was a problem in their school or educational setting, with 60% of students having this opinion.

12% said they have been unable to access period products due to financial difficulties; this is more than double the percentage of students who said this in the 2020 survey. 30.6% of students who responded to the question “How often have you been unable to afford period products?” said they couldn’t afford period products less often than once every six months, 26.4% said can’t afford them every 2-3 months, and 26.4% said they couldn’t afford period products every month. “Ask my parent/carer for money/products” was the most common response to not being able to afford period products, with 43.1% selecting this option.

School Support

The majority of students (56.9%) were aware of the support available in their school / educational setting to access free period products. This shows a higher level of awareness than in the 2020 survey, where just 37% of participants were aware of school support. There was an almost even split between students who do and do not access the support available, with slightly more having accessed the support. Again, this is higher than in 2020, where 43.7% of students said they accessed the support. 57.7% rated their experience of accessing the service as very good or good.

Talking about periods

Both males and females were most comfortable talking to their families about periods. 33% of males were comfortable talking about periods with family compared to 22% of females. Almost half (47%) said they strongly agree or agree with being comfortable being involved in discussions about periods in public places.

30% said they strongly agree or agree with feeling a sense of embarrassment buying period products; an almost equal number (29%) said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with feeling this

embarrassment. This indicates a lower level of overall embarrassment linked to talking about periods than was shown in the 2020 survey, where 63.5% strongly agreed or agreed that talking about periods and period poverty could result in individuals feeling embarrassed as the subject of periods is still seen as a taboo.

17% said they strongly agree or agree with having experienced or witnessed another pupil being treated unkindly due to being on their period whereas 44% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. 44% of students agreed that their school/educational setting is supportive and understanding of pupils on their periods compared to 15% who disagreed or strongly disagreed (Chart 7). A free text question followed this question giving students a chance to explain their responses. 58 students mentioned being told they cannot go to the bathroom during a lesson when on their period, indicating a reason why students may not feel that their school/education setting is supportive and understanding of pupils on their period.

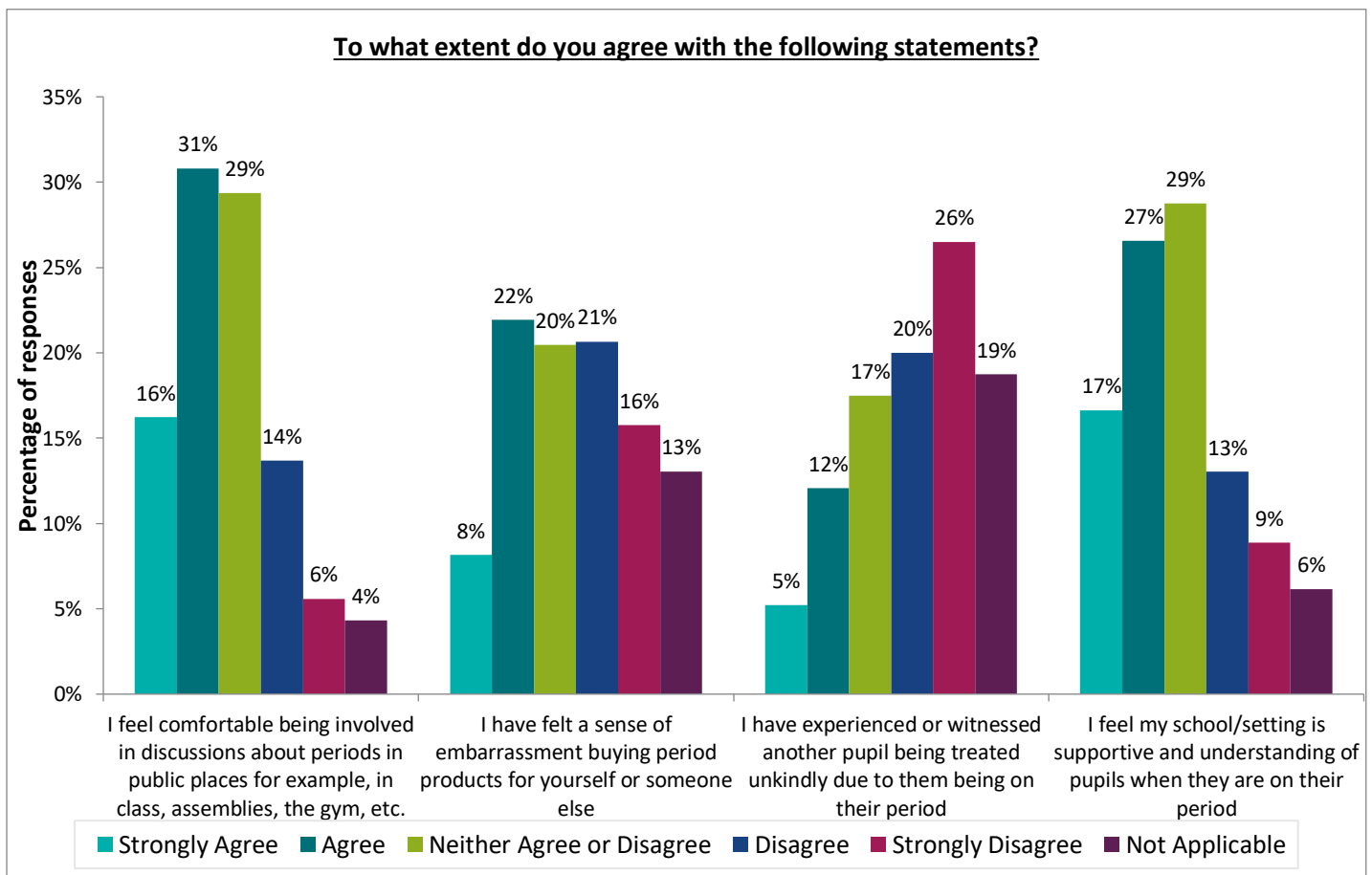


Chart 7: The responses to the question “To what extent do you agree with the following statements?”.

Suggestions for the council

Students were asked if they had any comments or actions that the council should consider taking to better support people who are on their periods and reduce period stigma. The free-text responses to this question were categorised into broad themes (Chart 8).

The most common theme was “Free period products” with 54 responses fitting this theme. A further 20 responses were of a “Lower the price of period products” theme. 33 responses were themed around “School regulation”, referring to students suggesting changes to be made in schools, particularly around allowing access to the bathroom during lessons. 22 responses were focused on “Education”, particularly of male students and teachers. One student suggested incorporating frequent period education into all subjects at school (including discussing symptoms in PE and learning vocabulary in modern language classes) to normalise language used around periods.

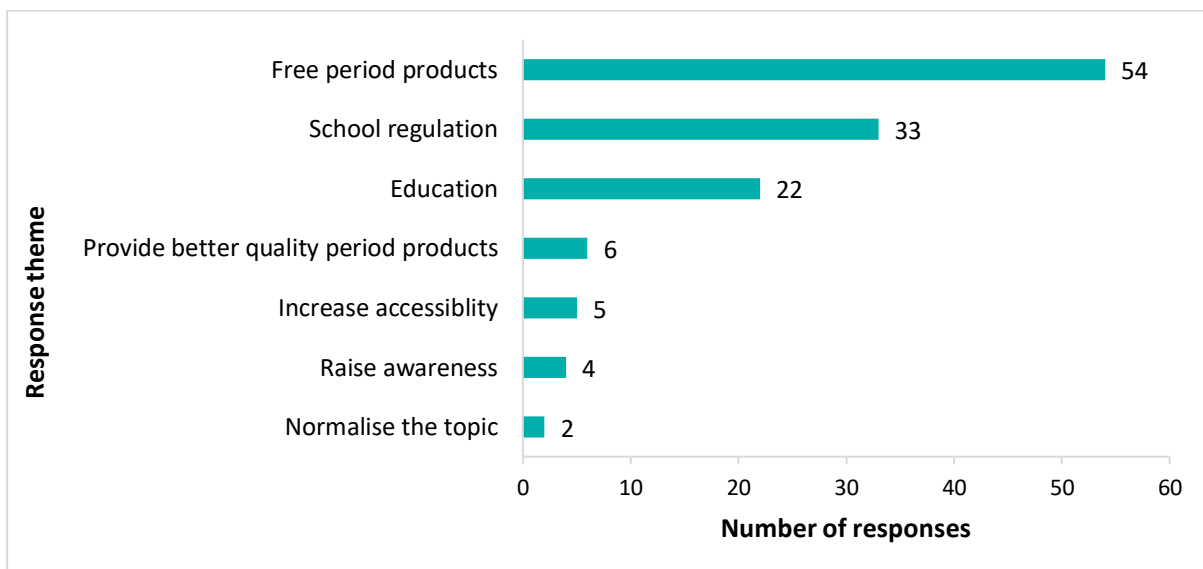


Chart 8: The themes of responses to the question “Do you have any comments or actions that the council should consider taking to better support people who are on their periods and reduce period stigma?”.

Conclusion

There was a greater uptake of the period poverty survey in 2022 compared to 2020, with over double the number of responses received.

The 2022 survey shows that awareness of the term “period poverty” has decreased since 2020 from 87% being either fully or partially aware of the term in 2020 compared to 67% in

the 2022 survey. This could perhaps be explained by the lower average age of students responding to the 2022 survey.

37.7% of students said they felt that period products were not affordable and 12% said they have been unable to access period products due to financial difficulties. Students were most likely to go to a parent/carer when they couldn't afford period products and were most comfortable discussing periods with their families.

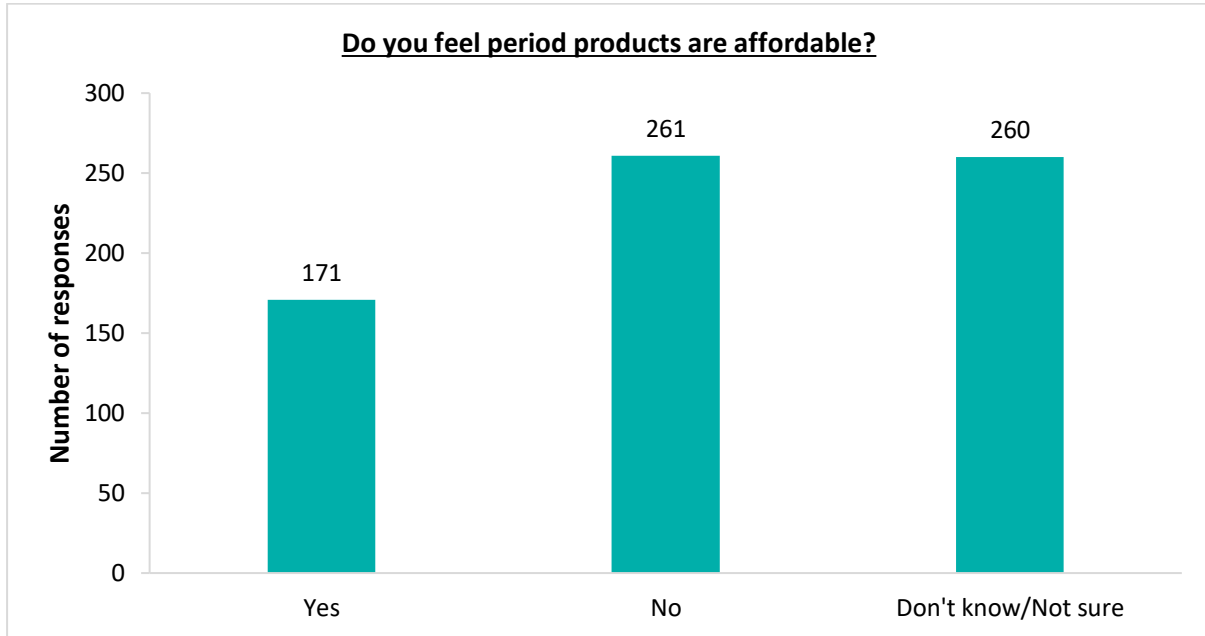
Most students (57%) were aware of the support available in their school or educational setting and rated it good or very good. However, the most common suggested improvement for the council was the provision of free or reduced-priced period products. Other than pupil awareness of the DfE-funded PHS scheme, this suggests young people may desire free or reduced-priced period products in the community environment.

Recommendations

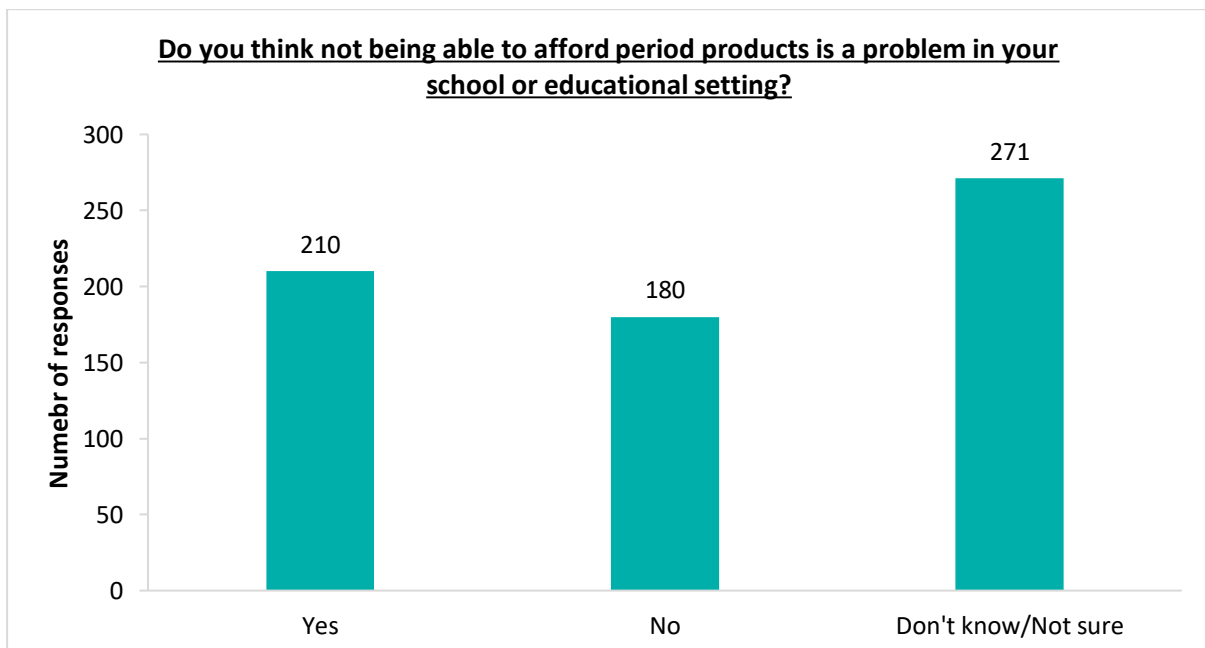
1. Where possible, questions should be kept consistent between surveys to allow for valid comparisons to be made. This includes the way a question is phrased, as this may affect how participants interpret it, and the answer options provided.
2. Sampling of students should be representative of Barnet's school population as a possible suggestion – to check this representation, we have compared survey demographic data to the 2021/22 school census. This comparison should be continued in future surveys.
3. Continue to encourage schools to sign up for the DfE-funded PHS scheme and order a wide range of period products available on the PHS portal. When ordering, schools should be encouraged to consider the quality and sustainability of the products selected.
4. Encourage schools to promote and raise awareness of the support that the school is able to provide around periods including free period products available.
5. Investigate the possibility of providing free or reduced-period products to young people in need outside of the school setting; particularly to meet the needs of home-schooled, asylum seekers & refugee children.
6. Encourage schools to conduct risk assessments and make reasonable adjustments to improve toilet accessibility.

7. Improve local period education for all genders, including male students and teachers so that everyone has a good understanding of periods and the support available.
8. Continue to raise awareness of period poverty and stigma and encourage discussions about periods amongst children and young people to help normalise periods.
9. Support schools to be environments that are 'Positive about Periods' whereby a whole school approach to periods is applied and period education is embedded into and across the curriculum.
10. Investigate ways in which families can be better supported with period education, stigma, and poverty.

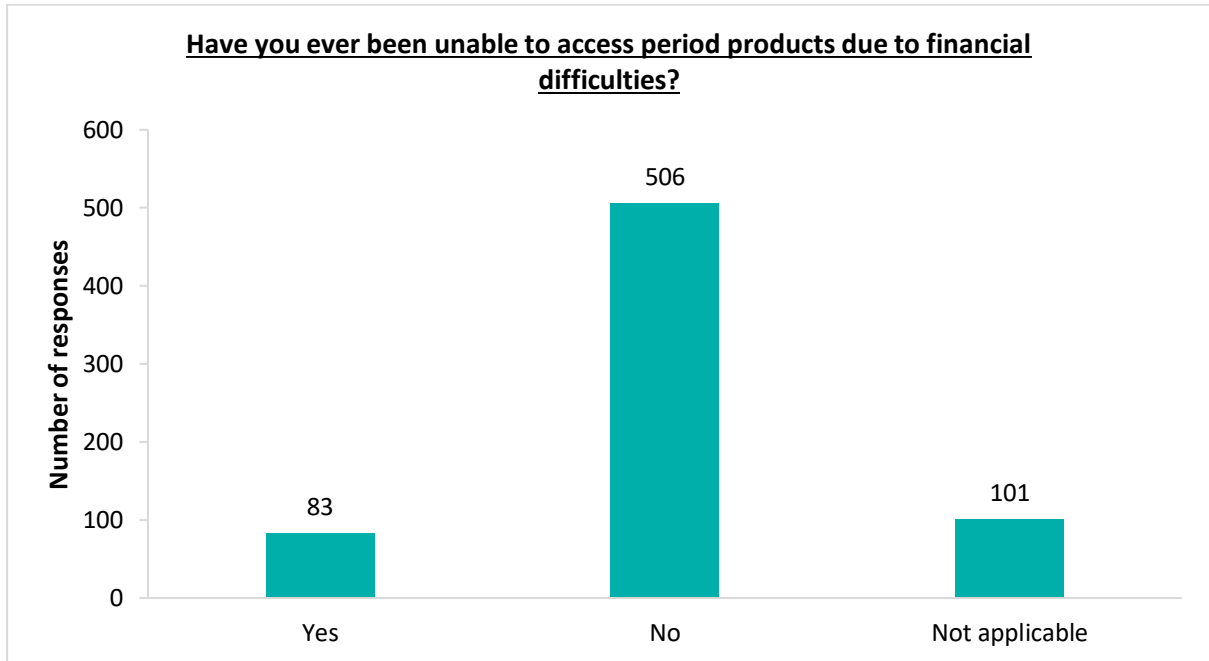
Appendix



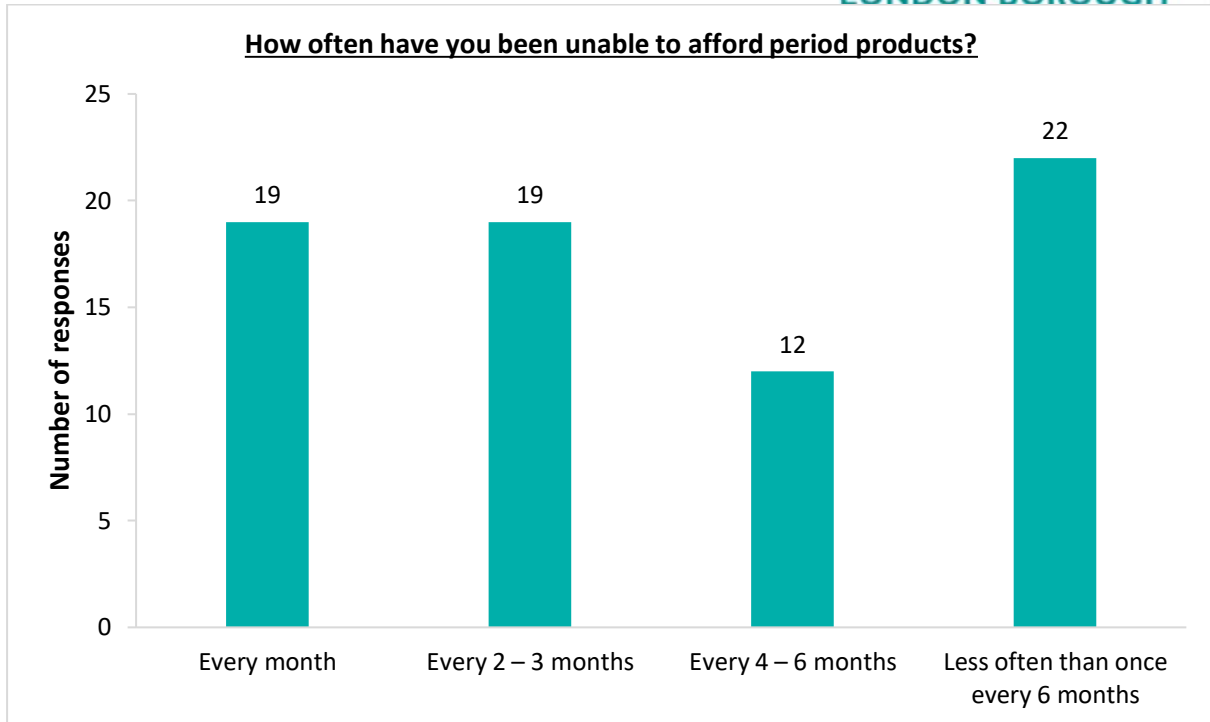
Appendix 1: The responses to the question “Do you feel period products are affordable?”.



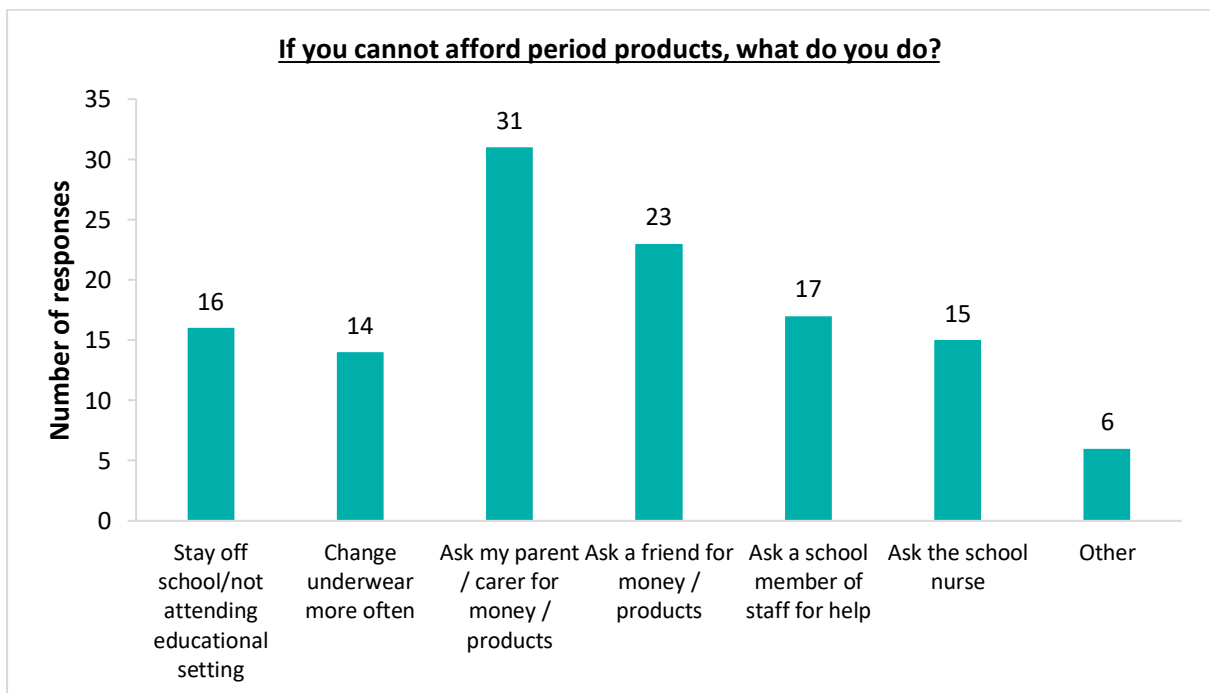
Appendix 2: The responses to the question “Do you think not being able to afford period products is a problem in your school or educational setting?”.



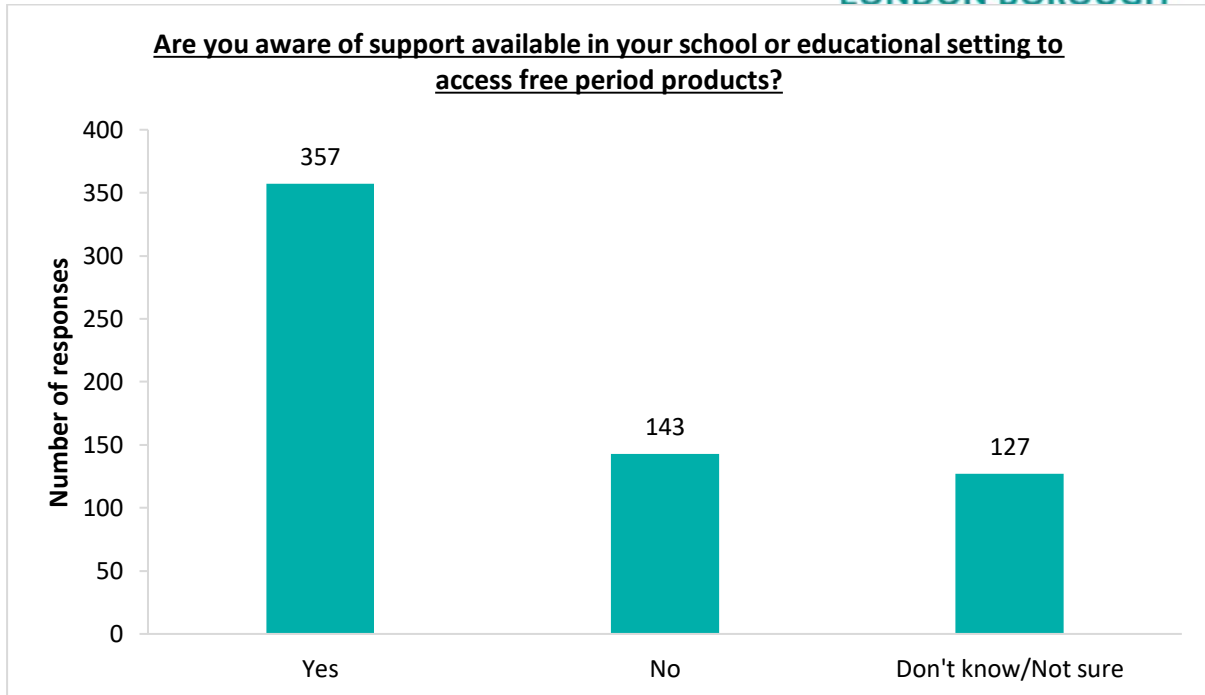
Appendix 3: The responses to the question “Have you ever been unable to access period products due to financial difficulties?”.



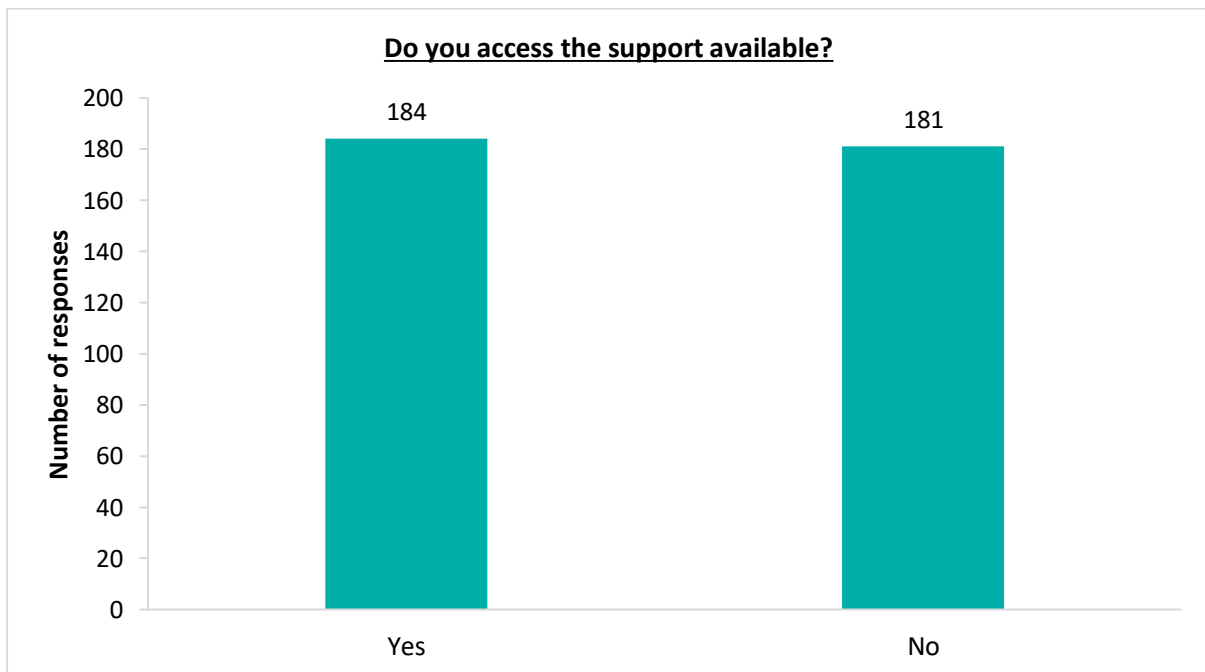
Appendix 4: The responses to the question “How often have you been unable to afford period products?”.



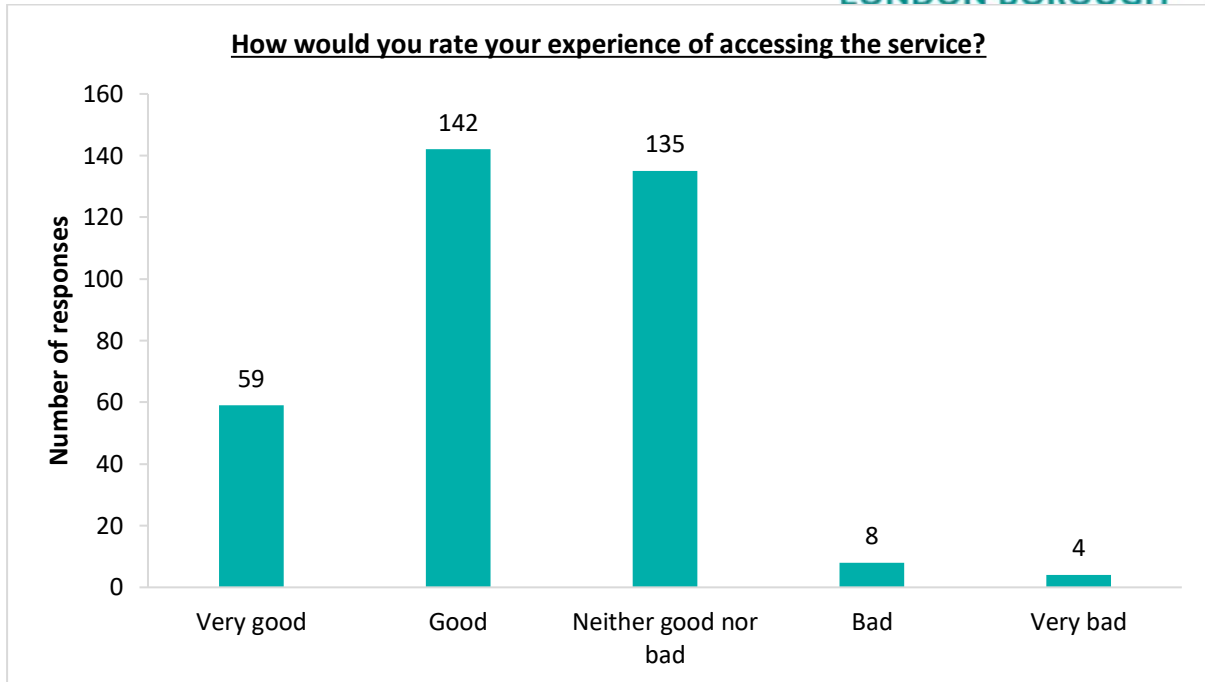
Appendix 5: The responses to the question “If you cannot afford period products, what do you do?”.



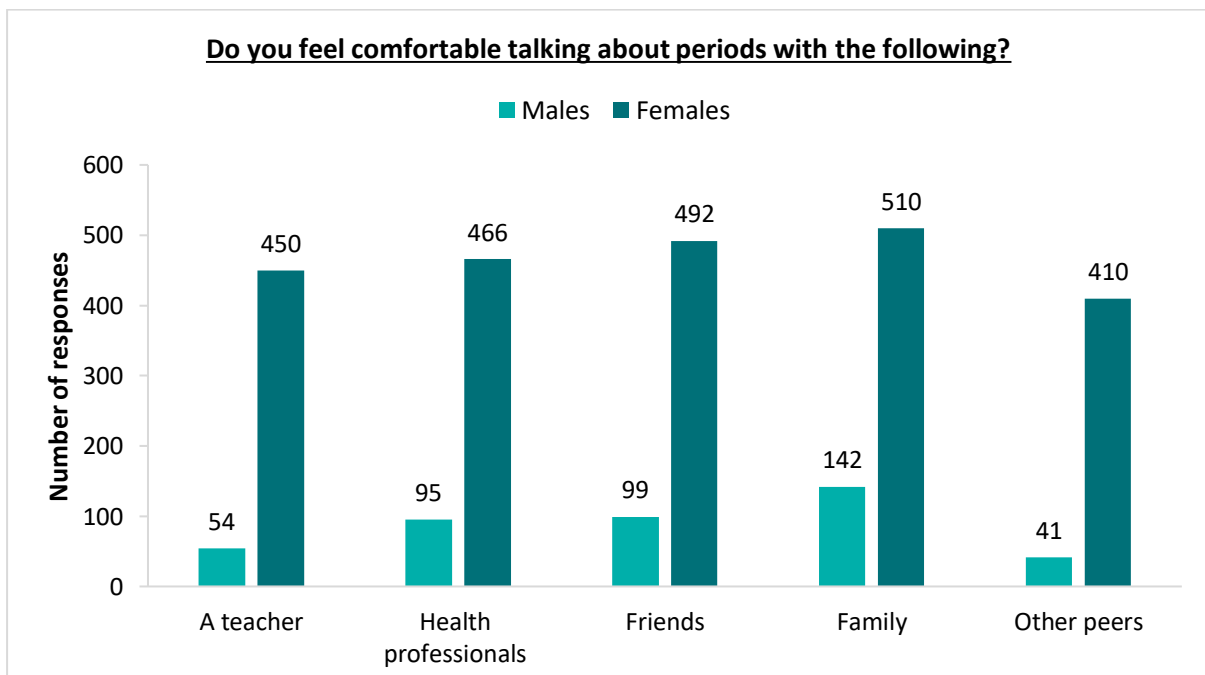
Appendix 6: The responses to the question “Are you aware of the support available in your school or educational setting to access free period products?”.



Appendix 7: The responses to the question “Do you access the support available?”.



Appendix 8: The responses to the question “How would you rate your experience of accessing the service?”.



Appendix 9: The responses to the question “Do you feel comfortable talking about periods with the following?”.

