























Wise in 5: Period Poverty

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

This briefing was published September 2025. It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

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	Free Access	Legal Requirement	Safety & Quality Standards	Cultural Sensitivity
Scotland	 Available to all	 Period Products (Free Provision) Act 2021	 Government oversight with Zero Waste Scotland	 Wide product choice; guided by community feedback
Wales	 Educational/ community settings	 Government-funded scheme	 Supplier collaboration ensures safety	 Young people consulted on provision
Northern Ireland	 Some schools only	 Bill passed in 2022, not implemented	 Policy in development	 Varies by location
Ireland	 Expanding- Schools, libraries, sports clubs	 Period Poverty Action Plan 2021	 EU safety regulations via approved suppliers	 Government guidance encourages cultural sensitivity
England	 Voluntary scheme	 Voluntary participation only	 Quality concerns due to no regulation	 Limited tampon-only supplies.
Key		 Yes / Strong	 Partial / In Progress	 No / Weak

Wise in 5: Period Poverty–Free Access to Menstrual Products across the UK & Ireland.

Overview

Period poverty affects millions across the UK and Ireland, creating barriers to education, employment, and dignity. While all nations acknowledge the issue, each has taken different approaches to tackle it.

The statistics reveal that [21% of women in the UK struggle to afford period products \(rising from 12% in 2022\)](#), with [2 million girls aged 14–21 missing school due to their periods](#). Paradoxically, Scotland, despite having the most comprehensive legislation, shows the highest rate of [student period poverty at 25%](#), compared to the UK average of 10%. This shows the scale of existing need and why strong policy intervention matters.

Period poverty goes beyond affordability, it's about having consistent, safe, and dignified access to menstrual products. Across the UK and Ireland, policies on free provision vary depending on the location. While some nations provide menstrual products as a legal requirement, others limit access to certain age groups and educational environments.

A 2021 [Plan International UK](#) survey found that 77% of girls in the UK report reduced concentration during menstruation, and many avoid attending school due to stigma and embarrassment. Recent student testimonies shared in [The Tab](#) describe the continued impact of menstrual health challenges in higher education, with some students reporting being unable to attend lectures due to severe symptoms, subsequently affecting their academic performance. These findings align with research from the [Higher Education Policy Institute \(HEPI\)](#) establishing the connection between menstrual health and educational

outcomes. Their [July 2025 report](#) found that students who menstruate miss an average of 10 study days per year, with those having diagnosed menstrual health conditions missing 19 days per year (over 11 academic weeks across a three-year degree). Additionally, 70% struggle to concentrate during studies or assessments due to period pain, and 16% experience period poverty. Nearly half (47%) of students experiencing period poverty miss classes as a result.

Meanwhile, recent investigations, including a [UK BJOG study](#) and highlighted in [The Guardian](#), have raised concerns about harmful chemical residues in menstrual products, including glyphosate levels 40 times above legal limits. Yet most publicly funded schemes in the UK do not require ingredient disclosure or safety testing. For policies to be truly effective, they must ensure access to safe, culturally sensitive, and high-quality products that support dignity and health.

Currently, where you live determines the support you receive, creating unequal access to what should be a basic matter of dignity across the UK. As the cost of living rises, these disparities are worsening, showing the urgent need for united action on this issue.

This briefing compares how period poverty is addressed across the UK's four nations and the Republic of Ireland, exploring how current policies affect access and provision.

Nation by Nation

Scotland

[The Scottish Government's Period Products \(Free Provision\) Act 2021](#) is described as one of the most progressive policies globally. It grants everyone a legal right to free period products in public buildings, schools, and workplaces. [The Scottish Government](#) works with [Zero Waste Scotland](#) to ensure products are safe and environmentally friendly.

Despite having this strong framework, [25% of students still experience period poverty, which is much higher than the UK average](#). This demonstrates why the policy is necessary. The Scottish approach prioritises a wide range of products, including pads, tampons, and reusables, with local councils deciding how best to meet the needs of the community.

[Research by the Scottish Government found that one in four young people](#) in educational institutions have struggled to access sanitary products, with earlier data showing an increase from one in seven girls in 2017.

Wales

Wales has provided government-funded period products since 2018, expanding significantly in 2020 with [£3.3 million allocated for schools, colleges and nurseries, alongside £220,000 for community provision in libraries and hubs](#).

[The Welsh Government](#) works directly with suppliers to ensure products are safe and sustainable. A key focus of the Welsh approach is consulting with young people to provide culturally appropriate and diverse product ranges. Local councils work with communities to ensure products meet cultural and religious needs while maintaining quality standards through trusted suppliers.

Northern Ireland

[Northern Ireland passed a law for free period products in 2022](#), inspired by Scotland's model, but political delays have prevented full implementation. Current provision remains limited to some schools, with access varying depending on the location.

Advocacy groups continue to push for a broader range of products and more consistent access that meets everyone's needs. While the policy framework is in place, it lacks the necessary funding and political will to be effectively implemented.

Republic of Ireland

[Ireland introduced the Period Poverty Action Plan in 2021](#), alongside pilot programmes to test different approaches. Free products are now available in schools, sports clubs, and libraries, with expansion in progress.

All products must comply with EU safety standards, and guidance encourages culturally sensitive options. However, implementation remains less comprehensive than in Wales or Scotland.

England

[England introduced a voluntary scheme in 2020](#), which is limited to educational settings with no legal requirement for schools to participate. This approach has raised significant concerns about inconsistent quality control and limited choice. Some feedback suggests that certain schools only offer tampons, which may be unsuitable for many due to cultural, religious or personal needs.

The lack of national regulation creates what [Pesticide Action Network UK identifies as serious safety risks](#), stating that "The UK lacks a robust regulatory framework to ensure that period products are safe to use." [Their 2024 testing](#) found glyphosate in tampons at levels [40 times higher](#) than permitted in drinking water, with chemicals absorbed via the vagina directly entering the bloodstream and "bypassing the body's detoxification systems". The voluntary approach means product quality varies significantly across suppliers and regions, with some schools offering limited product choice that creates particular problems for individuals whose [cultural, religious, or personal preferences make tampons inappropriate](#).

Key Statistics

Across the UK and Ireland, data highlights significant challenges around period poverty, but there are major inconsistencies in collection.

Affordability: 21% of women across the UK report struggling to afford products (up from 12% in 2022). In Scotland, 24% overall — rising to 35% of young women aged 15–24.

Students: [1 in 10 schoolgirls](#) in England experience period poverty, while in Wales the figure is 25% (1 in 4).

School Absence: In the UK, around 2 million girls aged 14–21 have missed school due to their period. Historically, 1 in 7 girls reported this in 2017.

Substitutes: [40% of girls](#) in England have used toilet paper instead of sanitary products. Nearly 1 in 5 women across the UK report using substitutes.

Impact: 77% report that their concentration is negatively affected.

Stigma: 55% feel too embarrassed to talk about periods.

Broader Poverty Context: The cost-of-living crisis exacerbates the issue, with [24% of children now living in poverty](#) (up from 18% in 2012/22).

Data Gap: Scotland is the only nation with comprehensive statistics. Wales, Northern Ireland, and Ireland lack consistent, comparable data. Coordinated data collection across the devolved nations is needed to support evidence-based policymaking.

Wise up – 5 policy points to take away

Five key points from what we've learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations:

1. Legal frameworks improve access: Scotland's approach highlights the power of legislation to make essential products accessible to all. However, as Northern Ireland shows, laws alone are not enough, political support and funding are also required.
2. Quality and safety require national oversight: England's voluntary scheme has led to quality concerns and highlights the dangers of unregulated provision, [with recent investigations](#) revealing concerns about chemical residue in menstrual products. Cultural sensitivity demands product choice beyond tampon-only supplies, recognising that religious, cultural, or personal beliefs shape preferences, without choice, dignity is compromised.
3. High poverty rates persist even with good policy: Although Scotland does have strong legislation, one in four students still experience period poverty. This shows how substantial the issue is and how success will require both access and broader support for educational and economic equality.
4. Cultural sensitivity is essential for effective provision: In Wales, working with young people ensures that product options respect cultural, religious, and personal needs. Dignity requires not just access, but appropriate discreet access that respects individuals' preferences and community values. Policy should reflect the multilingual approaches to language education recommended in academic literature and recognise that English is not the sole language needed for integration and life in the UK Nations and Ireland.
5. Cross-nation data collection: Scotland is the only nation with comprehensive period poverty statistics, which makes it harder for other nations to shape strong policies. If all nations collected data in the same way, it would enable more effective policy development policies and allow them to learn from policy successes and failures.

This briefing was led by Abianna Burke, PolicyWISE Intern and Law Student with The Open University, with support from Catherine May and the PolicyWISE team.



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1. **Space:** We create and maintain neutral but constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to **develop relationships, respect and knowledge.**
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3. **Solutions:** We help governments focus on evidence-informed policy solutions for citizens and communities across the nations, informed by comparative and collaborative research and methods.

The Open University has been awarded £1m in funding from Dangoor Education to establish and run PolicyWISE. The funding has supported the launch of PolicyWISE in 2023 and our development over the following four years.



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Wise in 5

The only regular snapshot comparative guide to public policy issues across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

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