

Report to the Future Melbourne Committee**Agenda item 6.5****Evaluation of the Free Period Care Pilot Program****6 December 2022**

Presenters: Linda Weatherson, General Manager Community and City Services and Roger Teal, General Manager Property Infrastructure and Design

Purpose and background

1. The purpose of this report is to present the findings arising from the evaluation of the Free Period Care Pilot Program (Pilot Program).
2. In April 2021, Council resolved to undertake a 12-month pilot offering a free period product service in at least six public facilities across the municipality and to consider a partnership with relevant organisations, such as Share the Dignity, for a wider provision of free products in the municipality. The Pilot Program supports the delivery of actions in Creating Communities of Equality and Respect: Women's Safety and Empowerment Action Plan 2021-2024 (MI49) and the Inclusive Melbourne Strategy 2022-2032 (MI48).

Key issues

3. The Pilot Program was implemented in six Council owned facilities between September 2021 and August 2022. The initial phase was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic which caused disruptions to the utilisation of the program, servicing of the dispensers and some challenges in collecting data.
4. Symplan Consulting was engaged to conduct an evaluation of the Pilot Program (see Attachment 2). The evaluation report found that:
 - 4.1. Demand for products was high despite some facilities not being open due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Carlton Baths and Library at The Dock dispensed the most products while the North Melbourne Community Centre dispensed the fewest. There were 6733 discrete products used during the Pilot Program, potentially assisting 6733 people at a cost (excluding administration and marketing) of \$0.80 cents per person.
 - 4.2. There was overwhelming support from facility managers, service providers, users and the broader community. Feedback indicates the Pilot Program aligns with people's perception of Council's role as a leader in upholding community health and wellbeing.
 - 4.3. While the primary purpose was to address period poverty, access to free period products may also have had positive impacts on social inclusion, menstrual stigma, and gender equity.
 - 4.4. The facilities selected for the Pilot Program were appropriate as they are managed by Council, are open for extended hours, are easily accessible by public transport, and used by people of all ages, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds.
5. Feedback indicated that expanding the service to include dispensers in all-gender and accessible bathrooms will provide more equitable access and that information about the program should be more widely available.
6. Share the Dignity operates Dignity Vending Machines in two non-Council locations within the municipality including the Royal Women's Hospital and Youth Projects. The model relies on sponsorship and volunteers, therefore an ongoing partnership was not feasible due to cost and resourcing requirements.
7. Expanding the program by providing incontinence aids was explored, however there are several existing options available to people experiencing incontinence through the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the Federal Government's Continence Aids Payment Scheme. A free incontinence product disposal bin service for men is being trialled in Council facilities for 12 months beginning 1 September 2022.
8. The Victorian Government has committed to invest \$23 million to provide free period products in public places. 1,500 free pad and tampon machines will be installed in 700 public sites including public hospitals, courts, TAFEs, public libraries, train stations and major cultural institutions like the State Library of Victoria and the Melbourne Museum.

Recommendation from management

9. That the Future Melbourne Committee:
 - 9.1. Notes the findings of the evaluation (Attachment 2 of the report from management) and approves the continuation of the free period care product program in existing Council owned facilities until 30 June 2023.
 - 9.2. Endorses working with Victorian Government to actively share findings from the City of Melbourne Free Period Care Pilot Program and explore opportunities to accelerate the roll out of free period products in public places within the municipality.

Attachments:

1. Supporting Attachment (Page x of n)
2. Evaluation of the Free Period Care Product Service Pilot Executive Summary (Page x of n)

Supporting Attachment

Legal

Whilst no direct legal issues arise, legal advice will be provided as required in respect to subject matter of the report.

Finance

1. Funding for the Pilot Program was approved for \$10,000 and was funded through the Property Services Branch annual budget over financial years 2021-22 and 2022-23. The funding for the continuation of the program through to 30 June 2023 will be covered within the existing Property Services budget.

Conflict of interest

2. No member of Council staff, or other person engaged under a contract, involved in advising on or preparing this report has declared a material or general conflict of interest in relation to the matter of the report.

Health and Safety

3. The Free Period Care Program provides residents and visitors, especially those experiencing period poverty, with safe and convenient access to free period products in various community facilities located across the municipality.

Stakeholder consultation

4. Two workshops and follow up discussions were held with the facility managers /community animators, service contractor, and project management team.
5. An online feedback survey was open to service users and the broader community from 1 August to 30 September 2022. Fifty one people completed the survey. Most respondents were female (83%), aged between 25-44 years (69%) and either worked (42%) or lived (36%) in the municipality.
6. An email with a survey link was sent to seven local service providers on 28 July seeking their feedback on the free service. The survey was open for four weeks and three respondents from two services completed the survey.

Relation to Council policy

7. The Free Period Care Product program aligns with priority themes and actions in:
 - 7.1. Council Plan 2021-2025 under Strategic Objective Safety and Wellbeing Priority: All people feel safe and included when participating in Melbourne's economic, visitor and community life.
 - 7.2. Health and Wellbeing Action Plan 2021-2025 under Priority area one. Public health and safety: All people feel safe and included when participating in community life, with a zero tolerance of violence in our community including family violence, gender equality, violence against women, racism and discrimination in all forms.
 - 7.3. Inclusive Melbourne Strategy 2022-2032 (MI48) under priority one – Organisation, services, programs, and places for all: Our services, programs and places are welcoming, safe, accessible, and affordable for all.
 - 7.4. Creating Communities of Equality and Respect: Women's Safety and Empowerment Action Plan 2021-2024 (MI49) under strategic theme one: Advance women and gender diverse people's leadership and participation in economic, social and civic life across the municipality.

Environmental sustainability

8. In developing this proposal future provision of the service will consider the supply and use of products and packaging that are sustainable, biodegradable and or recyclable.

EVALUATION OF THE FREE PERIOD CARE PRODUCT SERVICE PILOT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

October 2022



**City of Melbourne Free Period Care Product Service Pilot Evaluation
Executive Summary**

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We respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land, the Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation and pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

Melbourne Review of the Free Period Care Product Service Pilot Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Background

In September 2021 the City of Melbourne (Council) introduced the Free Period Care Product Service Pilot (the Pilot Program) in six locations across the municipality to assist in addressing period poverty in the community. This responds to one of the high-level actions in *Creating Communities of Equality and Respect – Women’s Safety and Empowerment Action Plan 2021-2022* – “Pilot free period care product vending machines¹ in council facilities to address period poverty”.

Council engaged Symplan, in collaboration with Strategic Leverage Pty Ltd (the consultant team), to conduct the *Evaluation of the Free Period Care Product Service Pilot* (the evaluation).

The purposes of the evaluation are to:

1. Identify costs and benefits of the program.
2. Determine the program’s effectiveness in addressing period poverty.
3. Determine opportunities to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the program.
4. Identify the feasibility of expanding the program to include other products such as incontinence pads and pants.

The evaluation involved a desktop review, site inspection of all facilities and multi-level stakeholder engagement process with facility managers/staff (referred to as ‘Community Animators²), service providers, users of the Pilot Program and the broader community.

Understanding period poverty

Period poverty, which affects one in five Australians³, is a lack of access to menstrual products, education, hygiene facilities, waste management, or a combination of these factors.⁴ Barriers to access to period care products which support menstrual health include both cost and stigma against periods, often referred to as ‘menstrual stigma’.⁵

It causes physical, mental and emotional challenges, and the inability to go to school or work, or participate in daily life and physical exercise.⁶ While period poverty can affect anyone who menstruates, cohorts at an elevated risk of period poverty include young people who identify as LGBTQI+ and Aboriginal young people.

Implementation of the Free Period Care Pilot Program

Funding for the 12-month Pilot Program of approximately \$10,000 was provided through Council’s Property Services Branch cleaning budget over financial years 2020/21 and 2021/22.

¹ While the wording of this action uses the term ‘vending machines’, the term ‘dispensers’ will be used in its place throughout the evaluation as this term is less likely to be associated with any cost to the user.

² Community animators are Council employees whose role is to bring their facilities to life and provide a range of services and supports to facility users and the community.

³<https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2021/08/big-bloody-survey-reveals-extent-of-period-poverty-in-australia/#:~:text=More%20than%20one%20in%20five,survey%20on%20period%20poverty%20finds.>

⁴ <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/period-poverty#what-is-it>

⁵ [it’s a Bloody Shame: The Barriers to Period Access | Massive Magazine](https://www.massive.com.au/news/its-a-bloody-shame-the-barriers-to-period-access-|massive-magazine)

⁶ <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/period-poverty#what-is-it>

City of Melbourne Free Period Care Product Service Pilot Evaluation Executive Summary

The Pilot Program was implemented in six Council owned facilities⁷ between 1 September 2021 and 31 August 2022. The initial phase of the Pilot Program was implemented during the COVID-19 Pandemic which involved lockdowns in the latter part of 2021 and the slow return of workers and visitors to the City in early 2022. This caused disruptions to the utilisation of the Program, servicing of the dispensers and some challenges collecting data.

The total cost to install dispensers and dispensing products during the Pilot Program for the 12 months was \$3,702 plus GST.⁸ Additional costs included design and printing of posters (\$900 plus GST) and translating the text into different languages (\$785 plus GST).

The total cost, excluding GST, for the pilot was therefore \$5,387 or approximately \$898 per facility. This does not include officers' time in initiating the project, report writing, managing the contractor and implementing the evaluation.

Carlton Baths and Library at The Dock dispensed the most products while the North Melbourne Community Centre dispensed the fewest.

It is unclear from the data how many people were assisted. There were 6,733 discrete products taken during the 12-month Pilot Program. Assuming a person took a single product (one pad or one box of tampons) each, then the Program potentially assisted 6,733 people at a cost (excluding CoM administration and marketing) of \$0.80 cents per person.

Key findings from the evaluation

There was overwhelming support for the Pilot Program from Community Animators, service providers, users and the broader community. Feedback indicates the Pilot Program aligns with Council's statutory responsibilities of service provider and leader in upholding community health and wellbeing.

While the primary purpose of the Pilot was to address period poverty, access to free period products may also have had positive impacts on social exclusion, menstrual stigma, and gender equity.

The facilities selected as part of the Pilot Program are appropriate as they are managed by Council, are open for extended hours, easily accessible by public transport, and are used by people of all ages, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds.

Demand for products was high despite some facilities not being open due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, indicated by replenishment to capacity levels. This suggests there would be times between services when some dispensers are empty. More frequent servicing (i.e., fortnightly or weekly) would address this issue.

Feedback gathered during the stakeholder engagement process indicates that, should Council consider implementing the program on a permanent basis, providing dispensers in all-gender / unisex / male and accessible bathrooms has the potential to address gender inequality. The feedback also indicated a demand for a wider range of period care products and that information about the Program should be more widely available and include consistent messaging.

⁷ Library at the Dock, City Library, Town Hall Collins Street public bathroom, North Melbourne Community Centre, Kathleen Syme Community Centre and Carlton Baths.

⁸ The actual cost was \$2,604.56 due to service charges where access or data was an issue

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Options and programs

There are two options for Council going forward, should Council consider the Free Period Program a success.

These options are not mutually exclusive.

Option 1: Support, and potentially expand, a Free Period Care Program. Should Council decide to continue to support a Free Period Care Program, it could be expanded through three different programs:

Program 1A: Provision of one dispenser per Council facility, including the existing six facilities and/or other facilities.

Program 1B: Providing more than one dispenser per facility.

Program 1C: Replenishing the stock more than once a month, either bimonthly or weekly.

Option 2: Provide rebates for reusable sanitary products (Program 2A) and/or provide incontinence products used by anyone (including babies) experiencing incontinence (Program 2B).

Option 2 involves different programs, and therefore could be supplementary to the Free Period Care Product Pilot Program. The key differences between the Pilot Program and a reusable sanitary care program include:

- The Free Period Care Product Program has no cost implications for the user whereas the reusable sanitary care product program would likely involve a partial rebate to offset the cost of reusable products.
- The Free Period Care Product Program is available to anyone who uses the facilities in which the dispensers are installed whereas only households in eligible Councils can access the Reusable Sanitary Product Program.
- The key target for the Free Period Product Program is people experiencing period poverty whereas the target market for the Reusable Sanitary Product Rebate Program, where they currently exist, includes a wider age group, socio-economic status, and health status.
- The key driver for the Free Period Care Product Program is financial vulnerability or mental health whereas the key driver for a Reusable Sanitary Product Program is environmental sustainability.
- There are fewer providers involved in a Free Period Care Product Program whereas there are several providers involved in a Reusable Sanitary Product Program.
- The range of free period care products is smaller than the range of reusable sanitary products.

**City of Melbourne Free Period Care Product Service Pilot Evaluation
Executive Summary**

Models for implementation of Option 1

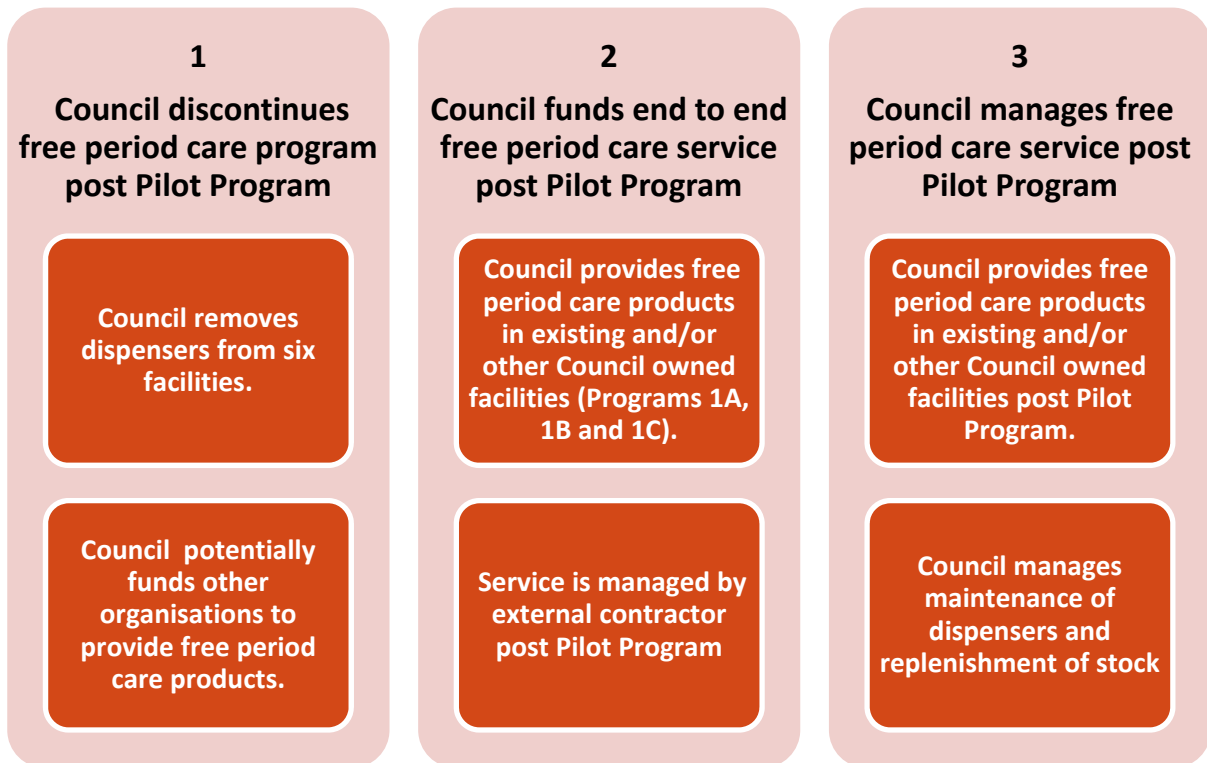
There are three potential models implementation of Option 1, should Council continue to support a Free Period Program.

Model 1 Involves Council supporting but not providing free period care products in Council facilities. It involves removing the existing dispensers in the six facilities and relying on external service providers to address period poverty, either with or without Council funding. Given the overwhelming support for the Pilot Program and Council’s commitment to addressing period poverty, this model is not likely to meet the community’s needs, aspirations and expectations in relation to addressing period poverty. Further, some service providers receive no funding to support the provision of free period care products and may therefore be limited to providing these products on request.

Model 2 Involves Council funding a free period care program in Council facilities with the end-to-end service done by an external contractor. This would ensure Council continues to meet the community’s needs, aspirations and expectations in addressing period poverty. This is equivalent to the current model of service. Council could achieve greater efficiency in the procurement and management of a contractor to deliver the service.

Model 3 Involves Council managing the delivery of a free period care program in Council facilities, utilising internal staff and resources. This would provide Council with greater control over the servicing of the dispensers but would require the accurate and consistent collection and collation of data in order to adequately monitor and evaluate the feasibility of the program.

The Pilot Program falls into the second model (refer to Figure below):



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Feasibility of Options 1 and 2

The feasibility of the Options 1 and 2 is as follows:

1. Providing free period care products in more than one location in existing facilities would provide more people with access to free period care products and address menstrual stigma and gender inequality.
2. Providing free period care products in additional council facilities would similarly provide more people with access to free period care products. If this is done instead of providing dispensers in gender neutral bathrooms, it has limited potential to address menstrual stigma among LGBTQI+ people or gender inequality, but the potential to reach more people experiencing period poverty.
3. Expanding the program to provide rebates for reusable sanitary products is feasible given the anecdotal success of similar programs in Victorian local governments. This is reinforced through feedback provided through the community survey that just under half of people would participate in the program. The actual program would be determined by available budget and the potential uptake of the program.
4. The feasibility of providing free disposable use incontinence pads and pants is supported by feedback from the community that this program would be welcomed. However, a detailed feasibility study would need to be undertaken to provide clarity on the actual demand for this expansion option given there are several options available to people experiencing incontinence through the NDIS and government Continence Aids Payment Scheme. This feasibility study would be complemented by an evaluation of Council's Bins4Blokes pilot program which commenced September 2022.

Recommendations

The models refer to the models shown on page 4.

Recommendation	Model
1. Implementation, monitoring and review	
1.1 Implement an end-to-end model including at least monthly servicing of facilities, with a 12-month trial involving fortnightly servicing in existing facilities.	2, 3
1.2 Continue to undertake a thorough and transparent procurement process to select the most appropriate contractor to implement an end-to-end service or self-management model. Criteria included in the procurement process to include, but not be limited to the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous experience in providing free period care products in Victorian settings. • Demonstrated capacity and capability in providing free period care products in Victorian settings. • Potential to contribute to the local economy in the City of Melbourne. 	2, 3
1.3 Continue to collect, collate and analyse service utilisation data to help inform service improvements.	2, 3

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Recommendation	Model
1.4 Continue to monitor demand for free period care products and/or incontinence aids on an annual basis	1, 2, 3
1.5 Identify opportunities to supply environmentally sustainable single use period care products.	
2. Expansion	
2.1 Consider expanding the Free Period Care Product Program: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • into additional community facilities • in more than one bathroom in the facility • in all-gender / unisex / male bathrooms • in accessible bathrooms • in changerooms/showers 	2, 3
2.2 Investigate the feasibility of implementing a partial rebate for reusable sanitary products, including period care products and incontinence aids. This feasibility should include identifying potential funding through the Halve Waste initiative and evaluating the success of similar programs in other Victorian local governments.	1, 2, 3
2.3 Investigate the feasibility of providing single use incontinence aids such as pads and pant. This feasibility would involve gathering further evidence supporting the feasibility of and need for this initiative given the existing CAPS scheme and funding provided to eligible clients through the NDIS.	2, 3
3. Information dissemination	
3.1 Continue to raise awareness of initiatives addressing period poverty during events like International Period Month (May) and Menstrual Hygiene Day (28 May) and include information of initiatives on council's website and other corporate communication tools.	1,2, 3
3.2 Ensure all information on Council's period care product program communicates a consistent message on the intent of the program.	1,2, 3
3.3 Provide information on where free period care products are available both within and around the facilities with period care products.	1
4. Partnerships	
4.1 Identify opportunities to support and partner with other organisations implementing initiatives addressing period poverty in the City of Melbourne.	1,2, 3