



# Mandate proposal 2024

This year's mandate aims to tackle the issue of the plastics found in period products and other hygiene items

At our AGM in Coventry, we will be discussing and voting on one new mandate proposal:

**Townswomen's Guilds urges HM Government to raise public awareness of the hidden plastic in women's period and hygiene products, including**

***tampons, sanitary towels and incontinence pads, and to encourage the use of reusable and plastic-free alternatives.***

While this does in part fall under our existing campaign on climate change, we found this proposal in particular highlighted an area that doesn't get much attention, largely because it

relates to topics that are considered embarrassing and impolite to talk about – and that makes it all the more important that we do talk about the issue and the potential solutions to it.

### THE PROBLEM

In recent years we have become increasingly aware of how plastic pollution – and particularly single-use

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plastic – has negatively impacted our environment. Many single-use plastic items that once were commonplace are being phased out as we are encouraged to replace them with reusable items, or with plastic-free alternatives.

However, there is one product category, which is seldom mentioned, that causes environmental issues not just because of the plastic contained in the items but because, despite clear instruction that this shouldn't be done, they are frequently flushed down toilets where they block sewage systems and can end up in the sea and wash up on beaches.

In the UK, roughly three billion disposable period products are used every year – and, unfortunately, up to two billion of these are flushed rather than being disposed of in bins. Additionally, the most commonly used products tend to contain plastic – for example, a pack of 14 menstrual pads contains the same amount of plastic as five carrier bags – so even those products that are disposed of properly end up sitting in landfill for a long time.

Incontinence pads are also an issue as these are approximately 80% plastic, and a single pad can take up to 500 years to break down. While these are a convenient and readily available solution to a problem that can be embarrassing despite not being that uncommon, the climate impact of that convenience cannot be entirely ignored.

### THE ALTERNATIVES

The hygiene product industry has caught on to the demand for more eco-friendly alternatives, and in recent years there has been a wider availability of products that are kinder to the planet and, in the longer-term, to our wallets. These tend to come in one of two forms.

The first category of products we are seeing more of is plastic-free but still single-use products – disposable pads and tampons made from cotton and bioplastics, designed to be as effective as their plastic-containing counterparts. These can be more expensive and more difficult to find but are an easy way to reduce the amount of plastic going to landfill.

The second category consists of reusable products: period or incontinence pants; washable pads;



Reusable cloth sanitary pads will last for years

## A pack of 14 menstrual pads contains the same amount of plastic as five carrier bags

and menstrual cups. These options are more expensive up front, particularly for pants and pads where several are needed to allow for changing, washing and drying – but they are intended to last for several years, reducing the need to purchase additional products during their lifespan.

### THE BARRIERS

Alternatives to the single-use plastic options being available is important, but can only carry a real impact if people are made aware of them and know where and how to find them. This can be especially difficult for hygiene products, which people already don't like to talk about needing, and this is where the heart of the mandate proposal lies.

There is also consideration to be made for the fact that people are already struggling to afford existing products. An ActionAid poll in 2023 found that 21% of UK women were struggling to afford period products, all the more so as the impact of the cost-of-living increases started to hit. With so many of the alternatives working out to be just as or even more expensive, it is easy to see why people would choose to keep to the cheapest option available to them.

However, there are campaign groups and social enterprises already working to tackle these issues:

**City to Sea ([www.citytosea.org.uk](http://www.citytosea.org.uk))** has a range of informative resources available on its website. It also runs the Rethink Periods education programme designed to train teachers and school nurses so that they can provide the best possible education about periods to their students.

**Hey Girls ([www.heygirls.co.uk](http://www.heygirls.co.uk))** is a social enterprise that seeks to address period poverty by helping to provide free period products to those who need them. This includes the provision of Free Vend Units in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and even some train stations, where anyone who needs period products can take biodegradable and plastic-free disposable products at no charge.

### THE PLAN

Should members vote to accept this mandate proposal, we would seek to strengthen the voices and campaigns of those calling for greater awareness of more environmentally friendly hygiene solutions and the importance of those who use these products exploring the options available to them – while accepting that the alternatives won't work for everyone but not allowing that fact to prevent a push for reduced use of products that contain plastics.

**TAKE ACTION** Please discuss the issue in your Guilds so that your Delegate can bring your Guild's views to the AGM in Coventry in June.