



# FIT TO LEARN, FREE TO PLAY:

## THE IMPACT OF WEARING PE UNIFORM ALL DAY AT SCHOOL

Published July 2026



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During the Covid-19 pandemic some schools across the country allowed pupils to wear PE uniform all day on the days they had PE as a social distancing measure, but anecdotal reports suggested this also had benefits for physical activity. Some schools retained the policy after the pandemic and others did not. Whilst the benefits of such a policy may be felt by all pupils, we wanted to understand the impact on girls given the nature of the barriers they face to being active.

The Youth Sport Trust found that over half (55%) of secondary-aged girls would like to wear PE kit all day on PE days<sup>1</sup>, and girls report numerous barriers to sport that relate directly or indirectly to PE kit or changing at school. For secondary school-aged girls, top barriers to being active at school include having their period (36%), not feeling confident (30%), not liking others watching them (26%) and worrying about how they look (26%).<sup>1</sup> Research also shows that girls' engagement with PE is impacted by their PE uniform; 48% of girls (compared to 29% of boys) would prefer to have more PE kit options to choose from and a third (33%) of girls feel better options for PE kit would help them to feel more comfortable participating in PE when they have their period.<sup>1</sup>

This initiative was designed to gather evidence as to the benefits and challenges of implementing this policy in schools more widely. It involved piloting the Fit to Learn policy in schools, which allowed pupils to wear PE uniform all day on the days they had PE to support them to be more physically active. The Fit to Learn pilot project was a collaboration between Women in Sport, United Learning, the Youth Sport Trust and the Association for Physical Education (funded by Sport England).

PE is particularly vital to girls as it is more often the only form of physical activity girls participate in, with 53% of girls (compared to 37% of boys) only taking part in physical activity during PE lessons.<sup>1</sup> Whilst encouraging improved engagement with PE is essential, supporting greater levels of activity throughout and beyond the school day is also a vital part of closing the gender activity gap and enabling all girls to experience the benefits of sport.

We know that girls are consistently less active than boys throughout the life stages, with just 46% of girls meeting the recommended minimum activity levels compared to 52% of boys.<sup>2</sup> Girls are 24% less likely than boys to participate in team sport (46% of girls compared to 70% of boys).<sup>2</sup> Half of parents (51%) feel that girls have fewer opportunities than boys to take part in sport, whilst only 45% of secondary aged girls say that they have the same opportunities as boys in school to do the sports and activities they want to do.<sup>3,1</sup> School is a space in which girls might be

introduced to team sports, but they must be offered these opportunities and have the right support to engage, PE uniform can play a part in enabling this.

Girls' physical literacy, which is their relationship with movement and physical activity throughout life, is impacted by their experiences of engaging with physical activity at school.<sup>4</sup> As this research shows, experiences of physical activity at school can be significantly impacted by PE uniform and the changing room experience. The Fit to Learn policy is therefore a practical opportunity to positively influence physical literacy at a crucial life stage, enabling girls to be more active throughout their lives.

We know that for girls, fostering this positive relationship with sport and physical activity is more important than ever. The mental health of teenage girls is in decline, with four times as many 11-16-year-old girls compared to boys suffering from eating disorders (4.3%) and 1 in 3 girls and young women aged 11-21 saying that they feel sad most days or every day.<sup>5,6</sup> Sport and physical activity can play a key role in supporting mental wellbeing, something that many girls are being denied through lack of access, opportunity and support.<sup>3</sup>

Later in life, 1 in 2 women aged over 50 will break a bone due to osteoporosis.<sup>7</sup> The majority of bone density for women is built during their teenage years, so improved activity levels amongst girls in this cohort has the potential to prevent another generation of women from suffering in the same way.

The Fit to Learn policy has clear potential to work alongside other interventions and support to positively change this picture. It can support girls to engage more in sport and physical activity in PE lessons and beyond, and ultimately tackle the gendered health inequalities girls and women face throughout the life course.

**OVER HALF (55%)  
OF GIRLS WANT TO WEAR PE KIT  
ALL DAY ON PE DAYS**

# THE IMPACT OF FIT TO LEARN



## TIME SAVED, LEARNING GAINED

**86%** of PE teachers said around **10–25 mins** extra learning time was gained per lesson

↳ **9 in 10** (88%) felt this allowed them to **teach more PE**

## IMPROVED ENJOYMENT, MOTIVATION AND CONFIDENCE IN PE

**6 in 10** 60% of girls said they enjoyed PE more



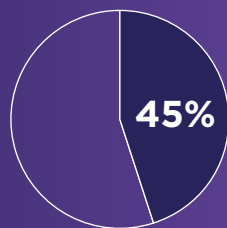
## Half of girls

felt more motivated (53%) and more confident (49%) to take part in PE

## GIRLS WERE MORE ACTIVE IN AND BEYOND PE

## Nearly half

of girls said the policy made them more active travelling to and from school



## Around 6 in 10 girls

(62%) were more active in PE and felt they had more opportunities to be active throughout the day (59%).



## IMPROVED MOOD AND WELLBEING

## Two-fifths

(41%) of pupils said the policy improved their mood



Girls were more likely than boys to report feeling less stressed and anxious overall



## REDUCING PUBERTY RELATED BARRIERS

**6 in 10** (63%) girls felt it was easier to take part in PE on their period

## STRONG INCLUSION BENEFITS AND IMPROVED ATTENDANCE

Among PE teachers:

**82%** said it was easier for pupils from low-income backgrounds to comply with PE uniform policy

**75%** said it improved how the religious or cultural needs of pupils are met

**71%** said it improved inclusion for pupils with SEND

## OVERWHELMINGLY SUPPORTED

**7 in 10** (72%) pupils wanted the policy to continue



**8 in 10** (78%) PE teachers would recommend it to other schools



## Aims

This project sought to pilot the Fit to Learn policy in schools, which allowed pupils to wear PE uniform all day on the days they had PE with the aim to support them to be more physically active. The evaluation aimed to:

- Understand the impact of the pilot for pupils and schools, with a particular focus on the impact on girls. This included the impact on activity levels, alongside the wider impacts in terms of tackling the barriers that prevent girls from being active.
- Understand key learnings and challenges associated with implementing the policy, to provide practical guidance to support schools who wish to introduce it.

## Methodology

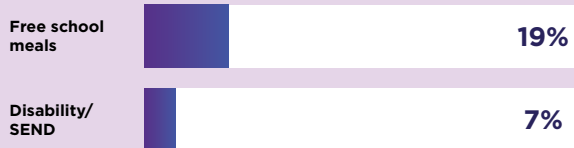
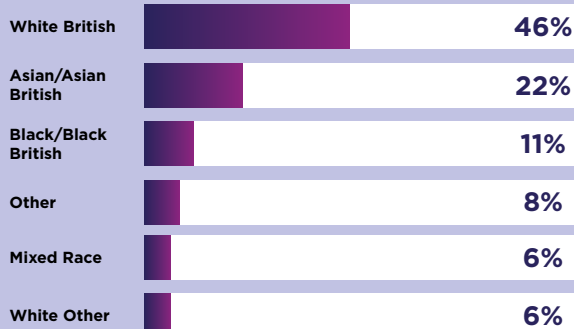
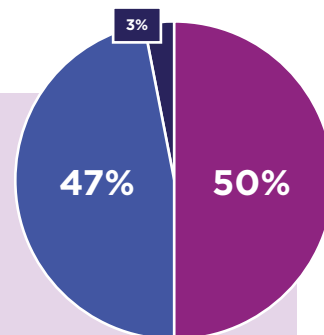
The Fit to Learn policy pilot took place in the Autumn term of 2025 in 12 schools and was evaluated from January to May 2026. Schools introduced the policy at the start of the Autumn term for select year groups of their choosing for the pilot, with the possibility of rolling it out more widely in the future.

Women in Sport worked with the 12 participating schools to survey pupils, PE teachers and Senior Leaders, running qualitative focus groups and depth interviews with 5 of these schools. These 5 were selected to represent diverse pupil populations and locations across the North and South of England.

PARTICIPANTS	
QUANTITATIVE SURVEYS	QUALITATIVE GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS
1,098 pupils	29 girls participated in focus groups (Yrs 7 - 9)
28 PE teachers	5 PE teachers participated in depth interviews
7 Senior leaders	5 Senior leaders participated in depth interviews

## Pupil Demographics

- Girls
- Boys
- Other/Prefer not to say



## Limitations and Challenges

Overall base sizes were low for the teacher and senior leader surveys, although it is worth noting that 35 staff participated in total across 12 schools, meaning each school had on average 3 staff participants. Similarly, the number of pupils who said they had a special educational need or disability (SEND) in the survey sample was limited, meaning findings for this group should be interpreted with caution. PE teachers and senior leaders in the qualitative fieldwork reflected on the positive impact of the policy on pupils with SEND.

## 1. IMPACT ON ACTIVITY LEVELS & ENGAGEMENT IN PE AND BEYOND

### Girls were more active in PE because of the policy

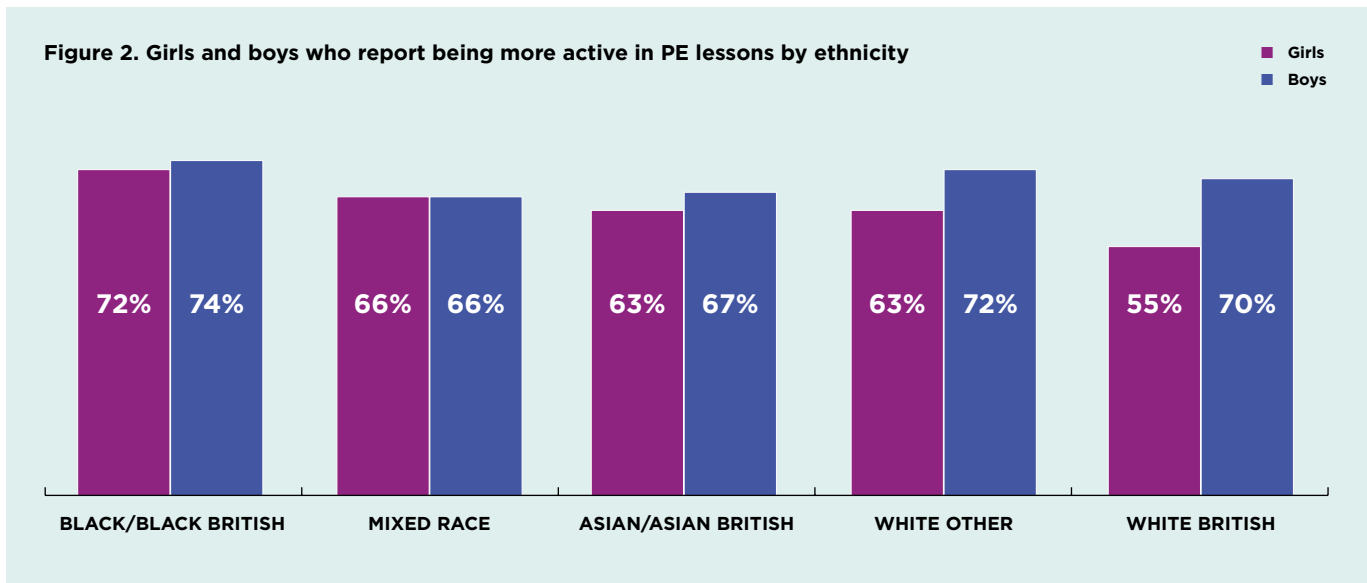
When reflecting on the policy, pupils were particularly positive about the impact on their activity levels in PE lessons, with two-thirds (66%) saying that wearing their PE uniform all day on days they had PE made them more active. Whilst boys were significantly more likely to feel this positive impact than girls, six in ten girls felt the policy had made them more active in PE (Figure 1).



By ethnicity, Black/Black British girls were the most likely to say that the policy made them more active in PE lessons, followed by Mixed Race girls. White British girls were the least likely to report being more active (though over half did) and were significantly less likely than those from all other ethnicities to say that the policy made them more active in PE lessons (Figure 2). Notably, Sport England’s Active Lives Children & Young People survey shows that Black girls are the least active group by ethnicity, followed by Asian girls (school years 7-11).<sup>2</sup> This reflects the opportunity the policy has to support all girls to be more active in PE, particularly those from ethnically diverse communities. Amongst boys, Black/Black British boys were also the most likely to say the

policy made them more active in PE lessons, although there were no statistically significant differences by ethnicity amongst boys.

“I would like always dread PE ... but now, I feel a lot better about it. I feel open minded.”  
**Girl, Year 7**



These perceived improvements for pupils in PE were also observed by staff. Around half of the PE teachers surveyed felt that PE lesson attendance had improved for girls (53%) and boys (47%) because of the introduction of the policy. Alongside improved attendance, two-thirds (67%) of PE teachers agreed that the policy had helped girls (and boys, also 67%) to engage more in physical activity in PE lessons. This positive impact was echoed in the qualitative research with PE teachers and SLT staff within all schools observing an increase in the number of pupils who were ready and willing to take part in PE.

“We’ve been really pleased. What we’ve seen is definitely a reduction in kind of avoidance or excuse culture of why we can’t participate in sport.”  
**Senior Leader**

“We are experiencing 99, 100% engagement most of the time. Having worked in previous schools where this [policy] wasn’t in place, most lessons you might have had two to three students — that many each lesson — that had an issue.”  
**PE Teacher**

**TWO-THIRDS**  
**OF PE TEACHERS AGREED**  
**THE POLICY HELPED PUPILS**  
**TO ENGAGE MORE IN PE**

## Schools reported improved attendance and inclusion for low-income and pupils with SEND

Some schools also felt the policy had a positive impact on attendance at school more broadly. With the increase in PE participation, schools saw a drop in the number of students missing school altogether or arriving at school late to avoid PE. The suggests that the policy helps to reduce pupil absenteeism and lost learning.

“Our attendance rates are really good, but they do tend to sometimes dip — or for our most vulnerable children, they’ll avoid going to PE or they’ll truant PE because they don’t want to get changed. That’s been eradicated.”

Senior Leader

“They wouldn’t come in till break because then they can avoid doing PE... that gap has just completely narrowed because it’s one less thing they have to worry about.”

PE Teacher

The positive impact on attendance shows the potential of the policy to support pupils who may feel particularly uncomfortable about getting changed, enabling them to experience the benefits of participating in PE and wider school life. This was further evidenced by PE teachers who reflected the positive impact the policy had on inclusion-related outcomes, with 82% reporting that it had improved the ease with which pupils from low-income households could comply with PE uniform policy, 71% reporting

that it had made it easier for pupils with SEND to take part in PE and 75% reporting that it improved how the religious or cultural needs of pupils are met.

These findings suggest that alongside improved attendance in PE and school more broadly, the Fit to Learn policy plays a role in improving engagement and enjoyment in PE, which are vital to encouraging a positive lifelong relationship with sport and physical activity. Improved attendance and engagement in lessons and school more widely were key benefits experienced by pupils and schools alike, supporting all pupils, including the most vulnerable who may avoid attending school on PE days.

### KEY INCLUSION BENEFITS SEEN BY PE TEACHERS

82%

reported that it had improved the ease with which pupils from low-income households could comply with PE uniform policy

71%

reported that it had made it easier for pupils with SEND to take part in PE

75%

reported that it improved how the religious or cultural needs of pupils are met

## Girls became more active beyond PE, particularly on their journeys to and from school

While the Fit to Learn policy was designed principally to make PE more accessible and improve engagement with physical activity in lessons, as part of this research we also explored the wider benefits of the policy in contexts such as after-school clubs and journeys to/from school.

The policy brought significant activity benefits to all pupils during school breaks, extra-curricular clubs and in terms of active travel to school (Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, more boys reported this benefit given that currently boys are more physically active than girls already. This should not disguise the significant gains in activity to girls in these areas.

Overall, these activity benefits were felt less by girls who were least sporty, reflecting the broader barriers and challenges these girls face when it comes to being physically active beyond PE lessons (Figure 4). This highlights the need to combine the policy with other interventions and support to help all girls engage in physical activity throughout the school day and beyond, and to improve their broader learning experience by ensuring that changing for PE is not a factor that impacts their attendance or engagement with school in general.



Figure 3. Girls and boys who report being more active outside of PE

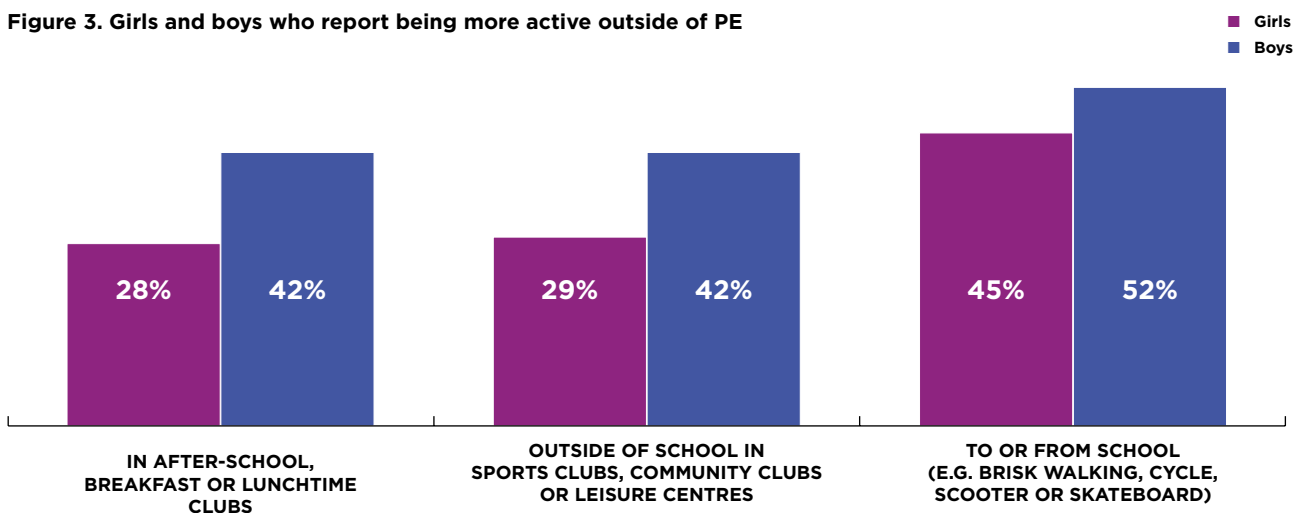
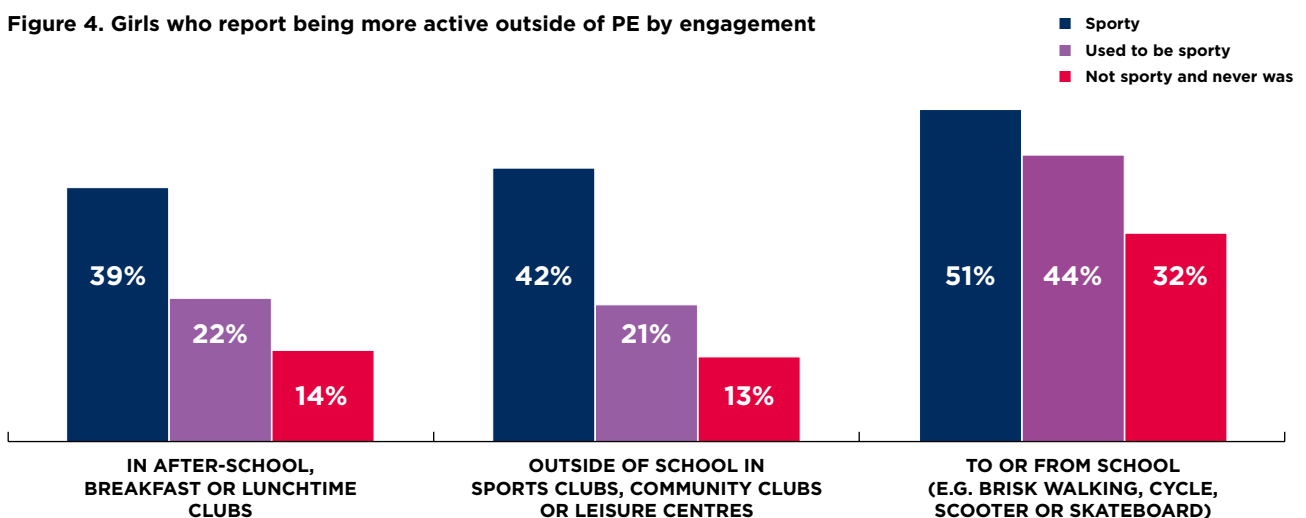


Figure 4. Girls who report being more active outside of PE by engagement





### In after-school, breakfast or lunchtime clubs:

Nearly a third of girls felt the policy made them more active in after-school, breakfast or lunchtime clubs (Figure 3). The higher proportion of boys (two-fifths) reporting being more active reflects wider barriers impacting girls' participation. There are established structures and behaviours which a change in uniform policy will take time to, or may never impact. For example, we know that a lack of girls-only opportunities can discourage girls from participating, with 68% of girls expressing a preference for girls-only groups in sport, physical activity and PE.<sup>1</sup> Amongst girls, sporty girls felt the most positive impact on activity levels in these settings (Figure 4).

PE teachers reported more positive impacts beyond PE lessons; over half agreed the policy had supported girls' engagement in activity during breaktimes/ lunch (53% girls vs. 60% boys) and after-school clubs (53% girls vs. 67% boys). Positively, increased activity levels outside of PE lessons were keenly observed by teachers at the schools visited, with girls and teachers alike reflecting positively on the impact of the policy throughout the school day.

“Historically, our astro at lunchtime has mostly been boys playing football, but we have quite a significant group of girls now that play volleyball as well in year 10, which is really nice.”

Senior Leader

“At lunchtime or break, I'm more active, like when running around. Or like, for example, the basketball area, I'm more active there.”

Girl, Year 8

### Travelling to/from school:

Outside of PE, the policy improved girls' activity levels most when travelling to/from school, with almost half of girls reporting that wearing PE uniform all day made them more active in this context (Figure 3). Additionally, this positive impact was felt more evenly amongst all girls, regardless of how sporty they were, highlighting that wearing PE uniform supported even the less sporty girls to be more active on their journeys to/from school (Figure 4).



**45%**  
**OF GIRLS SAID THE POLICY MADE THEM MORE ACTIVE ON THEIR JOURNEYS TO/ FROM SCHOOL**



“If I'm in my PE kit, it's easier to think I'll walk to school rather than get a lift ... and then at the end of the day, it's easier to go to the park and kick a ball around or like just run about with my friends rather than think I can't because I'm in a skirt and my school shoes.”

Girl, Year 7



## Outside of school in sports clubs, community clubs or leisure centres:

Just under a third of girls overall felt the policy enabled them to be more active outside of school in sports clubs, community clubs or leisure centres (Figure 3). Amongst girls, sporty girls were significantly more likely than girls who were not sporty to feel the policy made them more active in these settings (Figure 4).



Overall, the data suggests a positive impact on girls' activity levels. The even greater benefit to boys across these contexts outside of school reflects the wider barriers girls face that might limit their engagement with activity beyond PE lessons.

We know that girls have fewer opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity outside of school; only 40% of girls compared to 54% of boys strongly agree that they have the opportunity to be physically active.<sup>2</sup> This opportunity gap has long-term impacts. For example, a third of girls (32%) say that 'more opportunities for girls and women to try different

sports' and a quarter (26%) that 'more girls' teams at school and locally' are top priorities for the growth of women and girls' sport more broadly.<sup>9</sup>

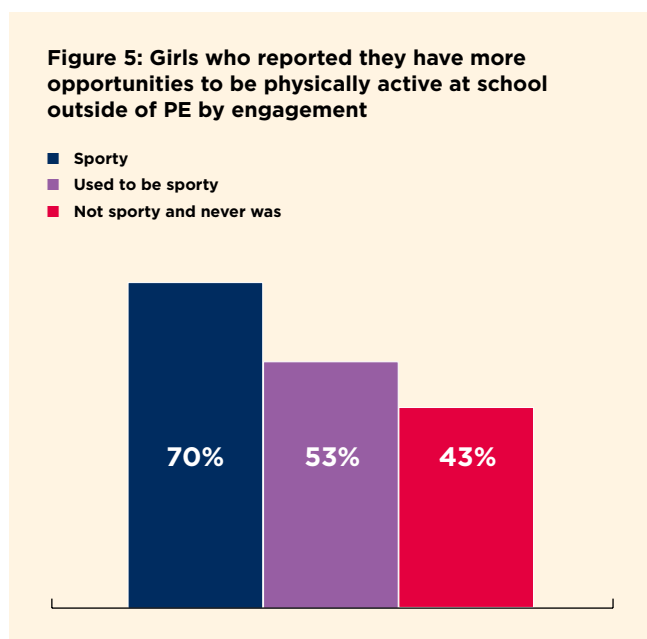
While the Fit to Learn policy can and does support girls to be more active, if the opportunities for them to be active outside of PE and school don't exist this can't happen. So the policy is not a catch-all and other interventions are needed to tackle wider barriers that prevent girls from enjoying sport, otherwise the gender gap in participation and engagement will persist.



## 2. OPPORTUNITY, EASE OF MOVEMENT AND TIME-SAVING

### Wearing PE uniform throughout the school day resulted in more opportunities to be active

Around six in ten pupils (63%) felt wearing their PE uniform all day meant they had more opportunities to be active at school (68% boys vs 59% girls). It is notable that two-fifths of girls who were not sporty felt that the policy gave them more opportunities to be physically active throughout the school day (Figure 5).



Despite being less likely than their sporty peers to feel this, this increased sense of opportunity amongst less engaged girls reflects the benefits of wearing PE uniform throughout the day; whether that be being active through joining clubs or incidentally through simply having the opportunity to move freely and play at breaktimes with less restrictive uniform.

“They’re asking for more sports, they’re asking for more opportunities to take part in sport, which is what we’ve never had before.”

**PE Teacher**

When asked about the main benefits of the policy, ease of movement was top of mind for pupils, with over a third noting that it made it easier to move around school (37%). Girls were more likely than boys to feel this was a main benefit (40% vs. 34%), suggesting that one driver of increased activity levels around school for girls was simply finding it easier to move without the restrictions of “feminine” uniforms like skirts and uncomfortable, limiting shoes designed to “look pretty”, not to encourage freedom and movement.

An associated benefit to this was feeling more comfortable and more able to focus. While in the survey over a third of pupils (37%) overall said that a main benefit of the policy was that they could focus better in PE lessons, in the qualitative research, some pupils also said that wearing their more comfortable PE uniform made it easier for them to concentrate in academic lessons, affirming the broader impact of the policy felt by schools in terms of behaviour and focus across the school day.

“It’s just easier to concentrate if you’re not thinking about whether your uniform is too tight, or too stiff. So, I think I actually concentrate more if I’m comfortable.”

**Girl, Year 7**

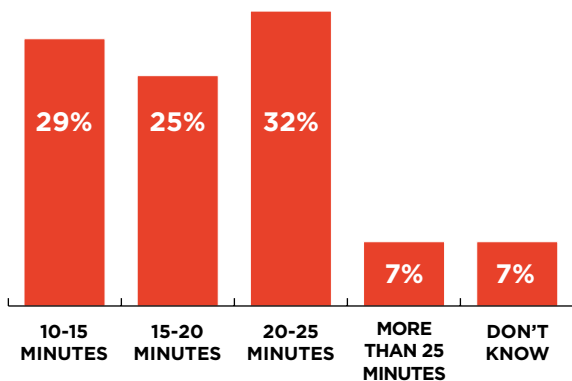
“I’m concentrating better because I’m more comfortable. There’s no teacher screaming at me to put my blazer on.”

**Girl, Year 9**

## Increased learning time in PE was a significant benefit for pupils and PE teachers alike

Almost three-quarters of pupils overall (72%) felt that the policy made it easier for them to take part in PE, with a slightly higher proportion of boys experiencing this than girls (76% of boys vs. 70% of girls). From a practical perspective, over half (56%) of pupils overall said the policy saved them time as they did not need to get changed, a benefit that was echoed by three-quarters (75%) of PE teachers who felt that 'a lot of time' had been saved by pupils wearing PE uniform all day. Eight in ten teachers reported that between 10-25 minutes lost learning time had been saved per PE lesson, with almost a third reporting 20-25 minutes saved (Figure 6). When thinking about a typical one-hour lesson (where 20 minutes is spent changing and 40 minutes is spent being active), removing changing time means a 50% increase in active lesson time. This has significant implications for improving girls' activity levels.

**Figure 6. Amount of time teachers estimate is saved per PE lesson**



The majority (88%) of PE teachers felt that the time gained from pupils not having to change meant they had more time to teach PE. This was one of the top positive impacts reported by Senior Leaders surveyed, with 6 out of 7 feeling that the time available for PE lessons had 'improved a lot'. Increased learning time in PE was also reported as a key benefit of the policy by 65% of PE teachers. Whilst a few minutes either side of a lesson might seem minimal, the cumulative impact can be significant, particularly when school timetables do not allow for as much PE as teachers would ideally like to provide.

"It's more efficient... you can just go straight into your lesson instead of having to wait 15 minutes for most of the class to get changed, you don't waste time."

**Girl, Year 7**

"You actually enjoy it more if you have more time to do the sport or activity – that's the fun bit, not the changing."

**Girl, Year 7**

"If you were to lose 10% of a maths lesson or 10% of an English lesson, someone would be saying, oh, this isn't right, something's going wrong here. We're losing too much learning time. Yet in PE it was almost expected – oh, it's okay, because I've got to get changed."

**Senior Leader**

"I had so much time taken up by the transitions of getting changed at the start and the end of the lessons... I was getting about 25, 30 minutes of PE outside. Now I can get pretty much the full hour."

**PE Teacher**

"It saves us lesson time, first and foremost... it does alleviate that stress of having to go to spend lots of time chivvying kids along in the changing room and we can kind of get into the lesson more quickly."

**PE Teacher**

The transition time between other lessons and PE lessons was a friction point for PE teachers which was also alleviated by the policy: 81% found it easier to manage the transition between lessons and 82% reported fewer behavioural issues resulting from clothing/changing room issues. The Senior Leaders surveyed reinforced this, with 6 out of 7 agreeing that the time spent dealing with PE uniform issues had decreased. This reduced stress for teachers (and pupils) meant they could focus more on the PE lesson itself.

These practical benefits were also reflected on by girls and teachers in the context of simply remembering and carrying PE uniform to and from school. Forgotten kit was historically a common reason for non-participation which was largely eliminated due to the policy. For many girls, particularly those travelling long distances to school by public transport, or those with other equipment-heavy subjects on the same day, carrying a separate PE bag had been a genuine logistical burden they didn't have to deal with anymore.



“I used to have food tech on the same day, and they were so annoying with you carrying two big bags — and it was so heavy, it was so tiring.”

**Girl, Year 8**

“One time in year seven, I left my PE bag in a different classroom... if you forget your PE bag somewhere, it just makes everything longer and you start panicking and stuff.”

**Girl, Year 8**

“The amount of times they're like, oh, I've left my PE kit on the train. And that would then spiral their day out because how am I going to get that back? They won't take part in PE because they're like, well, I haven't got a PE kit now.”

**PE Teacher**

This illustrates a simple and immediate result of the policy; more time available for teachers to educate pupils and more time available for pupils to be physically active, a benefit that was affirmed in the findings around increased activity levels in PE. The increased time available to be more active can support the health and wellbeing of pupils, and their learning of skills and strategies to support their physical literacy.

By removing the need to get changed, the policy also removed a key operational friction point in the day; instead of dealing with behavioural issues and the time-consuming process of an entire class getting changed before and after the lesson, everyone was able to focus instead on engaging in the PE lesson itself. Ultimately, this simplified the school day on PE days, with tangible positive results for pupils and teachers alike.

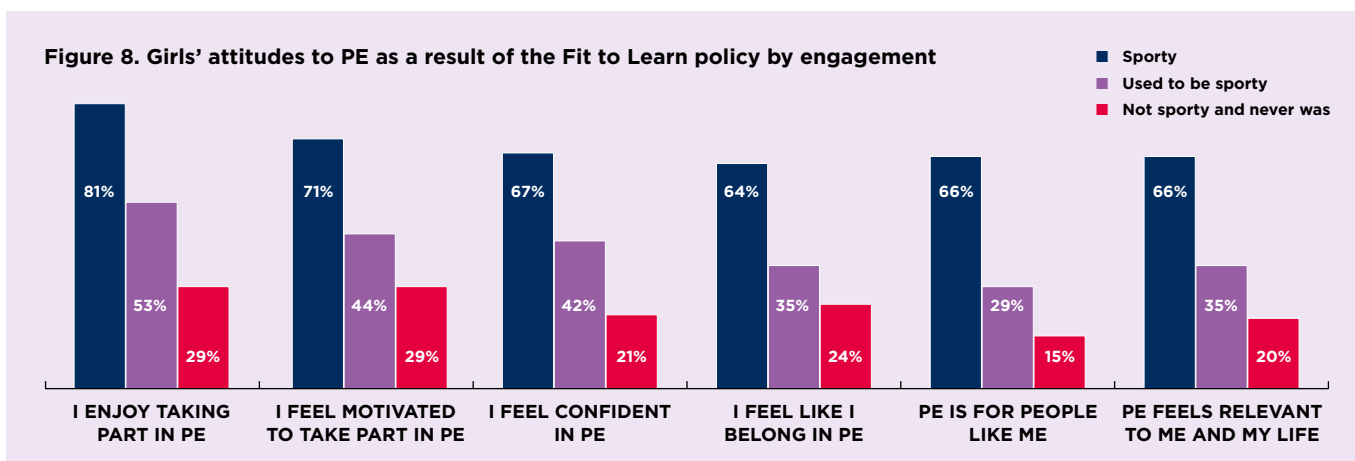
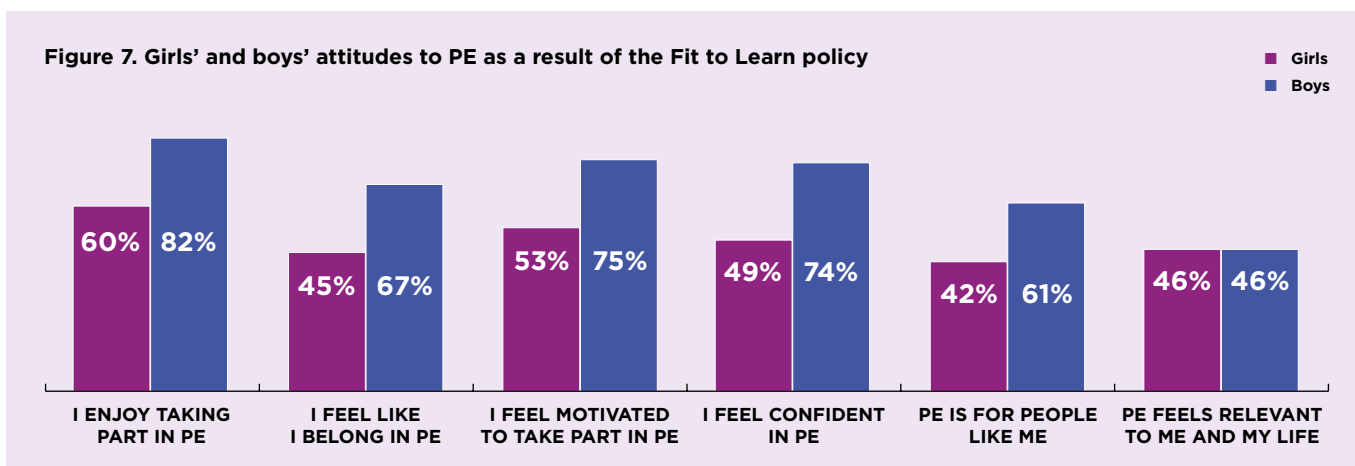


## 3. ATTITUDES TO PE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN SCHOOL

### Girls enjoyed PE more and felt more motivated to take part; these benefits were felt by sporty girls most

Wearing PE uniform throughout the day on PE days had a positive impact on pupils when it came to feelings of enjoyment, belonging and motivation in PE, although this was felt significantly more by boys than girls.

Feelings such as enjoyment and motivation are an essential part of keeping girls engaged in sport, and this is where the biggest gender gaps exist, as evidenced in the Active Lives Children & Young People Survey. Whilst girls were less likely than boys to report these attitudes, there were clear positive shifts for girls. Six in ten girls agreed that they enjoyed taking part in PE and around half felt motivated and confident in PE as a result of the Fit to Learn policy (Figure 7). Unsurprisingly, sporty girls were most likely to agree that they experienced all these benefits, likely reflecting their more positive relationship with PE to begin with compared to less sporty girls (Figure 8). Three quarters (74%) of PE teachers also felt that an increased sense of enjoyment was a key benefit of the policy.



In the qualitative research, the words girls used to describe how they felt about PE before the policy was introduced compared to afterwards reflect a powerful shift in their experiences, demonstrating feelings of increased confidence, freedom, enjoyment and belonging (Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Girls' feelings about PE before and after the Fit to Learn policy was introduced**



“I absolutely love not having to feel anxious or scared or thinking what other people would think of me.”

**Girl, Year 7**

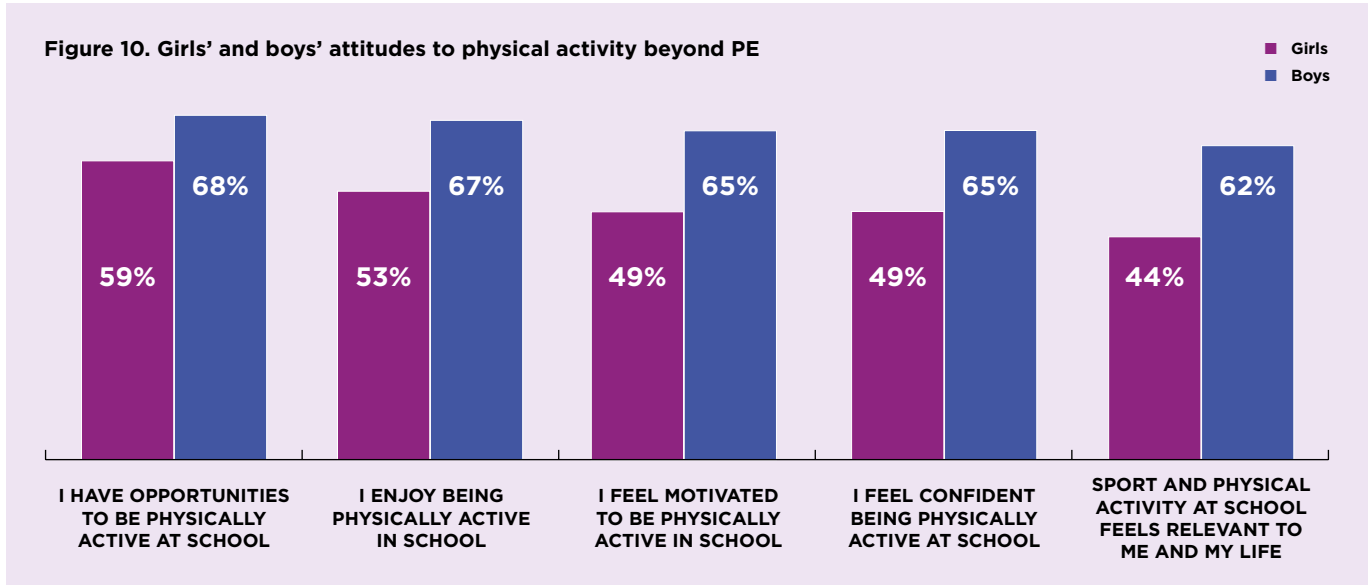
“I don’t have to worry about who’s judging me, what are they going to think, what are they going to say. I can just get on with it.”

**Girl, Year 7**



## Beyond PE, girls felt they had more opportunities to be active at school and enjoyed being active more

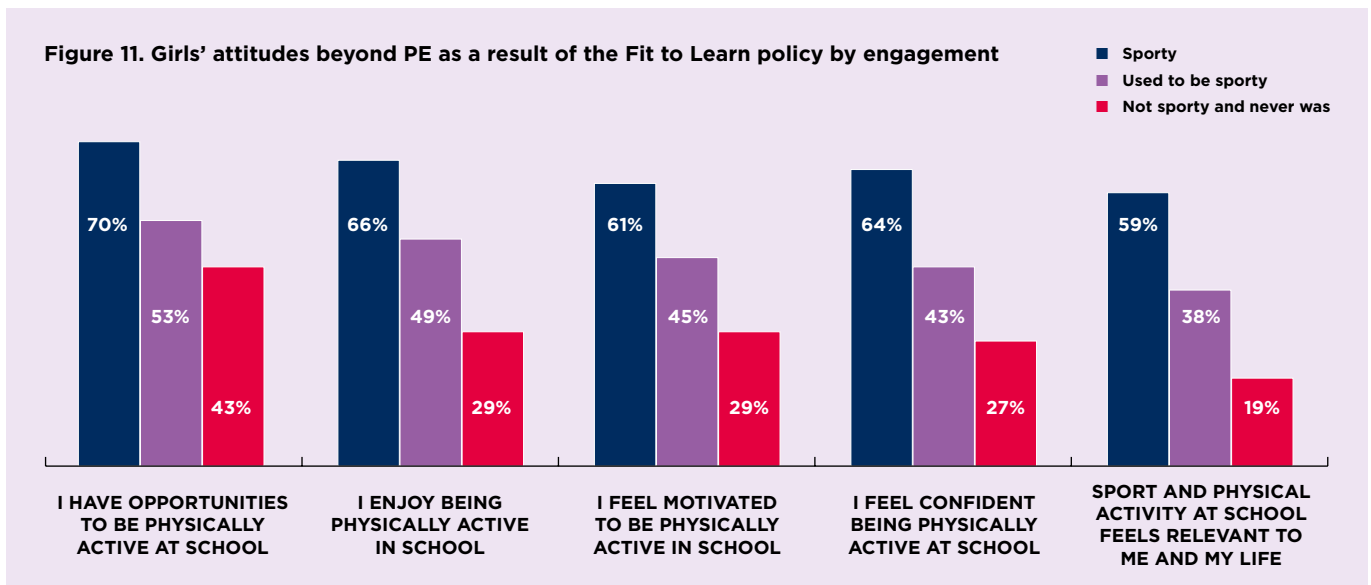
Outside of PE, wearing PE uniform all day increased pupils' feelings of enjoyment, motivation and confidence around being physically active in school (e.g. playing sport at clubs or being active during breaktimes). Whilst a significant gender gap remains for these measures, a clear positive impact was felt across the board with around half of girls agreeing they felt a positive change across the key measures explored (Figure 10). This positivity is perhaps a reflection of how increased opportunity, time and ease of participation have resulted in wider improvements in motivation and enjoyment, as well as activity in school feeling more relevant to girls' lives.



“It’s definitely got me more active because since I joined [the school and experienced the PE uniform policy], I’ve started like going to ping pong courts with my dad on the weekends.”

**Girl, Year 7**

The policy had the biggest impact on those who were already sporty across all measures, for example 66% of sporty girls said the policy increased their enjoyment of being physically active in school outside of PE. However, it’s notable that almost half of girls who used to be sporty and a third of not sporty girls also felt their enjoyment increased, reflecting the opportunity the policy presents to engage or re-engage these girls and support them to enjoy physical activity (Figure 11).



These positive changes were echoed by staff; shifts in attitudes and motivation amongst girls when it came to physical activity were clear, as well as a feeling that the policy had supported some girls to include more activity in their lives more broadly.



“We’ve now opened up a gym because they’re ready... in PE kit. We have about 14 people every lunchtime, which is quite a lot for our school because we’re quite a small school.”

**PE Teacher**

“Yes, we have seen an increase, especially in terms of competitive sport.”

**Senior Leader**



## 4. MENTAL WELLBEING, PUBERTY AND THE CHANGING ROOM

During puberty, feelings of self-consciousness, fear of judgement and low body confidence are amplified for girls. At this life stage, girls are experiencing significant physical and emotional changes; whilst physical activity can benefit girls during this time, it can also highlight insecurities and leave them feeling exposed and vulnerable. We know that 43% of teenage girls disengage from sport and exercise after primary school, as a result of barriers such as a loss of self-belief and fear of judgement.<sup>8</sup> The policy had a positive impact when it came to tackling some of these barriers, highlighting its potential to support teenage girls to become or remain physically active during puberty.

### **Stress and anxiety levels improved, whilst pupils' moods were lifted**

When asked about the main benefits of wearing PE uniform all day on PE lesson days, a quarter of pupils overall (26%) reported that they felt 'less stressed or anxious' as a result. Notably, girls were significantly more likely than boys (30% vs. 23%) to report this as a benefit, a clear reflection of the positive wellbeing implications of the policy for girls. This may be a reflection of the level of stress and anxiety that the changing room experience was causing them, as well as feeling more able to engage in physical activity. Relatedly, two-fifths (41%) of pupils said the policy improved their mood (boys 45% vs. girls 39%), highlighting the policy's ability to support the overall wellbeing and happiness of pupils.

**FOUR IN TEN  
GIRLS FELT 'IN A  
BETTER MOOD'**

**NEARLY A  
THIRD  
OF GIRLS (30%)  
FELT LESS  
STRESSED OR  
ANXIOUS**

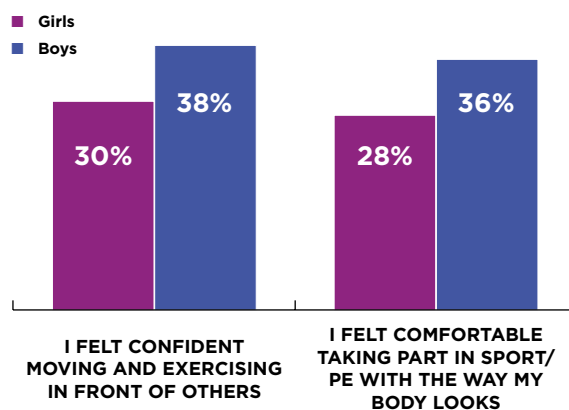


## For some girls, the policy improved confidence and made them feel less judged, although these deep-rooted barriers persist for many

We know that for girls, as a result of gender stereotyping, feelings of self-consciousness, judgement and low body confidence can be amplified by clothing and PE uniform during puberty. Pupils who took part in the survey were asked to reflect on how such feelings had changed since the introduction of the Fit to Learn policy, with gender gaps persisting across all measures.

Around a third of girls felt more confident moving and exercising in front of others and over a quarter felt more comfortable taking part in sport/PE with the way their body looks (Figure 12). Sporty girls were significantly more likely than girls who used to be or were not sporty to say they felt more confident moving and exercising in front of others due to the policy (38% vs. 28% and 15% respectively). We know from our wider research that the least engaged girls feel these barriers most acutely, for example 85% of girls who are not sporty don't like others watching them participate in sport compared to 50% of those who are sporty.<sup>8</sup> However, it is notable that even for sporty girls, the shift in feelings of confidence to move in front of others was smaller than for other measures captured in the pilot, such as increased activity levels, reflecting the deep-rooted nature of these barriers for all girls.

**Figure 12. Girls and boys who felt more confident and comfortable to be active**



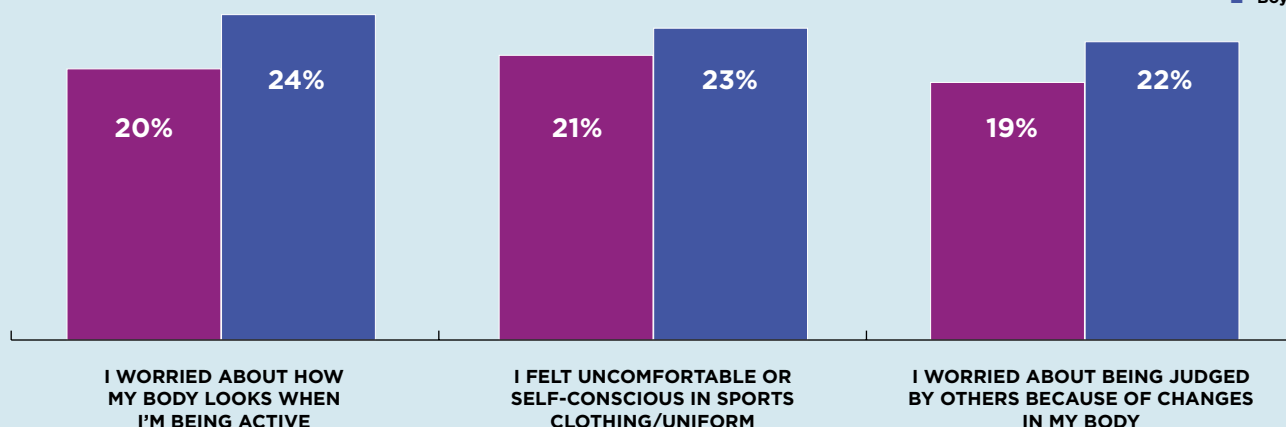
“I used to feel anxious and like, what about if people look at me... and what would they think of me? But now I just feel all confident and like PE kit’s so much better than normal uniform.”

Girl, Year 7



Figure 13. Girls and boys who felt less worried, uncomfortable and judged

■ Girls  
■ Boys



Despite this, around a fifth of girls felt **less** worried about how their body looks when being active, **less** uncomfortable or self-conscious in sports clothing/uniform and **less** worried about being judged by others because of changes in their bodies (Figure 13).

The fact that at least a fifth of girls saw shifts in these deep-rooted barriers reflects the power of the policy to instigate meaningful change. It also reflects the need for the policy to sit alongside other changes to enable the many girls who continued to feel self-conscious, uncomfortable and judged to feel safe and confident when taking part in physical activity in school. This might also include the PE uniform itself, particularly if girls are required to wear it all day, with wider data reflecting that half (58%) of secondary-age girls want more PE uniform choices.<sup>1</sup> A fifth (20%) of girls who participated in the Fit to Learn pilot reported that not liking their PE uniform was a downside of the policy (compared to 8% of boys). Alongside introducing the Fit to Learn policy, a wider range of affordable and appropriate PE uniform choices could support further improvements in feelings of body-confidence, whilst retaining the need to uphold school uniform standards.

Positively, half (53%) of the schools included in the pilot made changes to their PE uniform as part of introducing the Fit to Learn policy, for example introducing the option of leggings for girls. This reflects a secondary benefit of the policy in encouraging a more thoughtful approach to PE uniform design, made necessary by pupils being required to wear the uniform all day on PE days.

“Leggings were finally introduced after nearly 7 years of asking. The take up for girls has been strong and has absolutely improved the participation levels amongst girls.”

PE Teacher



“[We] Introduced additional school branded items - tracksuit bottoms and sports leggings. We now also allow girls across all year groups to wear sports leggings, something I have been asking for a few years and the Fit to Learn pilot has helped push this through.”

PE Teacher

The positive shifts observed across some of these measures related to confidence, judgement and self-consciousness reflect that the Fit to Learn policy can play a role in tackling these barriers and allowing girls to feel more confident and comfortable participating in physical activity. However, persistent gender gaps and the majority who did not report these impacts reflects the complex and entrenched nature of these barriers for girls. Our wider work with girls shows that six in ten girls (61%) feel judged when doing sport, two-thirds (65%) don't like others watching them participate in sport and almost half (45%) don't feel they have the right body shape to take part.<sup>8</sup> In order to truly change this picture for girls, this policy must work alongside other interventions and change to tackle these barriers.

## The changing room experience was fraught with worry and anxiety for many girls, feelings the policy helped to alleviate

When it came to the changing room experience, positively a quarter of girls (25%) felt less anxious or worried about getting changed in front of others for PE and around a quarter (23%) felt less judged by others. Whilst removing the need to change should in theory remove changing room anxiety altogether, the deep-rooted nature of this, coupled with the fact that there will be moments where girls do still need to change (e.g. leaking on their period or after wet weather), means that for many girls these anxieties may remain. Our conversations with girls revealed that the changing room experience could overshadow the rest of the school day, with the anxiety associated with the changing room impacting girls for hours before their PE lesson even took place. Girls described how on PE days, the dread of having to undress in front of their peers would sit at the back of their minds from the moment they arrived at school, making it harder to concentrate in other lessons and, for some, driving a reluctance to come to school at all.

# 25%

**OF GIRLS FELT LESS ANXIOUS OR WORRIED ABOUT GETTING CHANGED**

“I just think that it’s just better to come in in PE kit just because you might be uncomfortable, insecure about your body and you just don’t want other people judging you.”

**Girl, Year 9**

“Three lessons before PE, that’ll be on your mind in those three lessons. And then it will kind of distract you.”

**Girl, Year 7**

“You can do badly in other lessons because you’re worrying about PE.”

**Girl, Year 7**



Girls described the changing room as a space where they felt exposed to the judgement of peers in a way that was hard to articulate but very real. It was not always that anyone was necessarily judging them, but the potential for judgement was distressing. For girls who were just starting secondary school these feelings of anxiety could be particularly acute, as they likely have to change in front of people they barely knew.

In the context of going through puberty, girls felt concerned about being at different stages of development compared to their peers; the changing room made these physical differences very visible and made girls feel exposed and uncomfortable. Teachers and Senior Leaders were clear that the policy made a difference in improving this experience for girls.

“Some girls in my old class started wearing crop tops and bras and I hadn’t... some girls might be like, what if they wear a crop top and I’m still wearing like a vest or something?”

**Girl, Year 7**

“When you’re going through puberty, the last thing that you want to do is get changed into your underwear in front of other people. You just don’t want to do that.”

**Senior Leader**

With the policy, these concerns were alleviated with girls feeling less anxious about having to get changed. This positive impact was seen by PE teachers as well, who felt that for some girls, reluctance to engage with PE was more related to having to get changed, than to the PE lesson itself. Over a third (36%) of PE teachers surveyed reported ‘reduced anxiety or embarrassment around changing’ as one of the most important benefits of the policy for their school.

“Their confidence, in essence, has gone up because you eradicate something that was the barrier — not the actual PE lesson and taking part in sport itself.”

**PE Teacher**



Teachers also reflected on the power of the policy for girls with disabilities or special educational needs in this context. They shared that this group could find the changing room experience particularly distressing, as it was a potentially chaotic environment for them to navigate which could result in increased levels of anxiety and disengagement with PE.

“Imagine going through puberty as an autistic child anyway. So, you don’t like change. You don’t like the sensations of puberty, you don’t like hair growing, you don’t like the feeling of hair on your skin, you don’t like sweating more, you don’t like different smells. So, you’re going through all of that and then we’re going to pile on you that you then need to do that in front of other people.”

**Senior Leader**

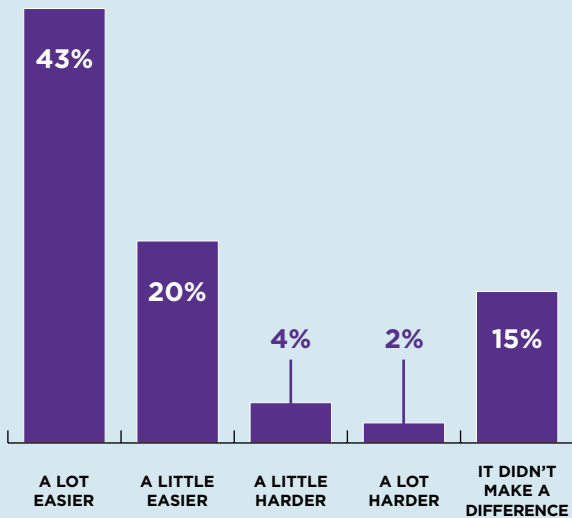
“We have quite a high SEN profile within this school. So, there’s a handful of students within each year group who getting changed would be either a struggle or it would be very high anxiety. So, taking that away completely, they’re able to access the PE curriculum.”

**PE Teacher**

## Wearing PE uniform all day made it easier for girls to participate in PE when on their period

Periods are a significant barrier for girls when it comes to being active, with around 7 in 10 girls avoiding being active when on their period, regardless of how sporty they are.<sup>8</sup> For girls who had started their periods, the changing room could be a particularly daunting place, leaving them feeling even more exposed and vulnerable to judgement, and the Fit to Learn policy played a significant role in addressing these anxieties.

**Figure 14. How much easier girls find taking part in PE when they have their period**



The policy had an overwhelmingly positive impact on girls, with two-thirds reporting that it was easier to take part in PE when on their period, with two-fifths finding it **a lot** easier (Figure 14). The impact was equally positive for girls with a disability or special educational need, with nearly two-thirds (58%) finding it easier to take part when on their period (35% a lot easier). Girls overall shared that the new policy took away some of the feelings of anxiety and exposure that getting changed for PE during their periods previously caused for them.

## TWO-THIRDS

(63%) OF GIRLS SAID IT WAS EASIER TO TAKE PART IN PE WHILE ON THEIR PERIOD

“I like [wearing my PE kit] during my period because you don’t have to worry about what people think and how you look and stuff like that.”

Girl, Year 7

“If you have a period, it’s like you can just go and do PE rather than having to worry.”

Girl, Year 7

A third (32%) of teachers surveyed reported ‘improved willingness to take part in PE during their period’ as a key benefit of the policy. Teachers felt that some girls who had previously used their period as a reason to opt out of PE were now joining in.

“We would previously have had people making those kinds of excuses about why they can’t do it that week, whereas now, because they’re already in the kit, it’s just like, oh, we might as well just do it.”

Senior Leader

“I think the PE kit is more comfortable actually for them to be in on those days [when they have their period] than being in uniform.”

Senior Leader



## 5. DESIRE TO RETAIN THE FIT TO LEARN POLICY

Most pupils, PE teachers and Senior Leaders were positive about continuing with the Fit to Learn policy into the future, with any perceived negatives (see Section 6) being outweighed by the broad benefits of wearing PE uniform all day on PE days.

**AROUND  
7 IN 10**

**PE TEACHERS AND PUPILS  
WANTED FIT TO LEARN  
TO CONTINUE**

Staff were positive about continuing with the policy; 67% of PE teachers and all Senior Leaders surveyed wanted the policy to continue. Overall, seven in ten (72%) pupils wanted the policy to continue, this was the same for girls and boys. Additionally, there was no significant difference amongst girls by engagement, reflecting that even for less sporty girls, the benefits of the policy are clear and reinforce the role it can play in supporting these girls. Similarly, pupils with a disability or special educational need were equally likely as other pupils to want the policy to continue. Overall, the pilot showed that the policy can support a range of pupils, including meeting the needs of those who are more vulnerable.

Half of pupils (50%) reported no downsides to wearing PE uniform all day on PE lesson days. This was significantly higher for boys (59%) than girls (41%). When reflecting on how the policy could be improved, most girls and boys did not suggest any particular changes and were positive about keeping the policy. Some even suggested they would prefer to wear PE uniform more often or every day, because they found it more comfortable and practical than traditional school uniform.

“I just think it’s a lot easier and I really like wearing my PE kit as it’s comfortable.”

**Girl, Year 7**

“It feels like you have freedom of what you wear... overall I think it is a good idea having PE kit all day on PE days.”

**Boy, Year 7**

“I am so glad the school has brought this rule in as it’s been helpful for everyone regarding their insecurities. Also, we do not have to carry shoes and a kit around all day whilst worrying about losing it.”

**Girl, Year 10**



School staff were similarly positive about the benefits of the policy, expressing a commitment to continuing it and proactively working through any challenges, with the perceived benefits outweighing the challenges that did arise. All Senior Leaders and 78% of PE teachers surveyed said they would recommend that other schools implement the Fit to Learn policy. As one Senior Leader reflected when asked whether they would recommend the policy to other schools: “[There’s] No reason not to”.

## AROUND 8 IN 10

PE TEACHERS WOULD RECOMMEND THE POLICY TO OTHER SCHOOLS

“I think it’s brilliant and we’re quite happy to put our name behind it and say this has been our experience, and we’re really pleased with it so far. So, if that helps and spreads the word a bit further or schools want to get in contact and speak to us about the things we found out and do... they’re most welcome to.”

**Senior Leader**

“I think every school should be doing it.”

**Senior Leader**

“It’s really been positive... I think it’s brilliant.”

**PE Teacher**

“Think carefully first about what the barriers and what the benefits are of the process. What you’ll find is that the benefits to doing it outweigh the barriers and the pitfalls of doing it.”

**PE Teacher**

“I would definitely like to continue with it... our plan is that as each new year group comes in, they will do the same. And then hopefully we’ll get to the point of having year 11s even coming in on the days that they have PE in their kit.”

**PE Teacher**



## 6. KEY LEARNINGS

Whilst the Fit to Learn policy was viewed positively overall by most pupils, teachers and Senior Leaders within the pilot, there were key learnings that can be taken forward. It is important to consider how these can be proactively addressed and planned for when considering implementing this policy. The challenges schools and pupils faced in implementing the policy were mainly focused on three key areas: hygiene concerns related to wearing PE uniform throughout the day, a desire from pupils for a wider range of PE uniform choices and staff concerns about upholding high standards and consistent uniform expectations.

### Hygiene concerns

Hygiene and comfort emerged as a concern, particularly among girls who were more likely to express this than boys. They worried more about smelling, being dirty/wet and generally feeling unhygienic (Figure 15). These concerns are likely amplified for girls during puberty, where feelings of self-consciousness and worries about hygiene will be felt acutely alongside their changing bodies and managing periods.

“Since we have PE first, it’s like I feel like sweaty throughout the whole day.”

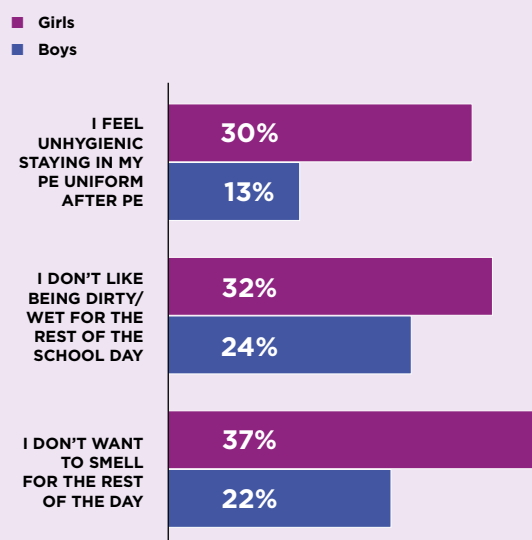
Girl, Year 8

“I don’t want to smell of sweat since I’m going through puberty... so it does smell so I would rather change back into normal school uniform”

Girl, Year 7



**Figure 15. Hygiene-related concerns for girls and boys**

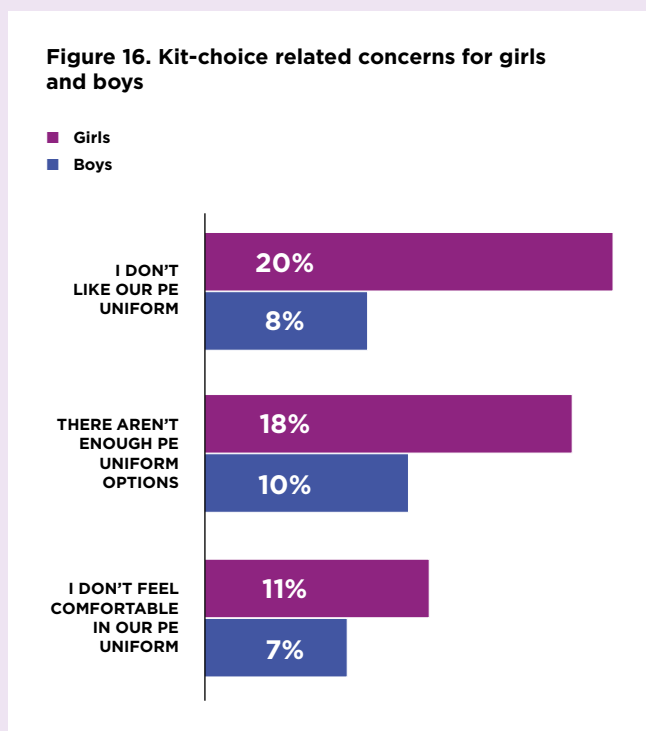


This reflects an important tension within the policy. Whilst removing the need to get changed reduced feelings of anxiety, judgement and self-consciousness around getting changed, remaining in PE uniform all day could simultaneously create other worries linked to hygiene, comfort and appearance after physical activity. Concerns around hygiene were also reflected at school level, with 39% of teachers identifying hygiene concerns as one of the main implementation challenges associated with the policy. A small number of pupils also felt there should still be some flexibility or choice around changing after PE lessons, particularly for pupils who feel uncomfortable remaining in PE uniform throughout the whole school day.

## PE uniform choices

PE uniform itself became more important to pupils. Where drawbacks were identified, these were less about the principle of wearing PE uniform all day and more about whether the school PE uniform itself felt comfortable, practical and wearable across the whole school day.

Where girls and boys did suggest improvements, the clearest overarching theme was the need for greater flexibility, comfort and choice of PE uniform options. Overall, although only 9% of pupils said they did not feel comfortable in the PE uniform, 15% said there were not enough PE uniform options available; these concerns were felt more strongly by girls than boys (Figure 16).



Pupils repeatedly cited the need for more varied PE uniform styles including leggings, flares, loose-fitting trousers, shorts, hoodies, zip-up tops and warmer layers that felt more comfortable, practical and less exposing to wear throughout the school day. Whilst girls' responses were more likely to link these concerns to body confidence, appearance and feeling exposed, boys' suggested improvements were more commonly practical and focused on comfort, warmth, flexibility and fabric quality.

“More inclusive PE kit designs so we don't have to feel insecure about our body, like flares.”

**Girl, Year 8**

“Improving the kit so it's better fitted for every person and how they prefer wearing it.”

**Girl, Year 10**

“[I think we need] more PE uniform options for people's preferences since we have to wear it for the whole day.”

**Girl, Year 11**

## Smartness and PE uniform standards

Alongside allowing pupils to wear PE uniform all day on PE days, several schools reported they had introduced more flexible options as part of the policy, with some teachers noting these requests had been ongoing for years prior to the pilot. However, introducing greater flexibility alongside the policy also created some inevitable tensions around consistency, autonomy and maintaining uniform expectations and standards in practice.

Some PE teachers and schools experienced challenges in consistency and expectations when it came to uniform. Over half (54%) of PE teachers agreed that confusion around what counts as acceptable PE uniform was a challenge for staff implementing the policy and around a third (36%) agreed it was difficult to enforce uniform rules fairly. It should be acknowledged however that maintaining uniform standards can be a consistent issue for many schools which is not specific to PE clothing.

“A girl came in in black leggings and a grey hoodie. So, I said — you've come in in your own clothes. She said — no, it's my PE kit. No, it isn't. So, we do have that and that is a problem that causes a little bit of friction.”

**PE Teacher**

“Opening up the possibility of students wearing their own clothes instead of PE kits — that would be the only downside and the main thing that we've had to kind of issue sanctions for.”

**PE Teacher**

# Belvedere Academy: Listening to girls and working together to get active

Belvedere Academy is an all-girls secondary school (Years 7–13) and part of the Girls' Day School Trust. The school sits at the heart of a community facing significant social and economic challenges, serving one of the most economically deprived postcodes in England, with a highly diverse student body including students displaced from conflict zones and a high SEN profile. The school values PE for the physical and emotional benefits it offers, as well as for its ability to create a sense of community for students through shared activity, energy and fun.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

Engagement in PE across the school was variable. Some girls were thriving, but others were voting with their feet – “forgetting” their PE uniform or refusing to take part. This sometimes surfaced as challenging behaviour around PE, and a division had opened up between the girls who were good at PE and those who weren't. When the school dug into what was driving these issues, the girls themselves identified the root of the problem – and it wasn't PE at all: it was getting changed.

“The idea of going and getting changed in front of everybody – complete discomfort for a lot of students.”

**Emma Speed,  
Senior Assistant Vice Principal**

## WHAT THE SCHOOL DID

The Fit to Learn policy principles were introduced at the same time as a wider, student-led rethink of PE and PE uniform, which saw girls co-design the PE uniform. Kate Reynolds, Head of PE, sourced options and displayed them on mannequins in the PE corridor, and the girls voted on what they wanted. The school's equality, diversity and LGBT+ groups were consulted to make sure the different options worked for everyone. The result is a flexible PE uniform with a choice of tops and bottoms – leggings, tracksuit bottoms, skorts, short or long sleeves – accommodating sensory needs, cultural preferences and personal comfort, all available for under £65. A pre-loved PE uniform store, stocked by donations from departing Year 11s, means any girl can take what she needs.

“Start small... but it's got to be pupil-led. And you've got to be prepared to hear things that you don't want to hear.”

**Kate Reynolds, Head of PE**

To answer concerns about standards, the school set clear parameters: the PE uniform is worn with the school blazer over the top – a blazer the girls helped redesign for the female form – so students remain smart and identifiable. Expectations were communicated through assemblies, a visual guide

sent to parents every year, and clear guidance to staff on what the PE uniform looks like and whose responsibility it is to follow up when something slips. Changing rooms were retained as an option for any girl who prefers to change.

Alongside the policy, Kate broadened what taking part in PE means. A no-notes culture means every girl is involved in every lesson – if she cannot take part in the activities themselves, she coaches, umpires or officiates. The RISE programme and a creative, ambitious curriculum – rock climbing, rowing, dance, badminton – give girls the chance to discover new activities.

## WHAT CHANGED FOR THE GIRLS

The girls feel more comfortable, less anxious and more able to focus. They describe the relief of no longer having the prospect of the changing room hanging over their day; they get more actual PE in every lesson because no time is lost to changing; they are no longer carrying heavy bags of PE uniform around; and they feel more comfortable travelling to and from school in sporty clothing.

Serial PE avoiders began to engage – and girls with SEN saw the biggest benefits of all. The sensory and cognitive demands of changing between uniforms had been a specific and significant barrier, and its removal made the difference between participation and non-participation.

Freed from the barrier of changing, the girls are also throwing themselves into the school's wide range of enrichment opportunities – and discovering new talents and interests.

“I’ve always loved football and netball, but I never knew that I was good at badminton or tennis, but now I love it when we do it and it’s really fun.”

Girl, Year 7

## WHAT CHANGED FOR THE SCHOOL

**Improved attendance on PE days:** girls who previously missed school altogether, or arrived late, to avoid PE no longer feel the need to. Senior leaders within the school have seen a specific rise in attendance on the days girls have PE. The shift has been most marked among the school's most vulnerable girls, some of whom had been staying away on PE days specifically to avoid the changing room.

**PE lessons are longer and richer:** with no changing time at either end, girls get the full hour of physical activity. Trainee teachers placed at Belvedere Academy from schools where pupils still change notice the difference: used to perhaps thirty or forty minutes of teaching once changing is accounted for, they find they have the full lesson here.

**Behaviour around PE has improved:** bypassing the need for changing rooms has effectively removed any challenging behaviours that may have occurred in them prior to the policy, and lost PE uniform has all but disappeared. Families who once reported constant losses have thanked the school, and the room that used to fill up with lost property now houses the pre-loved store.

**Enrichment is thriving:** the PE department runs at least two after-school activities every evening, and with the changing barrier gone far more girls take part. Where some once tried to join in wearing their school skirts and shirts – restrictive and off-putting for activities such as cross-country – they now arrive ready to go.

The senior leaders in Belvedere Academy had anticipated problems – girls not looking smart, standards slipping, concentration suffering in non-PE lessons. None of these anticipated problems materialised: as much as the school worried about its high standards, behaviour didn't dip. The girls gave us an insight into why behaviour and concentration had improved: when you are comfortable, it is easier to concentrate on what the teacher is saying.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Belvedere Academy is fully committed to continuing with the policy and would strongly advocate for it with other schools. Asked what she would tell other schools considering it, Kate Reynolds's response captured the value of the policy:

“The kids have just found a way to fall back in love with being active. It helps them more than you as a member of staff will realise.”

Kate Reynolds, Head of PE

# Cambridge Academy for Science and Technology: “Are you PE Ready?”

Cambridge Academy for Science and Technology is a specialist science and technology school taking pupils from Year 9 to 13. Girls make up only around a third of the school and it has a notably high SEND profile. Making sure all students, including girls, feel comfortable, included and encouraged to be active was the lens through which the school approached the Fit to Learn policy.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

Because pupils join in Year 9 from many different settings, many arrive with mixed experiences and memories of PE – although for many, the barrier was not PE itself but having to get changed. Some girls would routinely arrive without their kit – not because they had forgotten it, but because not having it was a way to avoid taking part. For the school’s autistic pupils, the prospect of getting changed could be particularly overwhelming. If any behaviour issues were to arise it was likely to be in the changing rooms, and lesson time was lost to changing and managing these issues.

“I always say to them, are you ready for PE? Like, are you PE ready? And they love it. They’re like, yeah, PE ready today.”

Hannah Lally, Head of PE

## WHAT THE SCHOOL DID

What has made the policy effective at Cambridge Academy for Science and Technology is the culture the PE department has built around it. Head of PE, Hannah Lally, has turned readiness into a rallying cry – “Are you PE Ready?” – and the phrase has embedded itself so thoroughly that pupils now say it back to her, arriving declaring that they are “PE Ready” and good to go. What was once a source of anxiety, particularly for some girls, has become a point of pride. Much of this comes down to Hannah Lally herself, whose energy and creativity have made PE a place where pupils want to be.

The detail underneath is deliberately practical and inclusive. To protect uniform standards, the school requires a school-branded PE top so pupils stay identifiable, while keeping everything else flexible and unbranded: any black bottoms, with dark thermals underneath for warmth, so nothing need be expensive or hard to find. Wearing the PE uniform is framed as a privilege tied to meeting expectations, not a relaxation of them. Departing Year 11s leave their PE uniform behind to restock a supply of spares, kept on hand by pastoral staff, so a student who is caught out can be quietly supported.

## WHAT CHANGED FOR THE GIRLS

The girls told us the difference in moving to a school that followed the policy was immediate. Freed from the need to change in front of others – something several described as genuinely uncomfortable among people they didn't know well – they can simply arrive ready and stay comfortable all day. The anxiety that used to hang over a PE day has gone, and there is no longer a heavy second bag to carry.

“I prefer coming into school in my PE kit a lot more than changing in school because I just don't really feel that comfortable changing.”

**Girl, Year 9**

“I can just be comfortable the whole day, because I know I've got PE and I don't need to change – I'm already in my comfy clothes.”

**Girl, Year 9**

Girls also told us that being able to take part comfortably when on their period and without having to change, had removed one more reason to opt out and made puberty easier to manage. As participation has risen, so has appetite: a group jumped at the chance to form a basketball team – and a group of Year 10 girls now plays volleyball on the astro at lunchtime, where the space had previously been the preserve of boys playing football.

“Their confidence has gone up, because you eradicate the thing that was the barrier – not the actual PE lesson, not the sport itself.”

**Hannah Lally, Head of PE**

## WHAT CHANGED FOR THE SCHOOL

The effect of the policy has reached well beyond the PE department.

**Engagement:** girls who used to sit out PE altogether now take part, and the gap between reluctant and willing participants has all but closed, with girls asking for more opportunities to take part in sport and trying sports they would once have refused.

**Improved attendance:** pupils who had missed some lessons to avoid having to get changed for PE no longer need to do so, which improved both PE attendance and school attendance more broadly.

**Time and behaviour:** with no changing at either end, lessons that once delivered 25 to 30 minutes of activity now run close to the full hour; the changing rooms are no longer a challenging space to manage; and staff report no negative effect on behaviour elsewhere. Transitions between lessons are smoother too, with pupils no longer arriving late from the changing rooms.

**Belonging and inclusion:** the benefits were greatest for those pupils needing the most support to access the PE curriculum. Autistic and girls with SEND, for whom the sensory and logistical demands of repeated changing had been a barrier, are now able to participate in, and benefit from, the full range of PE activities.

So convinced is the school of the policy that it is repurposing one (although not all) of its now-redundant changing rooms into additional gym space for pupils.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Cambridge Academy for Science and Technology is committed to continuing with the policy. Their advice to other schools reflects the spirit in which they approached it themselves: treat it as a trial rather than an irreversible leap – start with a single year group or run it across a term – and let the results speak. Hannah was clear about her full endorsement of the policy and the impact it has had on her school community:

“It's been such a positive. The whole attitude just changed around it here. I think it's brilliant.”

**Hannah Lally, Head of PE**

# Conisborough College: Levelling the playing field for girls across our whole community

Conisborough College is a diverse, inclusive secondary school in south-east London, where around half of pupils are eligible for free school meals. The school is on an ambitious improvement journey – and central to that ambition is a determination to get more girls engaged, active and thriving in PE. It was through this lens that the school approached the Fit to Learn policy: as one practical way to remove the barriers that may be holding girls back.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

Like many schools, Conisborough College had long watched girls' engagement in PE fall away as they moved through their teenage years – a decline seen across schools nationally. The barrier, time and again, was often not the sport itself but that, for some girls, anxiety around getting changed in front of others could be enough to make them avoid taking part altogether. The school recognised that they could take steps to minimise this obstacle.

## WHAT THE SCHOOL DID

Conisborough College piloted the Fit to Learn policy with its current Year 7 and 8 pupils. The decision to begin with the younger years was deliberate: it let the school set a clear expectation from the outset and embed it as the norm, with the intention of growing the policy up through the school year by year as each new cohort arrives.

To balance comfort with the school's commitment to standards, pupils wear a recognised PE uniform on PE days or the full school uniform, and the school manages the occasional creative interpretation of this uniform through its normal behaviour systems.

The policy has been driven from the top by Principal Lucy Oragano, as part of her wider mission to raise standards and get more of the school's girls engaged and enjoying sport, with Head of PE George Marsden bringing his expertise and passion for the benefits of physical activity to activating the policy on the ground.

## WHAT CHANGED FOR THE GIRLS

For the girls, the change has been about comfort, confidence and belonging. The girls describe the freedom of simply being able to get on with PE, without the worry of being watched or judged, and feeling self-conscious.

“I know people who didn't hate PE but used to do anything to get out of changing. Now they're not looking for reasons not to do it – they just join in with the rest of us.”

**Girl, Year 7**

Staff describe the effect as levelling the playing field: with everyone arriving in the same PE uniform, girls feel part of the group and part of the family, and the anxieties that the changing room could expose fall away.

Girls also told us the policy makes it easier to be active beyond the lesson – to walk to school, or to head to the park afterwards – and that being comfortable even helps them concentrate better in their other lessons. They were unanimous in wanting other schools to follow suit, so that girls elsewhere could feel the same comfort and freedom.

“You want other people to experience that. You don’t want other people from different schools to feel uncomfortable – you want them to be comfortable, to be free.”

**Girl, Year 7**

## WHAT CHANGED FOR THE SCHOOL

The benefits have been felt right across the school day.

**Participation:** among the Year 7 and Year 8 cohorts, far fewer girls now sit out of lessons or rely on a missing-kit reason to avoid taking part. Staff report that the impact has been more marked for the girls than the boys.

“It has definitely reduced the number of kids who are turning up to PE without kit – it’s taken away that barrier of changing.”

**George Marsden, Head of PE**

**Reclaimed lesson time:** with no changing at either end, physical activity begins straight away and runs right to the end, allowing staff to plan richer, fuller lessons with girls being active for longer.

“It saves us lesson time – it alleviates that stress of spending lots of time chivvying kids along in the changing room, and we can get into the lesson more quickly.”

**George Marsden, Head of PE**

**Behaviour:** the changing rooms had been a source of low-level behaviour problems, an issue that was eliminated by the introduction of the policy.

“If anything, the behaviour is better – because there’s so little time in the changing rooms now, our behaviour problems within Year 7 and Year 8 have gone.”

**George Marsden, Head of PE**

**Inclusion:** The benefit has been especially marked for girls with SEND, for whom the changing room could be a distressing environment. Removing this barrier makes it easier for these girls to engage with PE.

The school is honest that the policy is not a cure-all, and that the deeper work of building girls’ lifelong love and engagement in PE and sport continues alongside it – through efforts to strengthen girls’ teams, widen extracurricular opportunities and bring in positive role models. What the policy has done is remove a barrier that stood in the way of that mission, and it has achieved this without the downsides the school had braced for: behaviour has, if anything, improved, and standards have held.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Conisborough College is strongly committed to continuing with the policy and to extending it as each new year group moves up through the school. For its leaders, it is a clear and practical part of a much larger ambition – to make sure that every girl, whatever her background, feels included, supported and inspired to take part.

“It’s been 100% a positive move for the girls. If you can do anything to boost the confidence of girls, then we should absolutely do it.”

**Lucy Oragano, Principal**

# ADVICE FOR SCHOOLS WHEN IMPLEMENTING THE POLICY

For schools keen to implement a Fit to Learn policy, planning proactively will be key to ensuring the policy has the most positive impact possible. Based on the findings of this pilot, our advice for schools is to:

“Changing from kit to uniform was such a big language change... the idea behind it is now that this is our PE uniform, we’re proud to wear it properly.”

Senior Leader



## Ensure that PE uniform is well-designed – or the change may be counterproductive

- Consult with pupils and listen to their needs as part of any PE uniform re-design you do, including girls and pupils with SEND and religious or cultural needs.
- Offer a variety of appropriate PE uniform choices to meet different needs, for example shorts, leggings and tracksuit bottoms, long and short-sleeve options, and darker-coloured items. Consider consulting the **Inclusive Sportswear Charter** for best practice guidance.
- Ensure that PE uniform is affordable and accessible for all pupils, considering **UK government guidance** on developing school uniform, including limiting the number of branded items.

## Be proactive and flexible when it comes to hygiene concerns – to ensure comfort and peace of mind

- Provide a PE uniform list which includes spare clothing items, washing aids and deodorant, alongside other essential items for good health, comfort and confidence such as sports bras.
- Keep a ‘caught short’ kit to hand for girls, including period and hygiene products like deodorant, which girls can access easily and discreetly.
- Ensure girls have access to a changing room and toilets during PE lessons so they can manage their periods effectively whilst being active, and change items of clothing if needed, for example in wet weather.

“We’ve just communicated with parents and said, on these days it might be worthwhile bringing in your uniform and we’ll give you time to change if the girls so wish to at the end of the lesson just so that you can change into something dry that’s comfortable.”

PE Teacher



## Set clear expectations from the start and reinforce the benefits – with pupils, staff and parents

- Communicate the introduction of the policy and the accepted PE uniform in the term prior to introducing it and provide regular reminders across communications throughout the year (e.g. assemblies, parent newsletters, staff meetings).
- Share the evidence and benefits for girls, pupils with SEND and those from ethnically diverse communities.
- Consider the way PE clothing is described, for example describing a ‘PE uniform’ rather than a ‘PE kit’ to embed expectations and standards.
- On PE days, ensure PE uniform is checked at the start of the school day so that issues are dealt with swiftly rather than at the start of PE lessons.
- Consider a phased roll-out to help manage and learn from the policy change before rolling out across the whole school, starting with year 7s to set expectations early.

### KEY BENEFITS

- ✓ Reduced anxiety
- ✓ Improved wellbeing
- ✓ More active learning time in PE
- ✓ Better focus in lessons
- ✓ Increased attendance
- ✓ Fewer behavioural issues



## **Governments should encourage schools to adopt the policy and communicate its potential benefits**

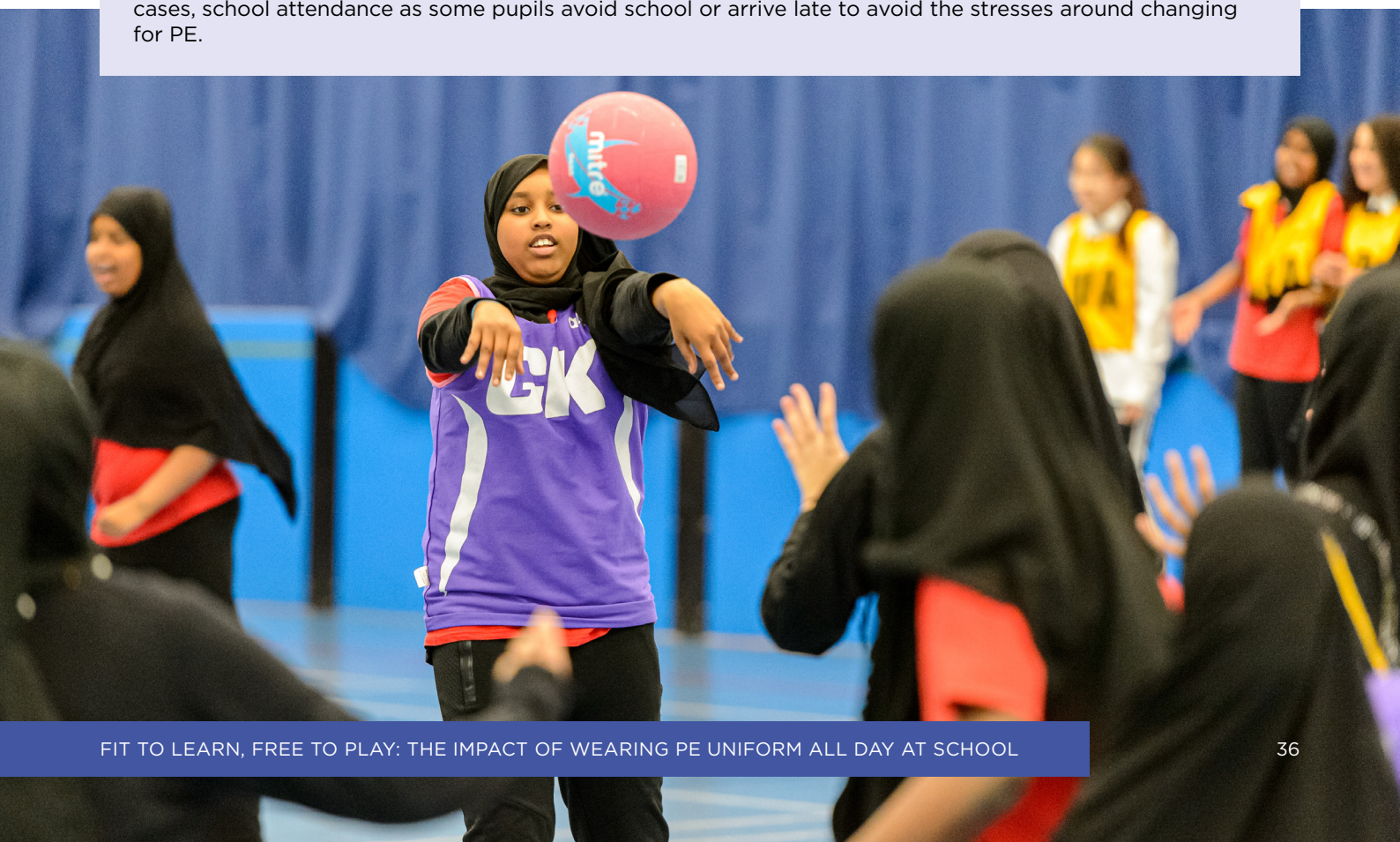
The Fit to Learn policy (allowing pupils to wear their PE uniform throughout the day on PE days) is a low-cost, straightforward intervention proven to make a positive difference to attendance as well as engagement and enjoyment of physical activity for all groups. The policy has a real impact on girls and pupils with SEND. Women in Sport believe governments across the home nations should recommend that schools adopt this policy, which has the following key benefits that can be communicated with schools who wish to implement it:

**Increases learning and activity levels in PE:** 32% of teachers believe the policy adds 20-25 minutes of time spent on PE rather than changing, which in an hour's lesson means around 50% more PE. This matters most for girls because they have less access than boys to physical activity outside school.

**Improves mental health and increases focus in PE and wider academic studies:** Girls responded to this policy with the top three words “relief, free and confident” replacing “anxious, stress and dread”. Girls face a unique mental health crisis with shocking rates of anxiety and poor mental health, which being more active can help combat. Removing the pressure to change and wearing a comfortable PE uniform helps pupils feel more at ease, less anxious and better able to focus in lessons.

**Increases active travel and activity during the school day:** 45% of girls and 52% of boys are more likely to be active on their journeys to and from school. Wearing PE uniform throughout the day provides more opportunities to be active at break times and in extra-curricular clubs, positively influencing their physical and mental health.

**Improved school attendance as well as engagement in PE:** PE lesson attendance increases and, in some cases, school attendance as some pupils avoid school or arrive late to avoid the stresses around changing for PE.



## Schools should take steps to ensure the policy is implemented effectively from the start (see our guidance for implementation above)

**Ensure PE uniform is thoughtfully designed:** PE uniform should be practical, comfortable, affordable and inclusive for the different needs of pupils; 58% of girls want more PE uniform choices so involving them in design is key. **Government guidance** on PE uniforms should be used to support this.

**Set clear expectations:** Schools should establish clear standards for what the PE uniform includes from the beginning, helping to maintain smartness and consistency over time. These standards and the benefits of the policy should be communicated clearly with parents, pupils and staff throughout the school year.

**Ensure hygiene concerns are addressed proactively:** Recommend pupils bring spares of certain PE uniform items and maintain clean changing rooms and toilets that girls can access during PE. These measures will enable girls to manage hygiene concerns after PE lessons, and to manage their periods effectively whilst being active.

**Implement the policy as part of wider best practice:** The policy can reduce barriers for girls but other changes are needed for true equality, including more girls-only time in PE and extra-curricular clubs. Only 45% of girls feel they have the same opportunities as boys in school.<sup>1</sup>

## Schools should ensure that the groups that face the most significant barriers are equipped to take part:

**Girls, especially during puberty:** For some girls having to change in front of others when feeling self-conscious about changes happening to their bodies, or when on their period, are key barriers to engaging. Alongside the kit policy, remove the stigma from these issues by educating girls on how to manage puberty when being active and by making period products available.

**Girls from minority ethnic communities:** Girls from ethnically diverse communities, particularly Black and Asian girls, are less likely than White girls to be active.<sup>2</sup> Ensuring PE uniform is designed thoughtfully, with cultural and religious needs such as modesty in mind, and removing the need to get changed can enable girls from ethnically diverse backgrounds to engage more fully in PE.

**Pupils with SEND:** The changing room environment can be overwhelming for pupils with SEND. For some of these pupils, removing this barrier can be the deciding factor in whether they engage with or avoid PE lessons altogether. The policy should be introduced alongside measures such as considering sensory needs in PE uniform design.

**[1] Youth Sport Trust** (2025)

Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Girls' Report

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**[2] Sport England** (2025)

Active Lives Children & Young People Survey, Academic Year 2024-2025

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**[3] Women in Sport** (2026)

Tackling the Opportunity Gap in Sport for Girls - Women in Sport Charity

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**[4] Sport England** (2023)

Physical Literacy Consensus Statement for England published | Sport England

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**[5] NHS England** (2023)

Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 - Wave 4 Follow up to the 2017 Survey

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**[6] Girl Guiding** (2025)

Girls' Attitudes Survey | Girlguiding

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**[7] Royal Osteoporosis Society** (2024)

The Low-Profile Condition That's Become the Second Worst Filler of Hospital Beds - And the Cruel Way it Targets Women

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**[8] Women in Sport** (2022)

Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Tackling Teenage Disengagement

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**[9] Women in Sport** (2025)

Let Her Dream 2025: The Rise of the Gender Dream Deficit in Sport



**We would love to hear how you have used this research.**

**Get in touch with us at:**

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