

# CHANGE STARTS IN THE CHANGING ROOM

**A whitepaper by The Sweaty Betty Foundation on designing school changing rooms that keep girls active for life. Drawing on research and recommendations from nationwide consultations with 2,000 secondary school girls and 200 PE teachers, this whitepaper presents a framework for co-designing school changing rooms with girls' voices at the centre.**

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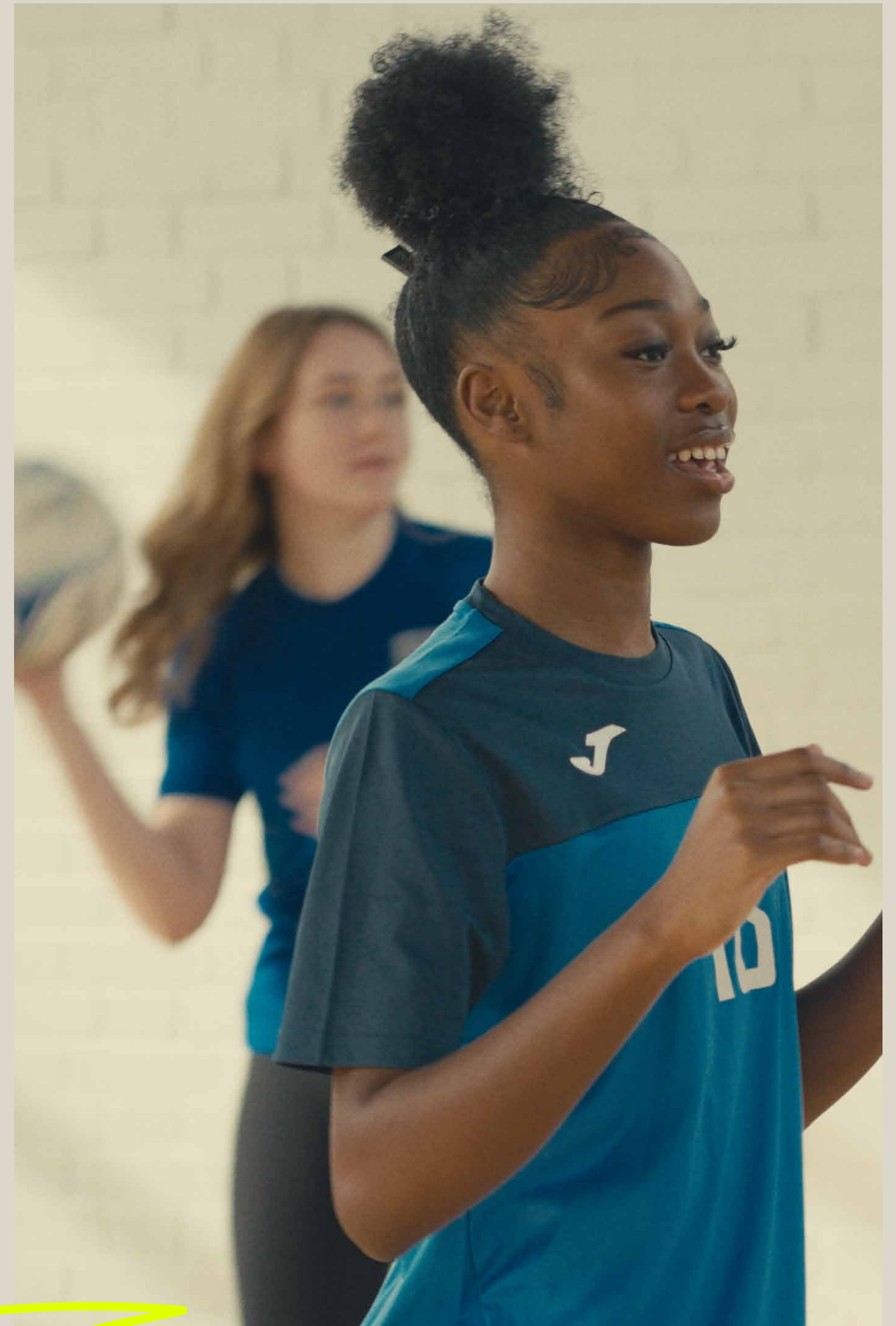
# Designing for Change

What We've Learned  
from Listening to Girls



**We're delivering this white paper at a pivotal time, as the government is simultaneously investing £1.4 billion in school rebuilding, £100 million in grassroots sports facilities, and implementing the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.**

The Department for Education's School Rebuilding Programme represents the largest investment in educational infrastructure in decades, with plans to rebuild or refurbish 518 schools by 2030. Alongside this, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's commitment to upgrade hundreds of grassroots sports facilities promises new pitches, changing rooms, goalposts and floodlights across the UK. Meanwhile, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill signals parliamentary recognition that student mental health must be central to educational policy, with Mental Health Support Teams planned for every school by 2029/30.





These three streams of investment - infrastructure, sports facilities, and mental health – are being managed in isolation. But the evidence presented in this whitepaper demonstrates these are interconnected challenges, requiring coordinated solutions.

Recent research by Public First shows that girls are missing out on 280 million hours of sport annually, costing the UK £6.5 billion in lost economic and health benefits by 2035. This isn't just about missed PE lessons, it's about a generation of young women whose relationship with physical activity is being damaged during the most formative years of their lives.

Even as we celebrate increased investment following the Lionesses' success, we must acknowledge that current approaches often miss the mark. Investment frequently flows toward elite performance or single sports, while the fundamental barriers girls face around privacy concerns, body image anxieties, and inadequate facilities for menstruation remain unaddressed.

**This isn't just about missed PE lessons, it's about a generation of young women whose relationship with physical activity is being damaged during the most formative years of their lives.**

That's before considering the deeper inequalities that intersect with changing room experiences. More than half of children from low income families can't swim 25m unaided. While Black and Asian girls face a unique 'play penalty', with Black girls the least active of all groups. These barriers are compounded by changing room environments that do not reflect the wide-ranging needs and lived experiences of today's girls.

We have a once in a generation opportunity to embed youth centred design standards into existing major government investment programmes. The question isn't whether we can afford to act on these findings, it's whether we can afford not to coordinate these investments around what girls themselves tell us they need.

If we don't act on what girls tell us, we risk perpetuating the same barriers that have excluded girls from physical activity for generations. So, we've captured all our learning from truly listening to girls and putting their voices at the centre of changing room design, for you to take into your world too. From teachers to politicians, everyone has a part to play.

It's time to move beyond assuming what girls need and start acting on what they tell us they want.

**Afsana Lachaux**  
Director, The Sweaty Betty Foundation

# Why Changing Rooms Matter

**One in three secondary school girls skip PE lessons because of the thought of using school changing rooms.**

This stark statistic from The Sweaty Betty Foundation's nationwide research reveals a hidden barrier that is quietly reshaping an entire generation's relationship with physical activity.

We consulted 2,000 secondary school girls across the UK and 200 secondary school PE teachers and discovered the consequences extend far beyond missed PE lessons.

More than a third (38%) of secondary school girls told us they're less active than they were in primary school, with one in ten girls saying they do no physical activity whatsoever.

Perhaps most concerning, one in three girls say bad experiences in changing rooms have made them not want to do PE as they get older.

"The changing room is their first experience of PE so it's very important that they have a positive experience from the beginning.

We must listen to girls' voices because they understand the barriers so much more than we do. It's what I like most about Sweaty Betty Foundations' approach to empower girls because it's about listening to girls' voices and putting them right at the heart of the thinking."

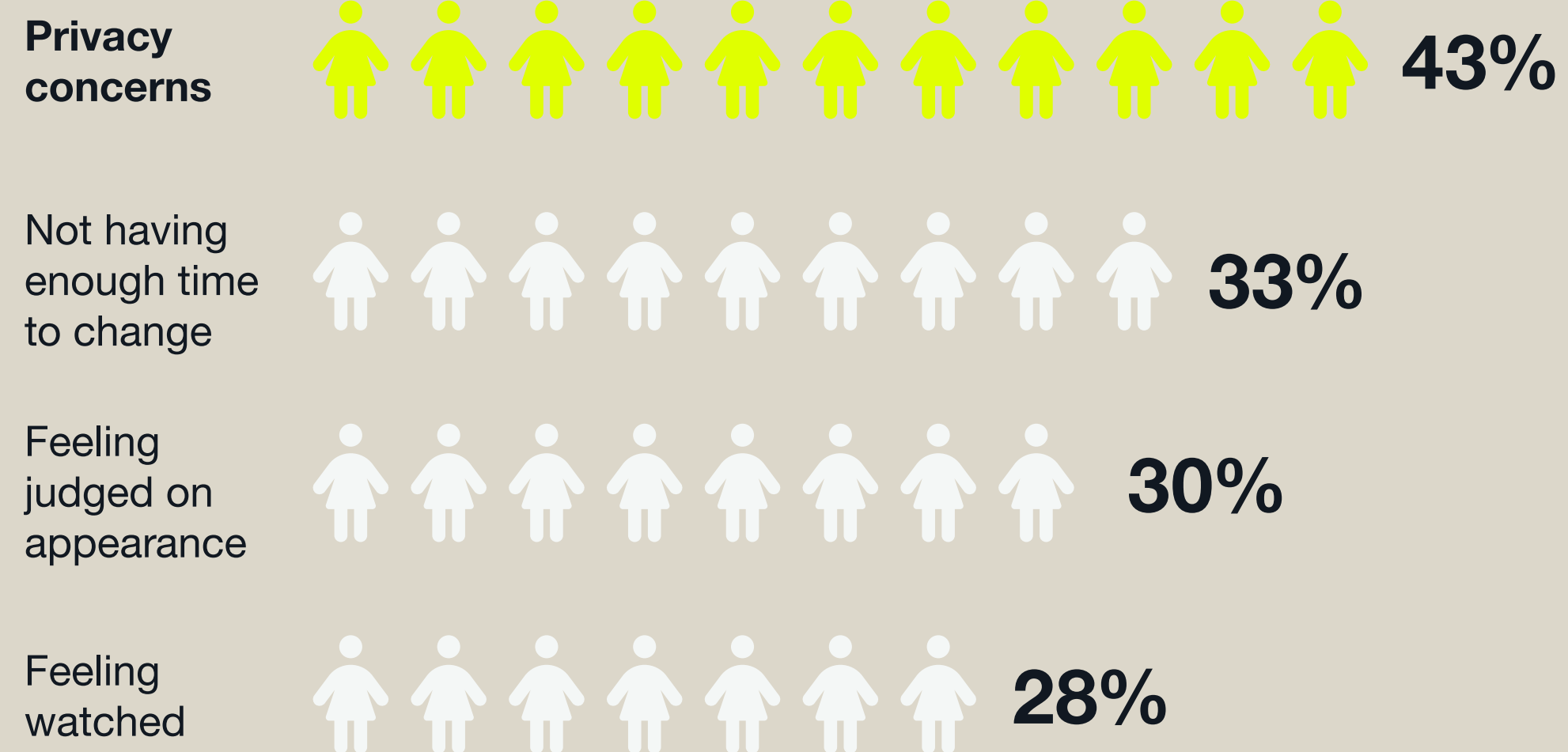
**Karen Smith**  
Girls PE Development Lead at  
William Edwards School





# What Girls Tell Us the Barriers Are

## The barriers girls face are both predictable and preventable.



“

The lack of privacy has often made me tearful as I feel quite insecure about my body and as we are so close [in the changing room] this makes me feel very uncomfortable. Coming from a person who really enjoys sport, I feel as though our changing rooms do not provide me with the mood or motivation to want to participate in my lessons due to the unesthetic atmosphere and lack of positive vibes. I hope to change this.

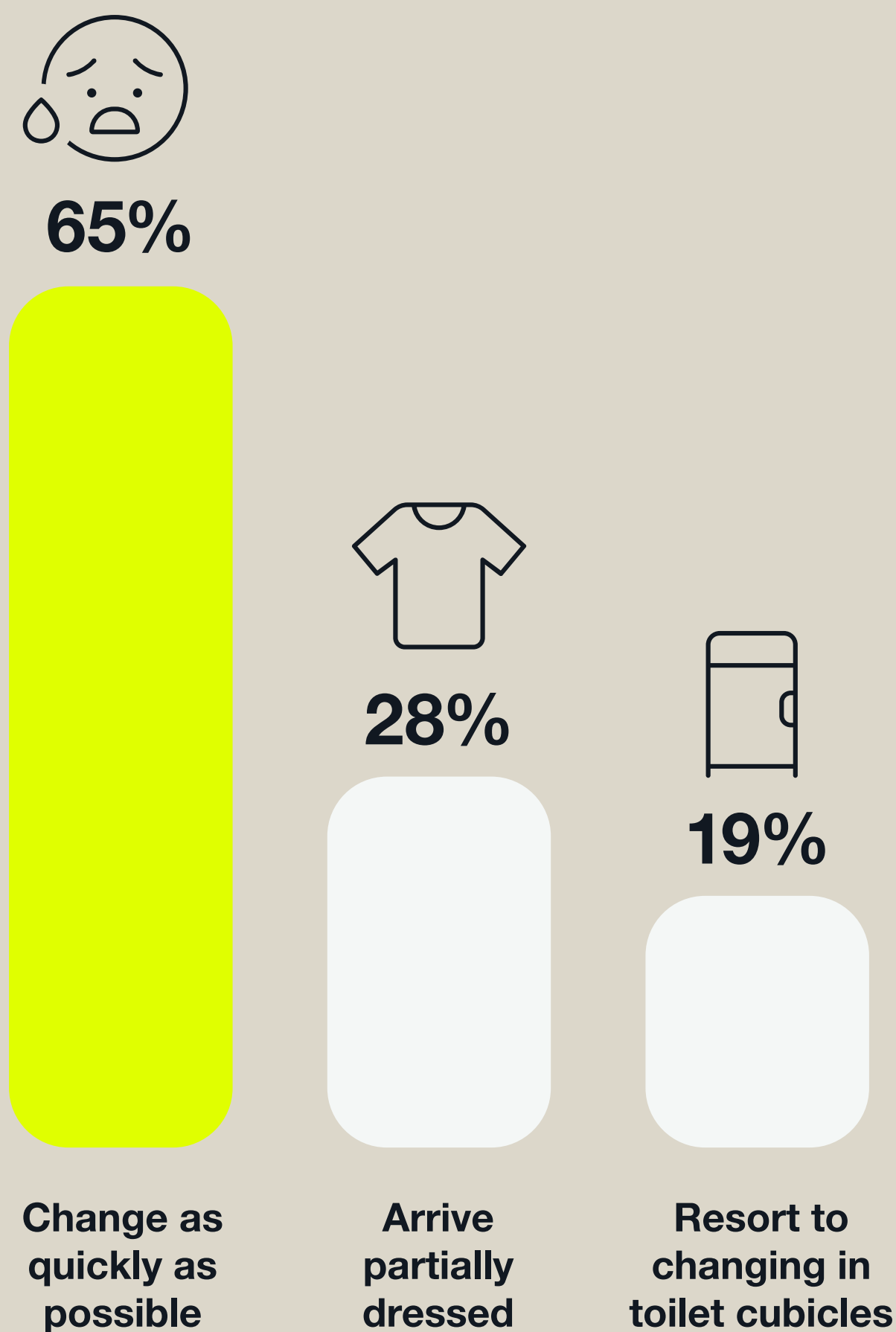
**Isabella, 15**



**I get changed with my shirt covering my top half and quickly try and put my PE shirt over, to prevent anyone seeing my body. I don't resent PE, in fact, I really enjoy PE. It gives me an opportunity to be active. But compared to other schools, I think that we have a changing room that lacks motivation and encouragement.**

**Jaya, 15**

**These concerns drive girls to develop coping strategies that speak to their discomfort.**

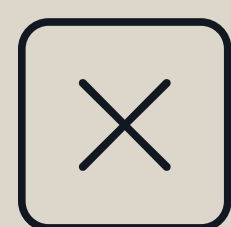


“

**Sometimes I feel watched by everyone and judged and then I often don't want to get changed due to insecurities. When I don't get changed, either I can't take part in the PE practical, or I'm faced with a detention. My teacher understands my condition so will give me extra time to get changed. Not all staff do this. This turns into a cycle where I miss out on PE lessons, all due to my insecurities that cannot be changed. Without feeling like I look good, I don't feel good and therefore don't want to engage with the PE lessons, due to lack of motivation and the unpleasing atmosphere.**

**Grace, 15**

Adding to these daily concerns, **69%** of girls miss PE due to period-related issues, with **24%** specifically citing better period product disposal facilities as a changing room improvement that would increase the likelihood of PE participation amongst girls.



**69%**  
miss PE due to  
period-related issues



**24%**  
citing period product  
disposal facilities



Before secondary school I didn't even think about how my body looked when I was getting changed for PE, I was just excited to take part in the sports. I hit puberty around year 7, a little earlier than most of my friends. I noticed that my body shape was beginning to change, my hips widened, and I put on more weight around my stomach. I started to feel much more self-conscious.

**Seren, 13**



“

**Lots of the girls use  
toilets cubicles. I actually  
get changed really slow  
because I put it off for as  
long as possible.**

**Hannah, 14**

# What Teachers Tell Us About Solutions for Girls

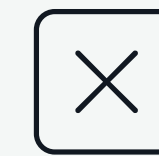
## Teachers overwhelmingly recognise the scale of this challenge.

Two-thirds (66%) of secondary school PE teachers agree that school changing rooms are negatively impacting girls' PE participation, with almost a quarter (23%) strongly agreeing.

The mental health implications are equally clear to teachers on the frontline. Over 71% of PE teachers agree that redesigning changing rooms with girls' input would have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing, with nearly one-third (30%) strongly agreeing.

More encouraging is teachers' belief in solutions, as 67% of PE teachers agree that if school changing rooms were redesigned with direct input from girls, more girls would take part in PE.

Perhaps most significantly, nearly three-quarters (73%) of PE teachers agree that listening to girls' voices as part of the school changing room design process is important to keeping girls active for life.



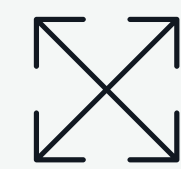
Changing rooms are negatively impacting girls' PE participation.

**66%**  
agree



Redesigning changing rooms with girls' input would have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

**71%**  
agree



Redesigning changing rooms would increase PE participation.

**67%**  
agree



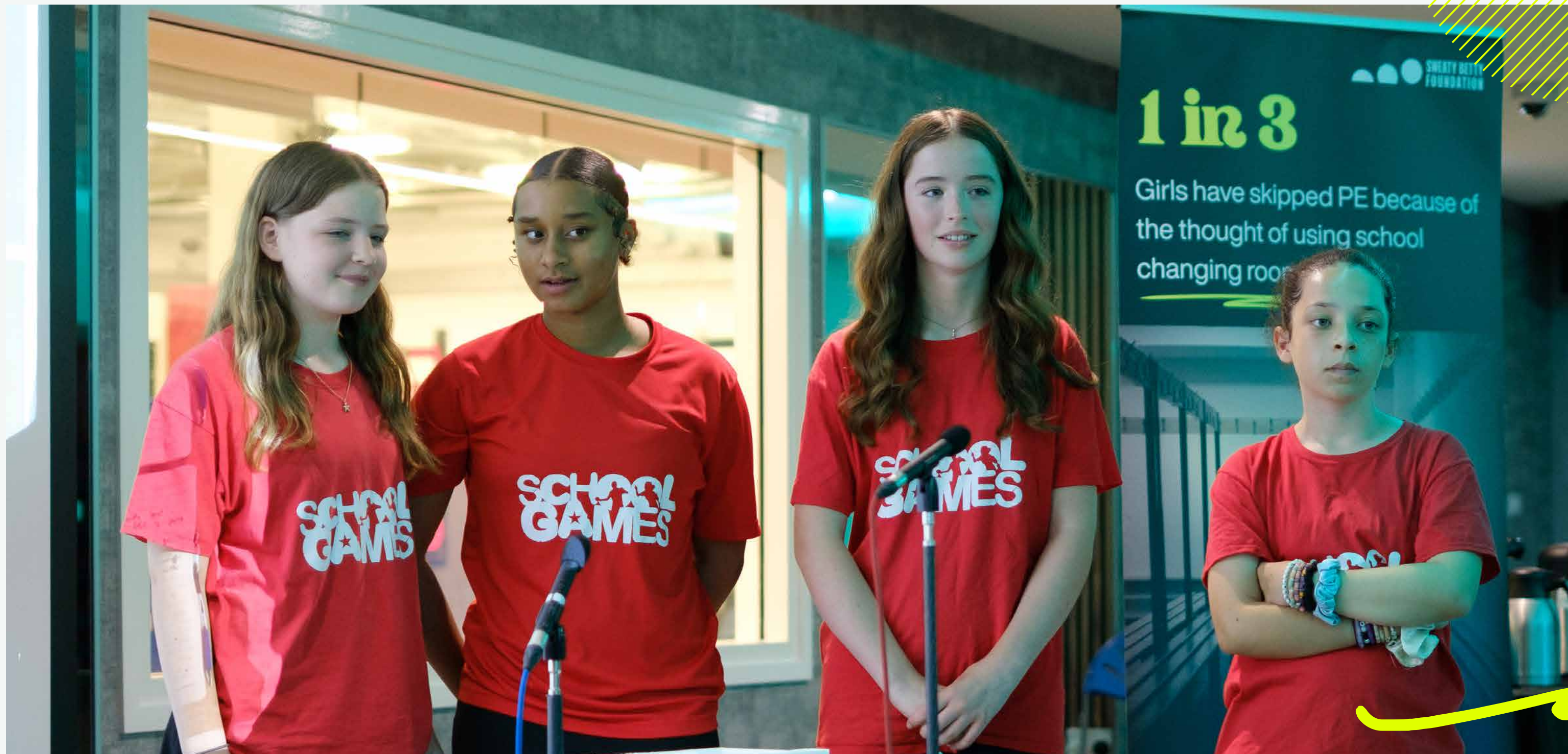
Girls' voices important in design process.

**73%**  
agree



# Sweaty Betty Foundations' Approach to Empower Girls

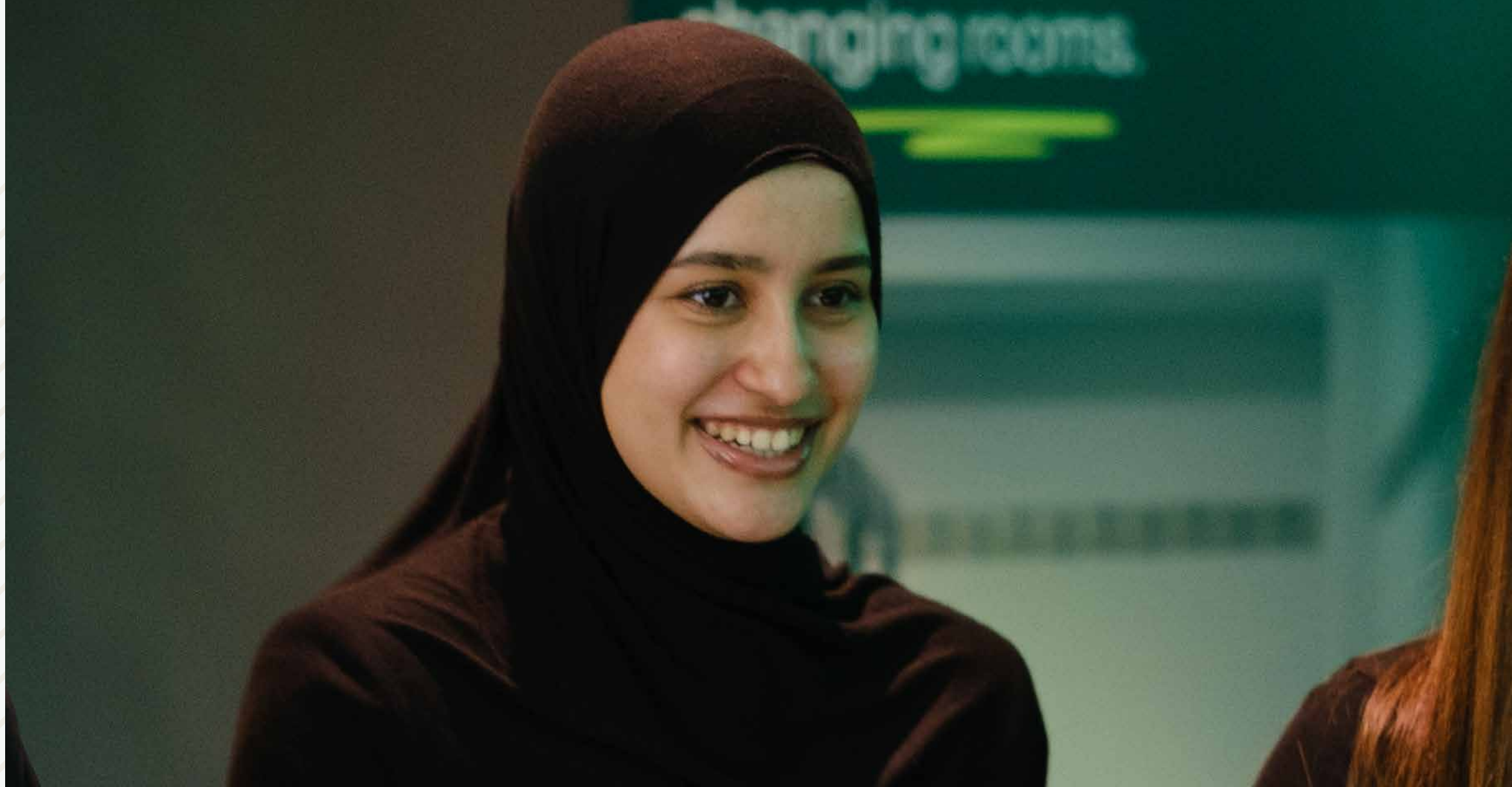
# The Sweaty Betty Foundation has co-designed new school changing rooms by working with five schools across the UK.



William Edwards School in Essex; Shawlands School in Glasgow; Harris Academy in Bermondsey; City Academy in Bristol; Ark Victoria Academy in Birmingham, all took part in the student led design competition.

We challenged the girls at these five UK secondary schools to redesign their school changing rooms. At the end of this document, you can see the designs created by girls, for girls.

The winning school, Harris Academy Bermondsey, was awarded a £10,000 grant from The Sweaty Betty Foundation with a surprise celebrity visit from Olympic heptathlon gold medallist and former BBC athletics pundit, Denise Lewis - while the other four participating schools received £2,500 to help improve their changing rooms.



# The Path Forward for Girls PE Participation: Five Pillars for Change



Drawing on a nationwide consultation with 2,000 secondary school girls and 200 PE teachers, alongside first-hand insights from co-designing and co-creating with pupils in schools across the UK, the Sweaty Betty Foundation has identified five evidence-based pillars to guide future policy and practice. Grounded in both lived experience and expert input, these pillars set out a clear blueprint for systemic change.

# Pillar 1:

## Listen to Girls, By Putting Youth Voices at The Centre of Design

Any changing room planning or renovation must begin with meaningful consultation with the girls who will use these spaces. This requires genuine co-design processes where girls shape solutions from the outset, not as an afterthought.

### Policy recommendation

Embed pupil consultation as a standard requirement within government building guidance for all new school estate projects and refurbishments.

Just as safety, accessibility, and sustainability are non-negotiable principles, so too should pupil voice be mandated in school design. Consultation should be structured, inclusive, and demonstrably integrated into final design decisions.





## Pillar 2:

# Recognise the Mental Health Connection

Changing room experiences directly impact girls' mental health and wellbeing. When planning facility improvements or mental health initiatives, considering how these spaces contribute to or alleviate anxiety, body image concerns, and social pressures puts us in a better position to design environments that safeguard girls' wellbeing.

**Policy recommendation**  
Require that assessments of pupil wellbeing and mental health be built into all school estate planning and capital investment decisions.

Facilities should be designed with explicit consideration of privacy, inclusion, and body confidence, aligning with wider government commitments on mental health and adolescent wellbeing.

## **Pillar 3:**

# **Address the Systemic Nature of the Problem**

**This issue affects nearly every secondary school in the UK.**

**Solutions require coordinated action across government departments, from education policy to public health initiatives. Individual schools cannot solve this alone.**

### **Policy recommendation**

Establish a cross-departmental taskforce. We recommend that the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport work together to set national standards for changing rooms and oversee delivery.

This would ensure consistent action across the school estate, reduce inequalities, and place responsibility firmly at a systemic rather than individual school level.





## **Pillar 4:** **Invest in Simple, Effective Solutions**

**Many of the barriers' girls face can be addressed through practical, cost-effective changes. Privacy solutions, adequate time allocation, improved hygiene facilities, and better period product provision don't require complete rebuilds; they require listening to and acting on what girls tell us they need.**

### **Policy recommendation**

Create a ring-fenced capital improvement fund to support schools in delivering simple, effective solutions. This fund should prioritise low-cost, high-impact interventions identified by pupils,

such as, cubicle privacy, mirrors, secure storage, and access to period products ensuring that every school can make immediate progress without waiting for large-scale redevelopment.

## **Pillar 5:**

# **Embed Girls' Needs in Design Standards and Building Codes**

**To achieve lasting change, consultation and co-design with girls must be written into the rules that govern how schools are built and refurbished. Without embedding pupil voice in official building standards and codes, schools risk repeating the same design mistakes that exclude girls.**

### **Policy recommendation**

Update the Department for Education's school building standards and estate guidance to mandate pupil consultation, with specific emphasis on girls' needs in changing rooms and other sensitive spaces.

This would place youth voice on the same footing as safety, accessibility, and sustainability, ensuring it becomes a non-negotiable part of the design and construction process nationwide.



# Summary



**Taken together, these five pillars provide a blueprint for systemic change. By listening to girls, addressing the mental health implications, recognising the systemic nature of the challenge, investing in practical solutions, and embedding pupil voice in design standards, government can ensure that every changing room becomes a place of safety, dignity, and empowerment. This is not just about bricks and mortar. It is about signaling to girls that their experiences matter and that their voices shape the environments where they learn, grow, and thrive.**

**Implementing these recommendations will deliver clear, measurable benefits for pupils, schools, and wider society.**



## Increased participation in PE and sport

By addressing changing room barriers, girls are more likely to engage in physical activity, supporting the government's ambition to get more young people active every day.



## Improved attendance and retention

Schools that provide safe, dignified facilities see reductions in PE-related absenteeism and fewer girls opting out of lessons due to embarrassment or anxiety.



## Enhanced mental health and wellbeing

Facilities designed with privacy, safety, and inclusion in mind help to reduce stress, body image concerns, and social pressures — aligning with the national priority on children and young people's mental health.



## Tackling inequalities

Co-design ensures that the needs of girls, particularly those from marginalised communities, are heard and embedded in school planning, supporting the government's levelling up and equality agendas.



## Better value for money

Investing in simple, evidence-based changes reduces the need for costly remedial work in the future and increases the long-term sustainability of the school estate.

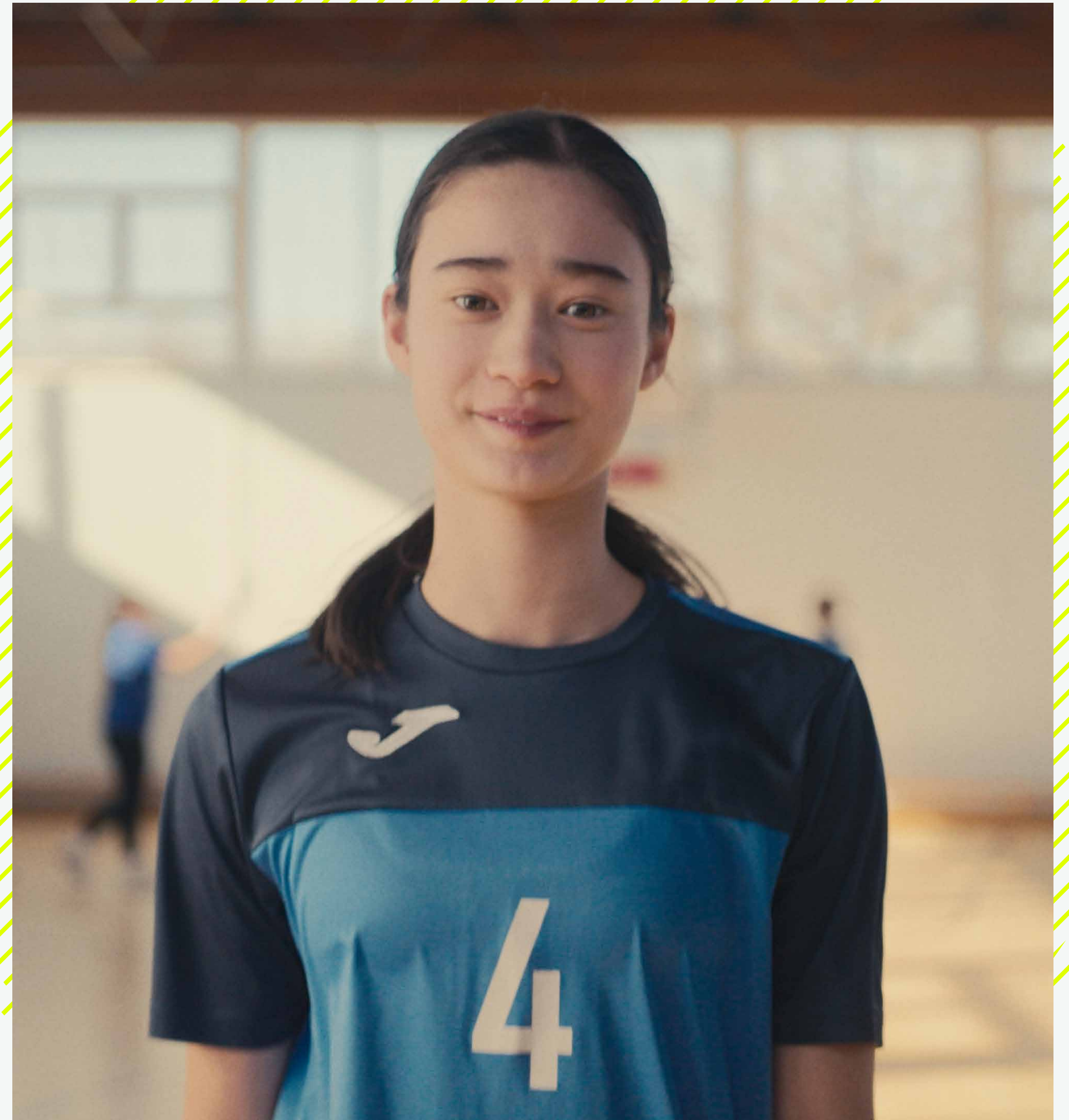


## Cultural shift in education estate planning

By embedding youth voice in building standards, we create a systemic legacy where schools are designed with young people, not just for them.

# Listen To Her

**When girls tell us that changing room experiences directly impact their willingness to participate in physical activity, they're describing the intersection of physical infrastructure, mental wellbeing, and sports participation.**





Changing rooms are not just spaces where girls get changed for PE, they are the first step on the path to lifelong physical activity and mental wellbeing.

The various government investment programmes present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address this challenge at scale, with £1.4 billion allocated for school rebuilding, £100 million for grassroots sports facilities, and national rollout of mental health support teams.

But resources alone are insufficient. We must shift decision making from adult assumptions about what girls need, to genuine co-design with the young people who use these spaces daily.

The Five Pillars for Change outlined in this whitepaper provide a practical framework for action, whether you're a teacher planning facility improvement, a policymaker designing investment criteria, or an architect working on school rebuilds.

The question now is not whether we should act, but whether we have the courage to listen to her.

## **Change Starts in the Changing Room.**



# The Girls' School Changing Room Designs



## What Needs Changing?

Based on initial discussions and student feedback, our redesigned changing rooms will focus on achieving the following key objectives:

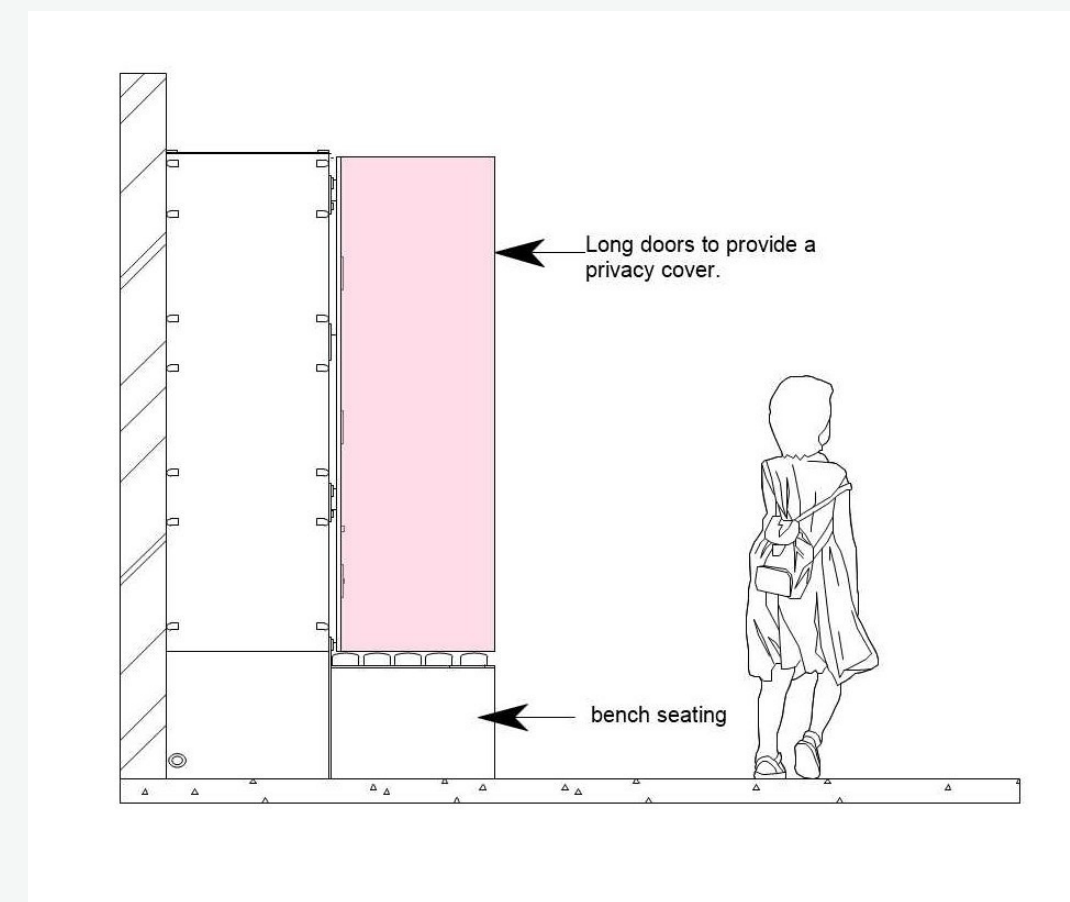
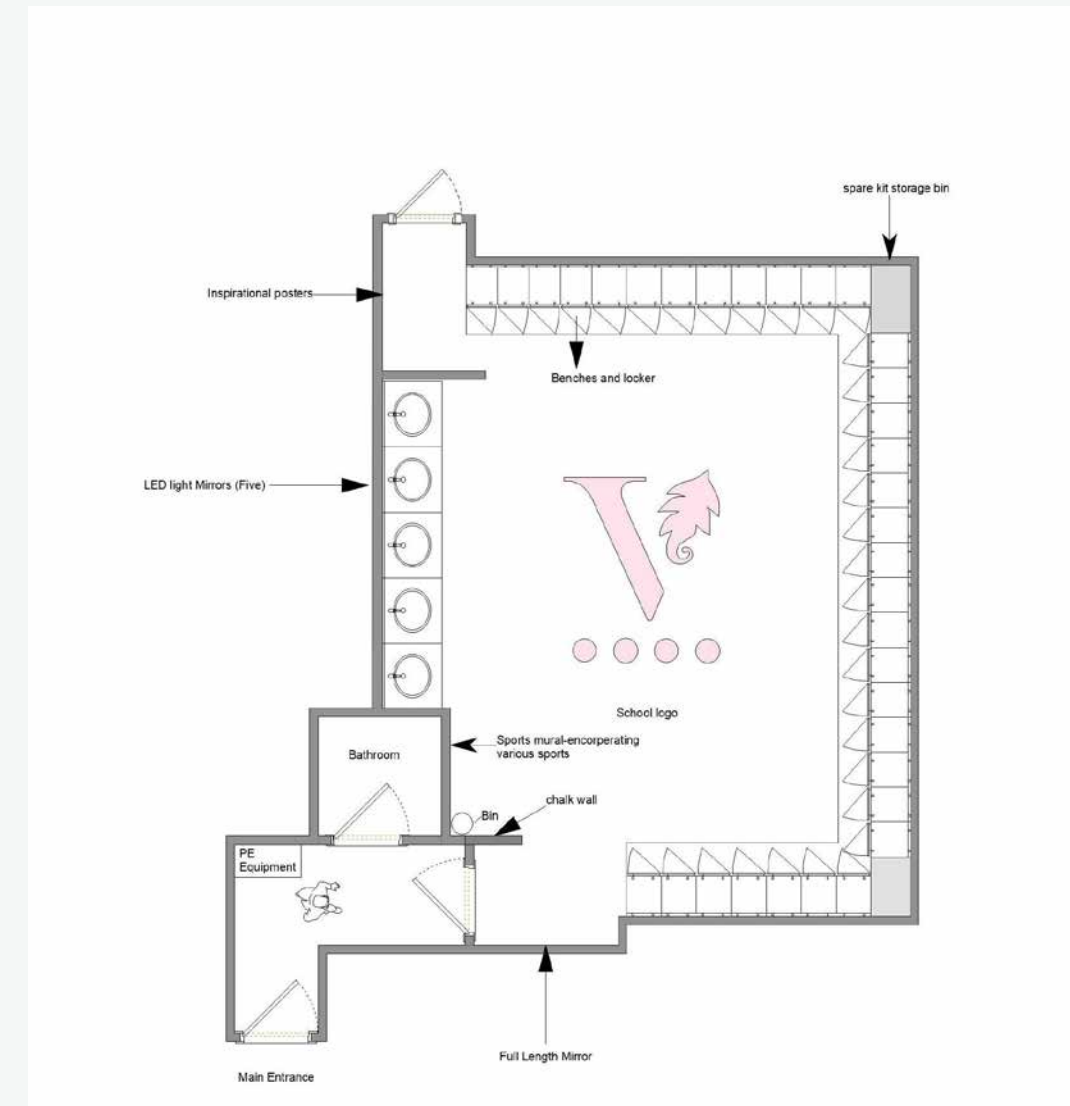
- **Privacy & Safety**
- **Comfort & Atmosphere**
- **Positive Messaging & Design**
- **Functionality & Convenience**
- **Sustainability & Responsibility**

## Our New Design

We made several key changes to our initial PE changing room design to improve functionality, safety, and inclusivity, while also aligning with safeguarding and sustainability standards.

### Key features of our design:

- Locker & seating redesign
- Frosted privacy panel
- Inclusive branding



## Colour Scheme

Thoughtfully chosen colour schemes and wall affirmations will promote body positivity, self-confidence, and empowerment, helping to foster a more uplifting space.

To promote inclusivity and motivation, we decided to adapt the Ark Victoria logo within the space. This design choice aims to make the environment more inviting for female students, encouraging a sense of belonging and determination to engage in PE.

**“This project is more than just a redesign - it’s a response to the real voices of students who deserve dignity, privacy, and pride in their school environment.”**



# City Academy Bristol



## Current Barriers

We identified the following issues with our current PE changing facilities:

- Lack of privacy
- Overcrowded spaces
- Outdated design

Our design responds to these concerns with practical and impactful solutions. This isn't about luxury, it's about dignity, inclusivity, and celebrating our community's identity.

## Our New Design

“We have reimagined the changing room as a space that feels private, welcoming, and unique to us. Our updated design reflects the needs of students today, especially in our diverse and creative school community.

### Key features of our design:

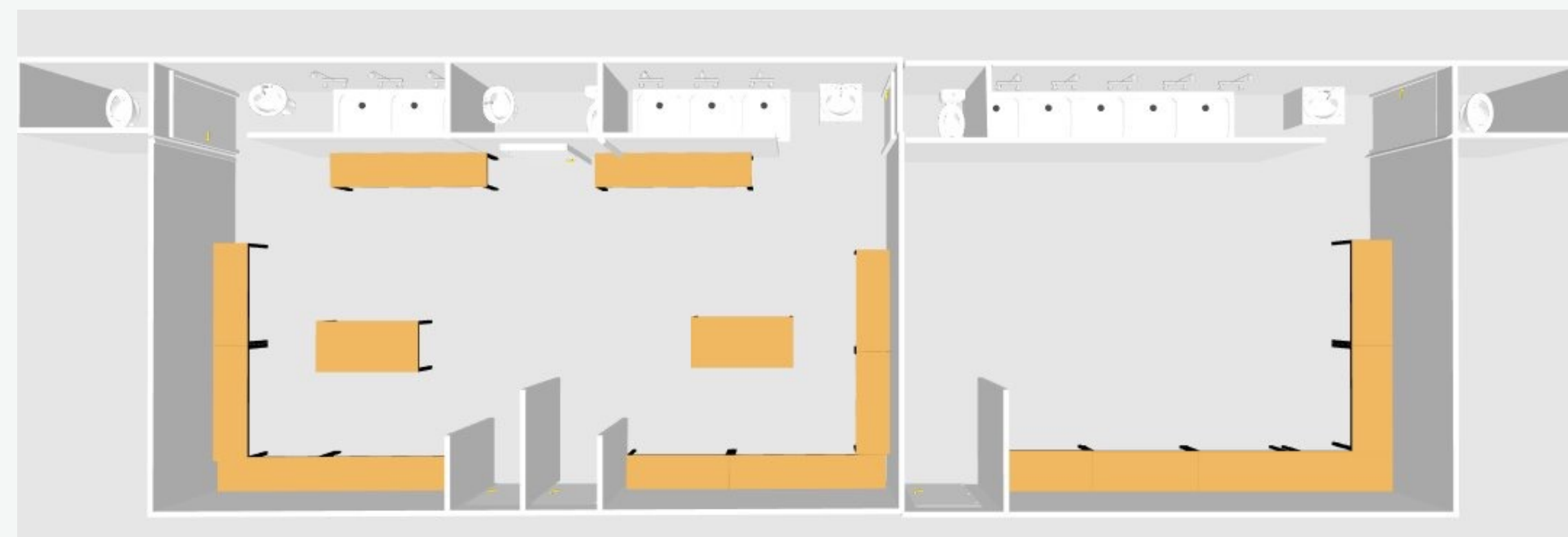
- Private changing cubicles
- Small cubbies for clothes
- Mirror with curtain
- Knocked down wall
- Decorations & murals
- Student artwork on display



## Key Features of our Mural

- **Bold, bright colours** to create a vibrant, energising space that lifts the mood and feels positive.
- **A female basketball player** representing strength, skill, and girls in sport.
- **A cheering crowd** because every athlete deserves support and we rise higher together.
- **A sportswoman jumping over a hurdle** symbolising resilience, progress, and breaking barriers.

“We’re not aiming for perfection; we’re aiming for belonging. Every student who walks into this space should feel seen, respected, and supported. Whether they’re nervous before P.E. or just beginning to build confidence, this space is for them. It’s a reminder that they are enough.”



# Shawlands Academy



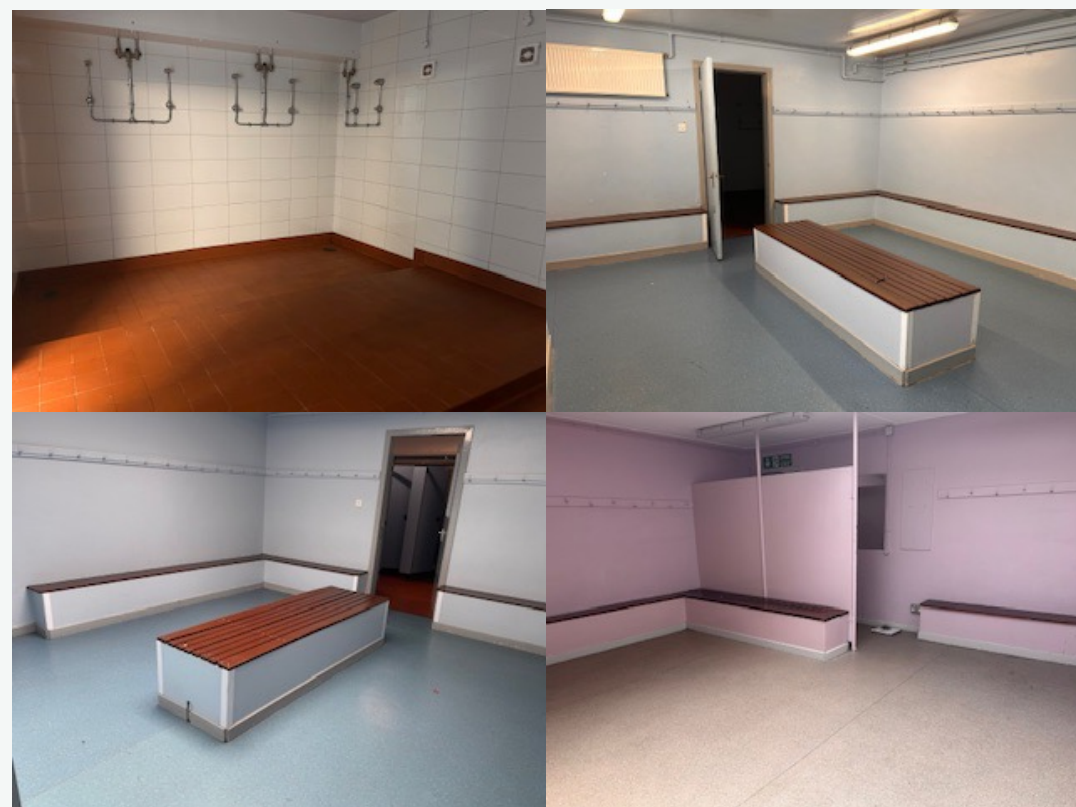
## Key Issues

93% of our girls from S1-S4 say they do not feel comfortable in their bodies.

Main problems:

- **The toilets**
- **Lack of privacy**
- **Unclean floors**
- **Gendered styling**

The changing rooms are painted blue for boys and pink for girls, and there are urinals in some changing rooms. This creates horrible smells, is not welcoming, and is not inclusive for many, including our transgender or non-binary pupils, and girls classes.



## Design Ideas

**We will add:**

- Privacy
- Signage
- Softening touches

We have worked with Leap Sports to create a national manifesto called "Safe Spaces in PE". Through this work, we have paid particular attention to providing alternative, smaller changing spaces for transgender, non-binary pupils, and those who may require quiet and privacy due to lack of self-confidence, or neurodiversity, although access to these spaces is not limited to these identified groups.



## Sustainability

A big consideration for the girls at Shawlands was sustainability. They would like to implement:

- **Limited flush toilets**
- **Rapid hand dryers**
- **Timer controlled water in showers**
- **Energy saving lighting**
- **Auto switch-off/motion sensor lighting**
- **Low flow showers and taps**



**“We love being active, but we do not want to change in front of everyone else.”**



# William Edwards School



## Key Issues

Our changing rooms are a barrier to us being active and we want this to change. They have no windows, no effective light or efficient ventilation which leads to two very bleak, musty rooms which instantly fill us with dread.

We found there are **three key issues** with our current changing rooms:

- **The toilets**
- **No privacy**
- **The floor**

## Design Solutions

Our main focus has been privacy with improvements being made to the toilet area and the introduction of private cubicles.

**We will add:**

- Cubicles
- Mirrors
- Vinyls
- Soft fabrics

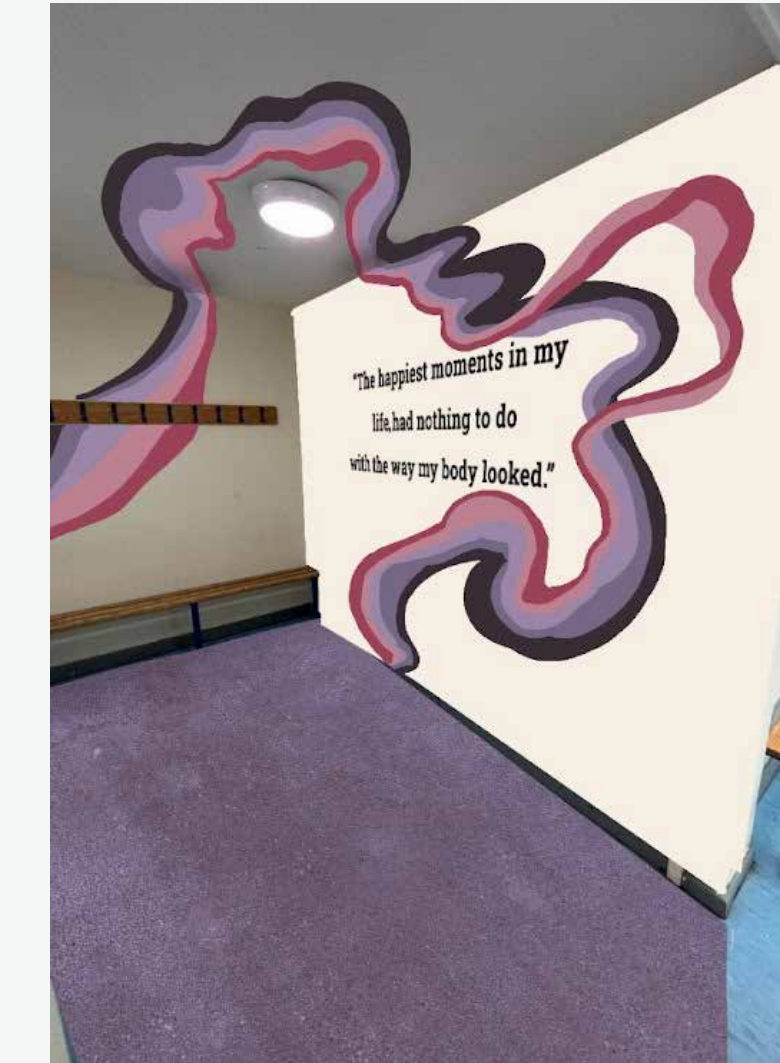
New toilet cubicles which lock easily will make us feel safe and protected. New toilet roll and period product dispensers in every toilet will mean girls have access to what they need in the bathroom.

**“This project has shown us what is possible when you are passionate and driven about a cause. It has taught us how to be resilient, stay focused and the true meaning of teamwork.”**

## Style & Design

We want the private cubicles to have a soft but practical shop changing room style so girls are comfortable and willing to use them.

The girls asked for soft feminine colours to brighten up the changing rooms. We want to fill blank walls with quotes to inspire and motivate girls to be confident and find joy in movement.



# Harris Academy Bermondsey

## The Problems

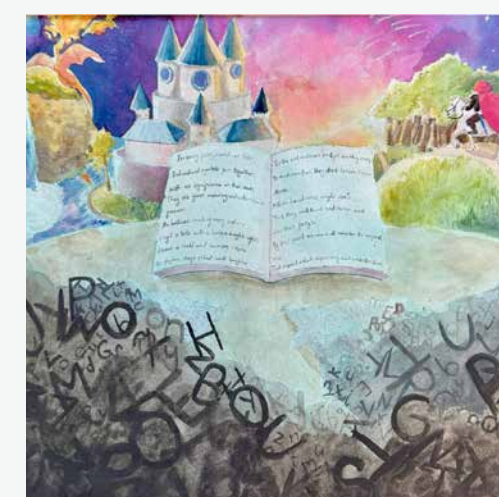
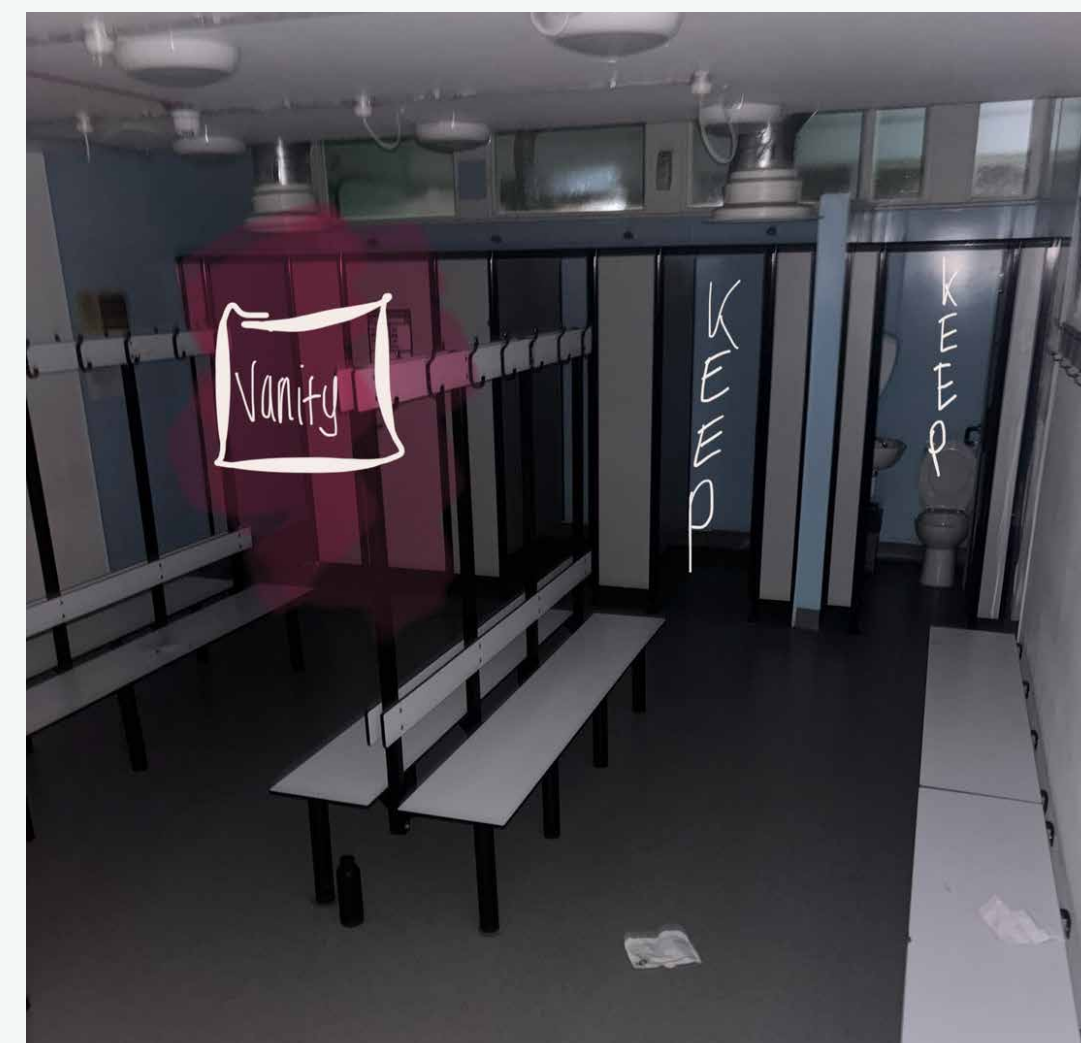
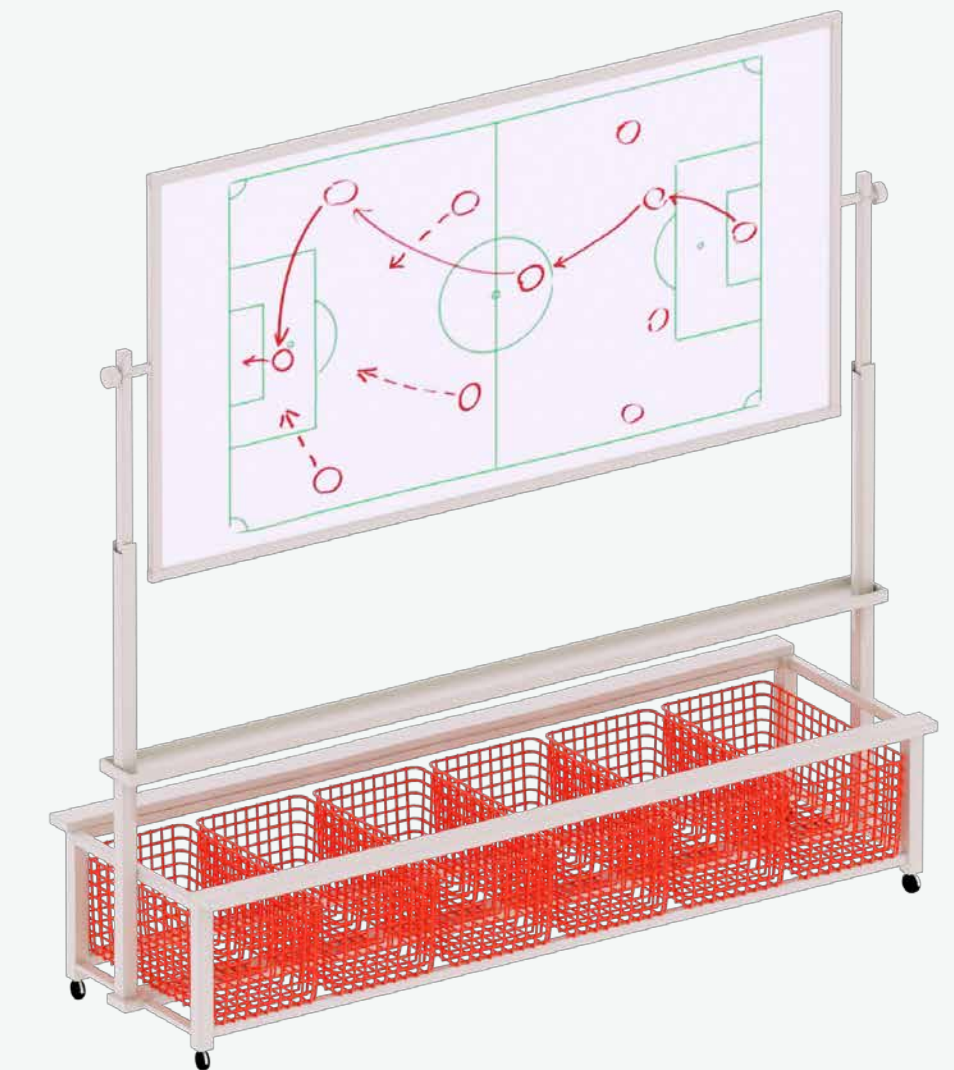
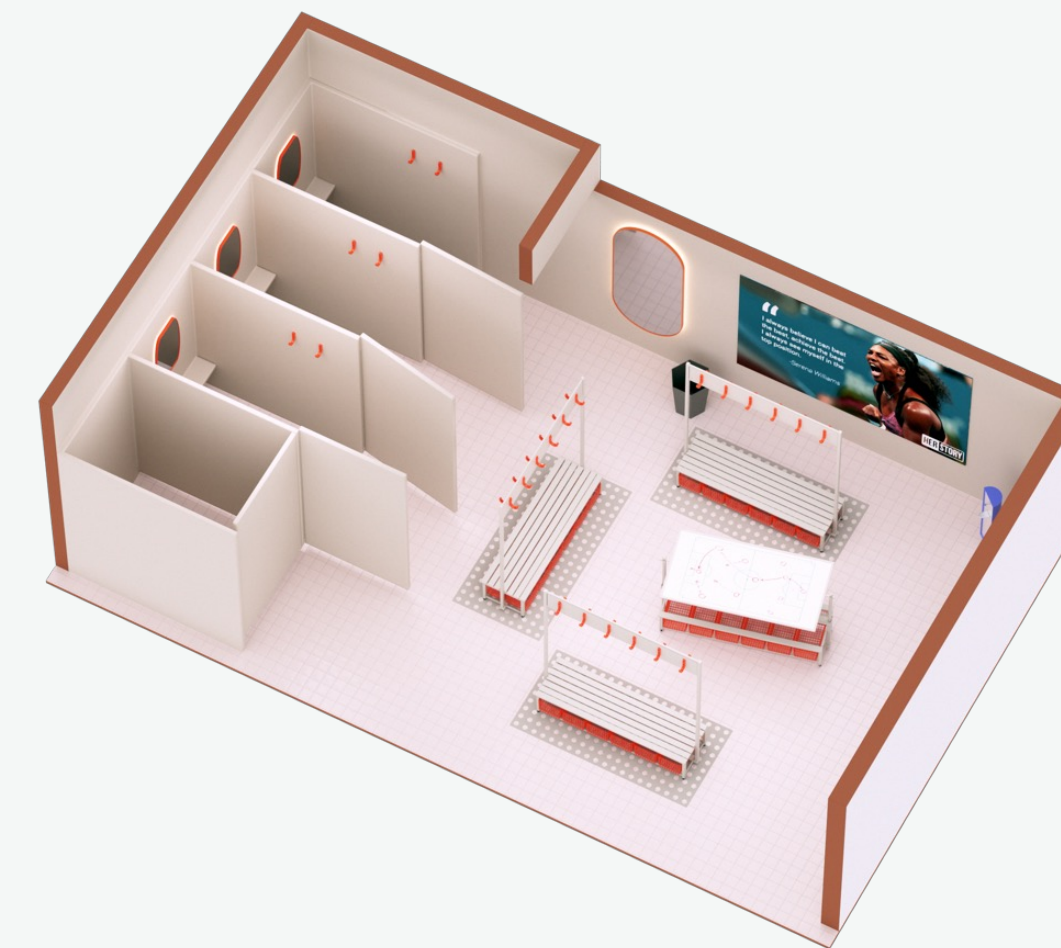
- No privacy
- Anxiety and shame
- Bullying
- Poor hygiene
- Poor

## Our New Design

This isn't about luxury, it's about listening and making small changes that have a massive impact.

### Key features of our design:

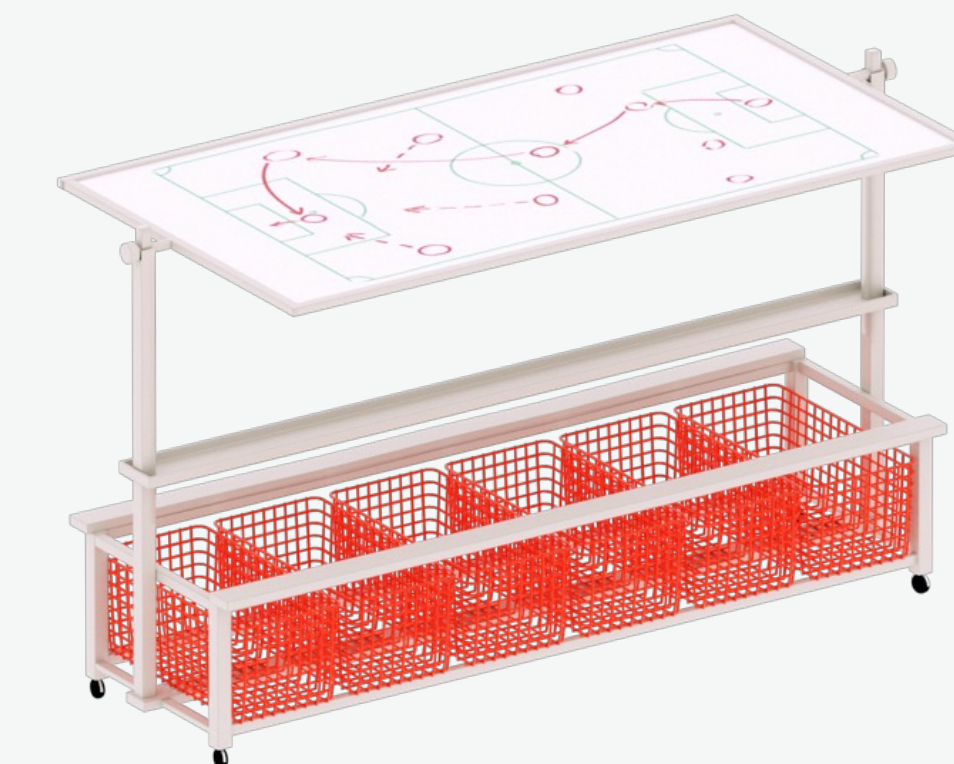
- Partitions for privacy
- Improved ventilation
- New colours & artwork
- Vanity area
- Storage



## Accessibility

We understand that everyone deserves a positive changing room experience. That's why we would make it an accessible area so no one feels left out.

We would do this by creating a moveable whiteboard so, not only a child that has accessibility difficulties can enter as it folds up, but it also saves space while having extra storage.





# About The Sweaty Betty Foundation

Established in 2021, The Sweaty Betty Foundation is an independent registered charity working across the UK.

The Foundation's mission is to empower women and girls from every background to get active and stay active for life.

We focus on breaking down the real-life barriers: social, cultural, and economic, that stop girls from participating in physical activity.

Our work prioritises teenage girls who face the greatest inequalities in access to sport and movement. Through our PACK strategy - tackling the challenges of Puberty, Attitudes, Changing Rooms and Kit - we're building a world where every girl has the chance to experience the joy of movement.

[sweatybettyfoundation.org](https://sweatybettyfoundation.org)

# Special Thanks

The Sweaty Betty Foundation's co-creation process has been brought together by a team of experts. Many have worked tirelessly behind the scenes, but all have dedicated their craft and time to supporting our mission.

## Special thanks to

**Sweaty Betty Foundation Girls Panel**  
**Shawlands Academy, Glasgow**  
**William Edwards School, Gray's Essex**  
**Harris Academy Bermondsey**  
**City Academy Bristol**  
**Ark Victoria Academy, Birmingham**  
**Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park**  
**London Legacy Development Corporation**  
**Everyone Active**  
**Zaha Hadid Architects**  
**Judy Murray OBE**  
**My Perfect Cousin**  
**Fanclub PR**  
**Shaunagh Brown**



# Sources

Survey of 1,000 secondary school girls aged 10 to 15 years old conducted by 3Gem on behalf of The Sweaty Betty Foundation between 21st -26th February 2025.

Survey of 1,000 secondary school girls ages 11 to 16 years old conducted by Censuswide on behalf of The Sweaty Betty Foundation between 11th-12th September 2025.

Survey of 211 secondary school PE teachers aged 18+ conducted by Censuswide on behalf of The Sweaty Betty Foundation between 8th-12th September 2025.

The Sweaty Betty Foundation is a registered charity in England and Wales, No. 1193601