



UNIVERSITY OF  
WINCHESTER

JANUARY 2026



# ACTIVE UNIFORMS RESEARCH REPORT

When School Leadership  
Makes a Bold Decision for  
Transformation



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# Foreword

In September 2023, the school made the decision to change from the traditional primary school uniform to an active wear uniform. At this point in my career, I had been in education for 32 years. In this time the issue of childhood obesity became more prevalent.

**When discussing moving to an active uniform, one of my main aims was getting all children active, for as much of the day as possible and fostering in every child the long-term desire to be fit.**

The principle was that if being active became habit, then it might be continued into the teenage years and beyond. I also hoped that if children were dressed in active wear, they would want to be active after school – walking, cycling, scootering home or to the park or a sports club. This would mean that most children could achieve the recommended 60 minutes of exercise every day.

Prior to this, the uniform was a white polo shirt or a shirt with a collar, grey trousers, shorts, or skirt, pinafore dress or summer dress, and a school sweatshirt. In order to change to active wear uniform we had discussions with the staff and governors, we went to parent consultation and we asked the children. There were a lot of strong feelings.

**A large number of parents were in favour of the change** – many with boys felt it would enable them to be more active every break and lunch time, some with girls who were already active said it would enable them to participate more in football at break and lunch without looking very different to other girls. One parent of a girl who was an excellent footballer said that he felt that it equalised opportunity for sporty girls without people telling them they were dressing like a boy. In essence the active wear uniform could be the same for boys and girls, particularly in footwear. Girls' school shoes tend to be less practical for running in, so being able to wear trainers helped with this. **A small number of parents were adamant that the change should not happen.** They were very vocal in their views, writing to governors, writing to the MP, reporting the school to Ofsted, and writing to the local authority. One of these parents removed her child from the school as she was so opposed to the change and stated that even though she was removing her child from the school, she would not stop fighting the change. Staff talked about how beneficial it would be to have an active uniform for all children, every day. The expectation would be that children would be dressed to be active every day and therefore could run, climb, jump, dance, do gymnastics at any time of the school day.

The school made the decision to go ahead, but in a phased process so that it was affordable. Parents who had recently bought their child a new uniform could still use it.

Once all of the school had moved across to the new active wear, the children did look smart. Everyone was dressed the same and it was much easier to enforce the correct uniform. Anecdotally, **staff noticed that children were much more active** at break and lunch, it was hard to see any children standing still. There were also some lovely situations where children (categorised obese) had not run around at break times previously due to unsuitable footwear, but now joined in the active games such as football. One of these was a girl, who became a central player in the boys' football team, showing herself to be very skilled. This led to her losing weight and also gaining self-esteem as the boys sought her out to play with them. She also then joined the girls' school football team. Children attending after school sports clubs had a full hour of the sport as they were all already in active wear. Children went to the park or to outside of school sports clubs and did not need to get changed, they were ready to do sport. Teachers stated that **it was much easier to do the daily mile, as all children were in the correct footwear, ready to run straight away**. However, the school was unable to win over some of the parents. Perhaps, if we had taken longer over the consultation this may have helped this situation. Unfortunately, the uniform change led to some lovely children leaving the school.

Making the transition to an active uniform was a challenging process that elicited strong views, both positive and negative. However, I believe, as the headteacher of the school at the time, that **this was the right decision to make**. The education system and the NHS are currently at a challenging point in terms of health, fitness and children being 'ready to learn'.

**Small changes are not making the difference that is needed, therefore, courageous and controversial actions are going to be needed.**

At the time of making the change there was very little genuine research available. There were a couple of research papers stating that wearing trainers all days damaged children's feet, but when these were investigated, they were commissioned by companies who make more formal footwear, so some form of bias can be expected. Some information was available from the NHS stating that trainers are so well developed that they are now better for children's feet than more formal shoes. Apart from this though, it was hard to find any research on the benefits of having an active uniform.

**I am optimistic that this study is the first of many.  
I also hope that this research project will lead to further change  
in schools across the country.**

*Jenny Jones  
Headteacher of St Michael's CE Junior School, Hampshire  
(2022 - 2025)*

# 1. Introduction

I was introduced to the school in 2024. Prior to this research, I had not met Jenny (the school's headteacher at the time) or anyone from the school. Most of my prior research has been in the field of technology in education, but as I've taught Physical Education to undergraduate Education students for a decade (already!), I was immediately interested in Jenny's initiative and her reflections on this bold decision for change. Together, we discussed gaining a holistic picture of parent and child perceptions on active uniforms from an objective point of view. Our shared aim was also to build an evidence-informed understanding for the claim that active uniforms improve a child's physical fitness.

A quick capture of the current state of research and literature (p.8) shows there are many reasons why always active uniforms would be a good idea. Globally, the traditional British school uniform is somewhat of an anomaly, given many educationally high-performing countries do not have any historical precedent for this type of school uniform. Children (or their parents) can choose what they wear to school. In Switzerland or France, for example, school uniforms are controversial. They are considered an affront to personal freedom. Yet there is much to discover still about the actual impact of a school uniform policy. I enjoyed this opportunity to contribute new insights to the body of knowledge.

## Research Questions

1. How do parents feel about active uniforms?
2. How do children feel about active uniforms?
3. Are there any measurable fitness improvements related to active uniforms?

## What struck me the most was the clarity of the children's voices.

They are, after all, the key stakeholders. Physical fitness is not their priority concern, but their experience of **being comfortable at school** and free to move and play is. Combining this with the parents' views and experiences shows that there is value in systems thinking. **A change can be positive and impactful if it takes the wider, complex web of social factors into account.**

The University of Winchester's values includes: 'making a difference'.

**I hope this report will contribute to the developing understanding of active uniforms, and that it may inspire school leadership.** Ultimately, our aim is to educate happy, healthy children who are keen to go to school, and receive the best chances for lifelong success.

*Dr Caroline Stockman  
Senior Fellow in Learning & Teaching  
University of Winchester,  
December 2025*

The school introduced an active uniform through a phased approach in September 2023. Lower year groups were asked to change to active uniforms first. From September 2024, all year groups transferred.

The active uniform allows children the choice of between a short, skorts, joggers, tracksuit bottoms, or leggings. The dominant colour on all of these is black, with a red trim on the side. On top, all children wear a red cotton T-shirt with the school logo, and a fleece jumper (also black, with a red side trim, and some white detailing). This is a deviation from the traditional school uniform which typically includes a blazer, buttoned shirt and tie, and pleated skirt for girls.

Instead of traditional school shoes, children can wear their own choice of trainers with grey, black, or white plain socks. The uniform policy further details long hair should be tied back with plain headbands or clips that complement the school uniform. Jewellery can only be plain small studs for earrings and/or a plain small wristwatch. In recognition of multifaith inclusion, the school welcomes headdress to be worn where required for religious reasons.

- Shorts : £9-£11
- Skorts: £14-£16
- Tracksuit bottoms: £10.95 - £13.95
- Joggers : £15.50
- Leggings: £15.50-£17.50
- Jumper: £23
- T-shirt: £5.95-£6.95

*As of Nov 2025*



## 2. Quick Facts & Findings

Research Project Duration	September 2024 – January 2025
# Schools	One mainstream primary school in Hampshire, UK
Fitness Tests	Modified-Shuttle-Test-Paeds (MSTP) Single Hurdle Endurance Jump (SHEJ)
About the children: ages	Equal spread across four year groups, from 7 to 10 years old
About the children: gender	Fairly even distribution of biologically male and female children (respectively, n=189 and n=162).
About the children: ethnicity	The sample is more ethnically diverse than the population average.
About the children: religion	Broadly corresponds to population data characteristics

Number of children surveyed:

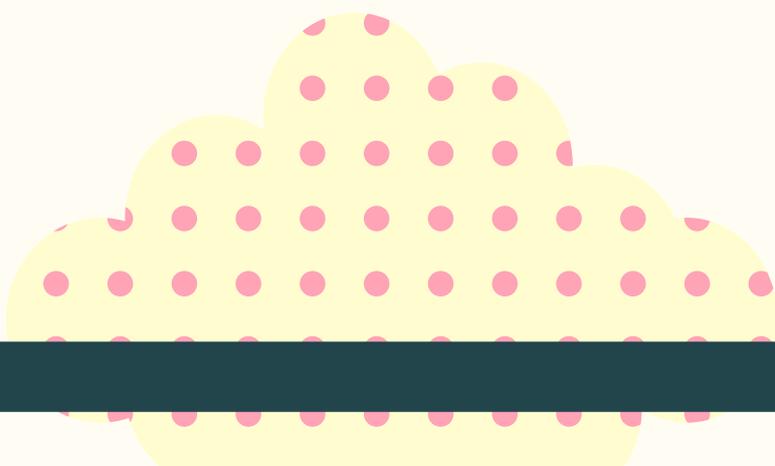
**334**

Number of parents surveyed:

**34**

Number of children fitness tested:

**342**



## Do children like active uniforms?

**70%** REALLY like it

26% is 'not sure'  
or has mixed feelings  
4% really don't like it

There do not appear to be sociodemographic markers for feeling a certain way. The 4% (n=13) of children who really do not like the uniform are 5 girls and 8 boys, of mostly Asian or white ethnicity. Their reasons for not liking active uniform are: the colour (n=4) and the feeling of the clothes as uncomfortable or too hot (n=5). One child also mentions sense of belonging: *Because, wherever i wear it feel like i belong from different school.(id871)* About half of this group of children, who really don't like the active uniform, still acknowledge that the active uniform makes it easier to play (n=7) and run (n=6).

One girl who feels 'not sure' about it states: *'I feel this way because I dont feel that comfy. I like the colours best and the texture least. I dont like that the shorts always go up so im constantly pulling them down (id890).* This shows the individual and specific experiences of children in regards to their clothing. Their views are nuanced.

Feeling uncomfortable (n=31)

Looks bad, or less smart (n=8)

Colour (red or black) (n=7)

Warm in a bad way (n=6)

Sense of belonging (n=2)

It's comfortable (n= 140)

Makes me (feel) more active (n=106)

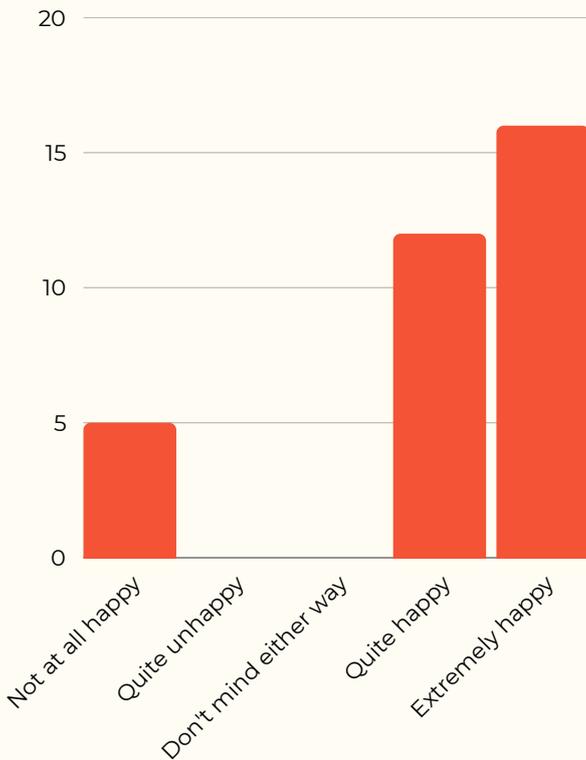
Warm in a good way (n=18)

Colour (n=13) i.e. nice, suits me

Image (n=10) i.e. it looks good

*I feel like this because I personally I think  
nomal uouninifom looks Better  
But the uouninifom / we are in feels Better.*  
♥ ♥ x slay x

For all children, the main reason for not liking the active uniform are feelings of discomfort. Next to that sensory experience, children are also aware of image: they might dislike the uniform because it looks bad or they don't like the colours. On the other hand, a similar number of children do comment on the uniform's colours as nice and that it looks good. A few children (n=4) specifically comment on not looking or feeling 'smart' in active uniform versus their old uniform: *'I like the old uniform way more because now we can't even waer a cardigen or skirt and i thinik the old white shirt with the colar looks a lot more smarter'* (id629).



### Do parents like active uniforms?

**47%** are extremely happy

**15% (n=5) not happy at all**

Other parents are generally happy about the uniform policy change.

My child is more comfortable (n=20)

It makes life easier as a parent (n=9)

It will improve my child's physical fitness (n=7)

- *'Active wear takes away the stress of sorting PE kit and extra washing. She can also go to after school sports clubs without extra kit'*
- *'She is very happy getting ready for School in the mornings. We can also go somewhere after school and not have to worry that she is wearing an uncomfortable uniform.'*
- *'It's the first time we have picked uniform and trainers and not had any complaints or Melt downs as my daughter struggles with finding comfy school shoes, so for us trainers and comfy clothes are a win!'*

Parents commonly raise that 'looking smart' is an important factor in school uniforms. Some parents do feel the active uniforms still look smart (n=5), and other parents don't (n=9). This influenced their overall happiness with the active uniform, even when recognising there are other benefits such as comfort or enhanced physical activity.

Image (n=9) i.e. looks less smart

Transition to secondary school will be harder (n=6)

# 3. What we already know and don't know

## A. About children's physical activity

### Removing barriers and enabling children to engage in play and informal physical activity is paramount.

Physical activity participation correlates with higher mental wellbeing, resilience, personal relationships, and more (Sport England, 2024). Yet the Youth Sport Trust (2021) reported that 3.2 million children do not meet the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines of an average of 60 active minutes per day. They found girls in particular face more barriers to physical activity participation than boys. In terms of ethnicity, children from a white background are more likely to find physical activity important and engage in physical activity more often than children from other ethnic backgrounds. The main motivator for children to engage in physical activity is 'having fun' (p.9). Sport England (2024) shows little has changed since then, with 3.9 million children not meeting the average of 60 active minutes per day. Children aged 7 to 9 years old are the least active (p.9). The report further confirms gender and ethnicity variations as noted in Youth Sport Trust (2021). For children aged 7 to 11, the most prevalent physical activity (69%) is active play and informal physical exercise (e.g. running in the playground, using the climbing equipment playfully, playing ball games with friends during breaks,...) (Sport England, 2024, p.47).

**In the local area of the school studied here, 48.9% of children are active** (e.g. an average of 60+ minutes per day) which is **broadly similar to the county's average** (according to most recent available statistics from Sport England's Active Lives Online). In Hampshire, 44.7% of children achieve an average of 30+ active minutes per day in school, less than the 55.6% who achieve this outside of school hours. The school was rated 'good' in its latest Ofsted report, improving its inspection grade from the previous report. The report describes the school as caring and welcoming. While the report does not specifically address physical education or sports in the schools, it comments that pupils are taught about physical and emotional health.

## B. About school uniforms in general

From their earliest introduction, uniforms served as public display: children looked and behaved 'in a way that society felt they should' (Stephenson, 2016: 50). A common perception formed that correct behaviour would be accompanied by correct appearance, and society set the norms for both (p.78). Orphaned or poverty-stricken children would be dressed in mass-produced clothing in charity schools, marking their low socioeconomic status but also showing adherence to societal collectivism and good behaviour rather than delinquency. House ties, hats, and colours further served to instil status, identification and belonging. To the developing middle and upper middle class, children's social mobility through education was a point of pride, again marked by the external confirmation of school clothing.

## WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW AND DON'T KNOW

Stephenson (2016) further points out that in the development of mandatory, formal education in Britain, academic education for girls was more controversial than for their male counterparts. A common social concern was that girls would lose their feminine traits and abandon their expected role in society as mothers and wives (p.186). Consequently, school uniform for girls aimed to assuage societal opinion that schooling would not adversely affect their developing womanhood. They were still to appear feminine, and be instilled with modesty. While some of the historical gender norms that inspire school uniforms are exclusionary and outdated, they still play into what we see today in British school uniform policies.

### **The history of the British school uniform goes hand in hand with the development of formal education in Britain.**

The school uniforms survey held in 2023 by the UK's Department for Education shows nearly all schools require children to wear school uniform (DfE, 2024). There is no legal requirement for schools in England to have a uniform, although the Department for Education (DfE) strongly recommends a uniform to 'promote the ethos of a school, provide a sense of belonging and identity, and set an appropriate tone for education' (Long, 2025, p.5). This shows the historical development and societal disposition towards having a school uniform is still strong.

However, in November 2025, the Department for Education published new guidance for school uniform policies, which (for the first time) states that schools should consider how comfortable the proposed uniform will be for children. It also specifically notes that some schools 'have adopted active uniforms which allow pupils to move freely and promote physical activity throughout the day' (DfE, 2025). It further suggests to 'take a sensible approach' and allow for flexibility in certain weather conditions, for example 'relaxing rules on blazers in very hot weather'. While this is not an endorsement or explicit promotion of active uniforms, it does imply a new awareness of the impact of school uniform policy on a child's lived experience. Perhaps also, it indicates a new sociopolitical movement that loosens some of the historical, exclusionary practices.

### **C. Impact of school uniform on physical activity**

School uniform is a known barrier to physical activity, especially in considering children's active play during break times (Stanley, Boshoff & Dollman, 2012). In a study across 135 countries/regions, Ryan et al. (2024) concluded that school uniforms are associated with greater gender inequalities in schools: 'the common use of school uniforms is associated with lower compliance with international physical activity guidelines among school-aged children' (p.595). They found greater gender inequalities in physical activity in primary school settings. In their view, this is because 'primary school-aged children accrue more of their physical activity from sporadic movements throughout the day, during which they may be wearing their uniform [and] active and risky play (e.g., hanging, balancing from heights, jumping). This may present greater challenges for girls if they are required or expected to wear skirts and dresses as part of their school uniform.' (p.595). This aligns with the national results from the Active Lives survey by Sport England (2024), discussed above. Only 53% of primary school teachers feel that the current school uniform allows

## WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW AND DON'T KNOW

the children to be active throughout the school day (Youth Sport Trust / YouGov, 2025). Equally, it is important not to overstate the potential of active uniforms to boost children's physical activity levels at school, or to overcome complex societal issues such as gender inequality. Many other factors impact a child's physical activity levels, such as peer influence and teacher influence (Stanley et al., 2012).

**Traditional school uniforms have a known negative impact on children's physical activity levels, especially impacting girls and primary-age children more so than adolescents.**

### D. Impact of active uniforms

Part of the challenge in researching active uniforms is that it is difficult to single out one, isolated factor in the complex constellation of healthy childhoods. Some tentative results exist, however. In a large study with over 2000 primary age children, Nathan et al. (2021) set up an experiment across 42 schools in Australia. They compared children wearing their traditional uniform with groups of children wearing their sports uniform by the use of accelerometers. They found small reductions in sedentary activity for all students wearing their sports uniform, and some improvement for girls' light intensity physical activity, though statistically non-significant. However, the measured intervention was only a very brief window: children were asked to wear their sports uniform for one day only when they would have normally worn their traditional uniform (called 'the intervention day'. A random day where students wore their traditional school uniform was picked as the 'comparison day'.) The researchers note this as a limitation and recommend a longer trial. They also recommend considering the out-of-school ripple effect. For example, wearing active clothing and sports shoes may encourage active travel to and from school. In a similar study, Norrish et al. (2012) utilised pedometers to measure 64 primary-age children's physical activity during school breaks. They found boys did not show greater activity levels when wearing their sports uniform, but girls showed statistically significant improvement. Although both boys and girls perceived themselves to be more physically active, the data from wearable technology showed girls were actually engaging in more active play during breaks. A key difference to Nathan et al. (2021) is the smaller sample size (64 compared with 2000+ children), but a longer measurement time (4 weeks versus 1 day).

**Currently, active uniforms are gaining traction as a popular school uniform policy, shown by a 2025 report by the Youth Sport Trust and YouGov. They found 74% of parents support the introduction of an 'always active uniform' in primary school.**

**In theory, active uniforms will benefit the children's physical and emotional wellbeing.  
Empirically, the evidence base is tentatively positive but small.**

# 4. What the parents said

## A. Data Collection

An online survey was sent to parents and guardians at the start of the school year (6th of September 2024) with an accompanying information letter about the research. The survey was co-designed by the researcher and headteacher. Data was collected and analysed by the researcher only. The survey inquired about parents' perceptions of active uniforms for their child, both in a general sense (How do you feel about your child wearing active uniform to school?) and more specific aspects (comfort, happiness to go to school, cost, disruption or distraction, physical fitness). All parents were able to respond anonymously. Participant identity was guaranteed in addressing parents directly via the school's mailing list. Participant confidentiality was assured by only sharing survey data directly with the researcher.

## B. Sample

In total, **34 responses were collected**. These were all complete and data-rich survey entries. The response rate was higher than usual school survey responses, and parents had taken their time to express their view in depth.

The sample is comprised of a **relatively equal number of parents to boys (n=14) or girls (n=20)**, and a relatively **equal age distribution** of their children between the ages of 7 and 10 years old. Most parents (n=19) state their child has already worn active uniform to this school during the phased approach. The remaining parents (n=15) state this is the first year their children will wear active uniform to school.

A limitation to the sample data is that the survey did not inquire about the parents' own physical activity. This may impact the importance they place on their children's physical activity or active uniform. Further cultural background details on the family would also be helpful to further parse the data insights, such as religion, ethnicity, heritage, employment and income, etc. Lastly, some survey data indicated that within households, there may be disagreement, for example: 'dad really likes it, mum not so much'. Survey instruments should be designed to allow for a capture of these different points of view.



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### C. Parent Perceptions

Most parents (n=16) are “extremely happy” about active uniforms, while 5 parents said they are “not happy at all”. The remainder of responses are mostly happy.

The most common reason for parents to like active uniforms is because they feel their child is more comfortable (n=20) and it makes their life easier as a parent (n=7).

- Fewer morning tantrums
- Easier to wash
- Easier to facilitate active travel
- Easier to combine school with extracurricular activities
- Don't have to remember when PE days are
- Don't have to sort extra clothes and shoes

Thirdly, some parents (n=7) like active uniforms because they feel it will improve their child's physical fitness.

## Systems thinking in public health

Change will not happen because of one single factor, like the uniform policy. But **uniform policies can have a positive ripple effect.**

It is easier to walk or cycle to / from school in comfortable, active clothes, there is more time to engage in active travel, after school sports clubs, or other extracurricular activities because practical management of clothing and footwear is easier, and easing school routine stress factors has a positive impact on parents' ability to increase their child's physical activity.

## Stakeholder perspectives

Improved physical activity was the headteacher's primary aim for introducing the change. However, for parents it's not the most important reason for liking active uniforms. This shows **the importance of stakeholder perspectives**. Introducing change has perceived benefits or downsides for different people in different ways. **Well-managed change takes these varying perspectives into account for all-round benefit.**

**The perception that the uniform does or does not look smart is a key indicator.**

- *'I like that the children are more comfortable in active wear. The only part I would disagree on the active wear is for school photos as I think a uniform looks lovely in school photos.'*
- *'I think the positive influence on the children to be active is positive, but I can't help miss a traditional uniform.'*
- *'It is a great idea for comfort. However, presentation wise the actual school uniform attire would be preferred if I had a choice. It was more formal/ smart.'*

The quotes above are parents who like (but don't love) active uniforms. The visual image of the uniform is their primary reason for not being 'extremely happy' with the policy change. Parents who love the active uniform (chose 10 out of 10 overall happiness) are more likely to comment that they do find the active uniform looks good or smart.

- *'It is beautiful to look at,'*
- *'It's important to be comfortable when you're wearing something all day but it also looks smart.'*

Look and style appear to impact overall perception of active uniforms the most. Some parents state the colour (red and black) is 'fantastic', other find it 'tacky'; some parents feel the black colour is helpful because 'it hides so many marks', other worry that it will be 'hot in the summer'.

The most common reason for parents not to like the uniform is because they feel **it doesn't look smart** (n=9).

Six parents also feel the **transition to secondary school** (where a traditional school uniform is likely to be in place) is rendered harder by having active uniforms in primary school.

*'It's great for being active and not having to buy a PE kit. Easier and cheaper. But it's not as smart and it will be a shock when my daughter goes to secondary school and has to wear a uniform and school shoes.'*

**Small things may impact the overall visual impression of the uniform.**

Some parent recommendations (even from parents who are 'extremely happy' with the active uniform) lean towards a formalisation of the look, for example mandating all trainers to be black, or having the school logo as mandatory. In parents' perceptions, this would enhance **the overall visual appeal of the uniform and promote a sense of belonging to the school**. For example, one parent points out that the red detail on the skort does not match the red on other pieces of the uniform, and this impacts the overall consistency.

Prior to 2021, there was no legislation on allowed cost of the school uniform. The current statutory guidance applies to state-funded schools. It sets out specific measures to reduce cost, for example that schools should keep the use of branded school clothing to a minimum. A new bill read in the House of Commons in January 2025 proposes further detail, such as that primary schools should not require children to wear more than three different branded items of uniform for use during a school year. This excludes PE kit, however. Schools can (still) prescribe a different uniform for boys and girls, but should not discriminate on cost. There are, however, pricing differences as shown by the 2023 school survey (DfE, 2024/Long, 2025, p.13):

**The factual cost of the new active uniform is much lower than the average cost of school uniforms for British primary school children.**

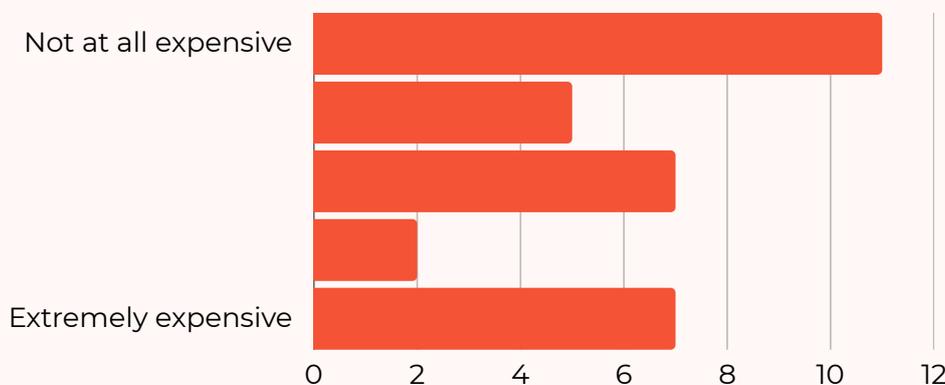
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- Joggers : £15.50
- Leggings: £15.50-£17.50
- Jumper: £23
- T-shirt: £5.95-£6.95

As of Nov 2025



**the average cost for children in primary school was £192.14 for boys and £201.04 for girls.**

Parents who dislike the uniform entirely are the most likely to find it financially detrimental: 'it is an expensive uniform', 'overpriced and unaffordable'. The jumper in particular is mentioned as pricey at £23. On the other hand, a parent to a 10-year old girl perceives a cost benefit in the choice of trainers as part of school wear: *'My daughter feels very comfortable, particularly wearing trainers everyday, girls school shoes are expensive, sometimes uncomfortable, often unsuitable in wet and cold weather: we would buy trainers for school, trainers for home, school shoes, and boots for winter, all of these would need replacing regularly as children grow, so costs a lot of money.'* Parents also note the cost saving in not having to buy P.E. clothing or additional clothing for extracurricular activities.



**The perceived cost benefit or detriment of active uniforms varies greatly.**

<sup>P</sup>The school facilitated the uniform change with financial help and a phased introduction of the uniform. No second-hand items were available, as it was the first introduction of the new uniform. However, the school allowed flexibility, for example allowing supermarket-bought leggings rather than the officially uniform leggings.

Aspects of inclusivity were also highlighted by parents.

This emphasises the importance to be attentive to individual children's needs; and **the paradox of any uniform, as it aims to dress all children in the same manner regardless of individual needs, preferences, or characteristics.**



### **Active uniforms may have specific benefits for children with additional needs.**

For example, one parent states *'My daughter is currently waiting for an autism assessment and is hyper active, moves around alot in the classroom and at break times this uniform won't feel as restrictive on her and is light weight and comfortable.'* On the other hand, the 3/4 zip on the jumper is contentious as one parent comments it causes sensory issues for their child when taking the jumper off.

### **Various parents to girls comment that the active uniform will be beneficial.**

For example, a parent to a 7-year old girl comments: *'My daughter is very active and plays football she performs better when comfortable, I feel this will help also in the classroom and being able to go straight out for lunch time to let off a bit of steam in trainers and comfy clothes to play'* and a parent to a 10-year old girl echoes: *'I think boys uniform particularly school shoes have always been more comfortable than for girls, therefore I think the active wear has been a huge benefit for my daughter, particularly in winter as it means no more tights which she's very happy about.'* Again highlighting the importance of details, another parent (who is 'extremely happy' with active uniforms overall) states *'Not as keen on the 3/4 fleece zip, much prefer a full zip as easier to take off and on in classroom, particularly for girls if they're feeling self conscious'*.

### **A child's body type and activity levels will impact comfort of the uniform.**

For example, some parents comment that the skorts are good, even their daughter's *'favourite'*, but other parents comment their daughters don't find the skorts comfortable or stretchy enough. Similarly, one parent to a 9-year old girl comments *'the officially branded leggings waist band far too tight so I have bought her other cotton stretch plain black leggings to wear'*. Arguably, these individual differences will occur for any clothing, including the traditional school uniform. It highlights that at least some optionality improves inclusivity.

### **Implications of 'sportiness'**

A parent to a 7-year old boy notes that *'He will benefit because he is very sporty and active'*, which aligns with a number of other comments. But another parent comments that *'The uniform being active highlights a pressure to be sporty all the time and this is only a small part of the national curriculum. Not all students are sport minded and this uniform excludes theses students.'* This parent moved their child to another school as a direct result of the change to active uniforms.

### **Parents believe active uniforms will help classroom focus.**

Nearly all parents (97%) feel active uniforms won't make any difference to test scores or focus during class. In fact, some parents commented that the comfortable clothing makes it more likely that their child will be focused in the classroom, as the parent to a 7-year old boy states: *'I think he'll prefer it to having to sit with scratchy buttons and toes, which I think might have distracted him.'*

# 5. What the children said

## A. Data Collection

The first data set aimed to explore the children's perceptions on active uniform. This data was collected through child-friendly paper surveys, administered and collected by classroom teachers on one school day at the start of the school year. The survey was co-designed by the researcher and school headteacher. It asked the children a first, general question: 'how do you feel about active uniform?'. The response option was outlined on a 3-point Likert scale represented by corresponding smiley faces ('I really like it', 'Not sure', 'I really don't like it'). The next section was an open-ended question so the children could explain in their own words why they feel that way, and what they liked best or not at all. Then, it asked them to rate active uniforms as 'better, same, or worse' on more specific aspects: feeling comfortable, feeling happy, feeling sporty, and whether they feel it's easier, less easy, or 'same' to run, and to play. The survey was printed as one A4 page on one side, in child-friendly font type and size, and some children also used the back of the paper to include comments or drawings which were added to the analysis.

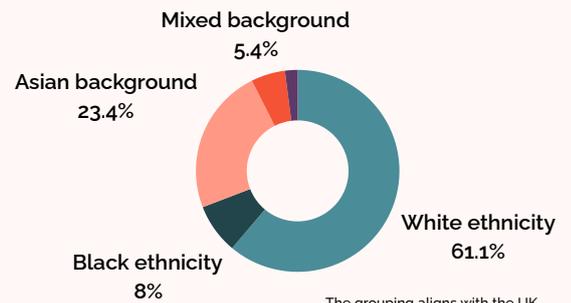
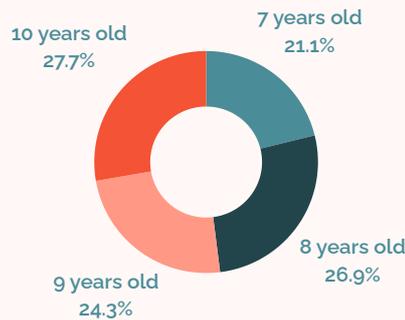
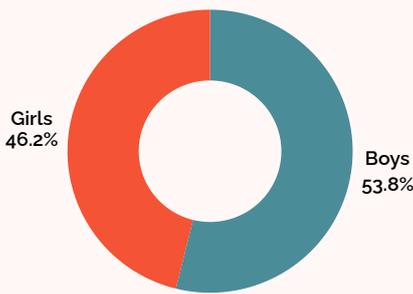
Demographic data about the children was analysed as an anonymous data set with permission from the parents and school headteacher, based on the available school data. Previous research has identified predictors and correlators between physical (dis)engagement and demographics such

as age, gender and religion. Children were assigned an anonymous identifier (e.g. 'child 256') by the school so that data could be cross-matched and analysed as one combined data set: an individual child's fitness outcomes could be analysed together with that child's perception survey, as well as their demographic details.

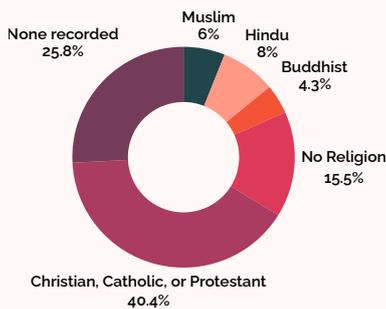
## B. Sample

Eleven children's entries were deleted entirely because their surveys indicated lack of informed consent (responding 'no' to the questions: 'do you understand what these questions are for?' and 'are you happy for your teachers to collect your answers?'). Data was transcribed into a digital format to allow digitised analysis, but the children completed their perception surveys on paper. This has a downside in that an additional seventeen children's surveys were excluded because they were mostly illegible or incoherent (such as ticking all answer options, which could be prevented in an electronic format). Their fitness data was complete and still included. Therefore, the final sample for perception data is 334 children. This includes 289 fully completed surveys, and 45 with only one or two answer options left blank, therefore near full completion. Their responses were transcribed faithfully - spelling mistakes included!

C. Children's perceptions



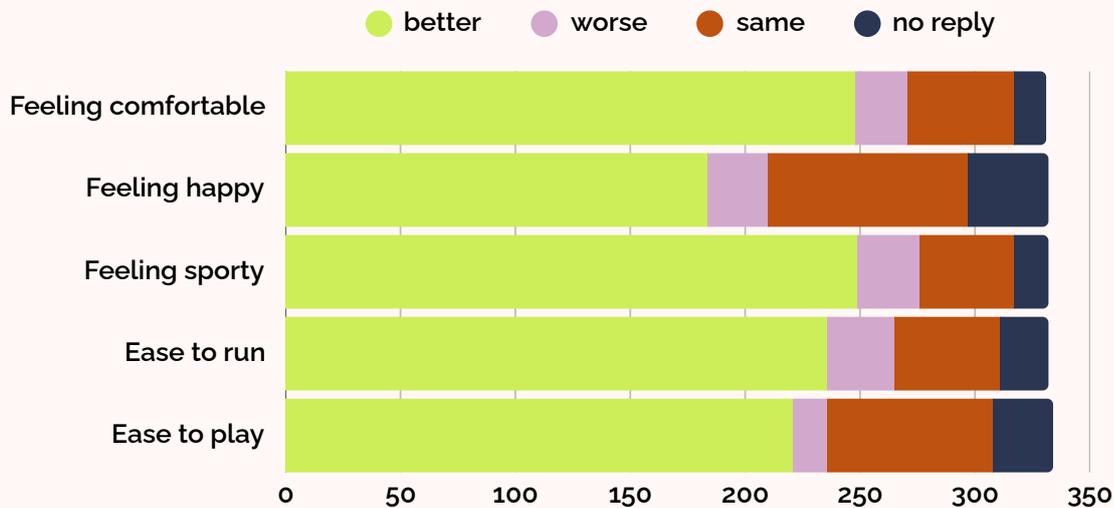
The grouping aligns with the UK Government's agreed list of ethnic groups. The sample is more ethnically diverse than the population average.



This broadly corresponds to population data according to the 2021 Census for England and Wales, where 46% of the population self-reported as Christian, and 'no religion' to be the second most common response (ONS, 2022).

About the children

The majority of children in the school are consistently wearing their active uniform, including sports trainers. Thirteen children still wear the old uniform with the traditional school shoes. The remainder of children's uniform adoption shows some inconsistent practice or mix-and-match approaches. For example, fifteen children are wearing active uniform but with the former school shoes and eight children still wear the school's old uniform, but with sports shoes. Some other children wear alternative supermarket-bought leggings rather than the recommended school uniform provider's offering.



**Children report 'feeling sportier' with active uniforms** (n=249). Their comments refer to specific sports or physical activities such as doing handstands (n=1), gymnastics (n=2), cheerleading (n=1), or football (n=10). Most often, they refer to running (n=42) and 'play' or 'playing sports' more generally (n=25). Running and playing are perceived to be easier by the majority of children (n=236, n=221). In addition, **girls are 8% more likely to say that active uniforms makes it easier to play, than boys**. This implies traditional uniform wear feels more restrictive for girls than boys, as they perceive a greater difference wearing active uniforms. Overall, the least significant perceived increase was happiness, although **girls are still 6% more likely to say that active uniforms have made them happier**.

# Permission to move

While not prompted by the survey instrument, **children made spontaneous and nuanced comparisons between different clothing.** They distinguish between active uniform, traditional school uniform, clothes they'd wear at home, and the clothes they'd wear for Physical Education. With their understanding of different clothing came an understanding of comfort and permission to move. They relate the active uniform to the benefits of the P.E. kit in terms of comfort and freedom of movement.

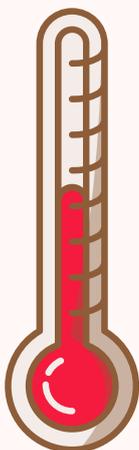
*'I LOVE the new idea because I LOVE wearing my PE kit'*

*'its much more better to play sports with because playing in Actual school uniform is kinda uncomfortable.'*

*'I love sport and running around being bale to move in active wear is sooooo much better than normal school unifrom you feel like your free.'*

A 10-year girl who still wears the traditional uniform comments on her peer group's increased activity: *'Maybe its more easier to run and play because I see others where it.'*

Though less so than their parents, children do also observe aspects of looking smart, and the transition to secondary school. It's worth noting that no direct links were made between parent data and children's data, so it's hard to establish whether children echo their parent's views, as follows: *'because in senior school u wear smart clothes but we don't [angry emoji face]'* and *'I like the old uniform way more because now we can't even waer a cardigen or skirt and i thinik the old white shirt with the colar looks a lot more smarter'*. On the other hand, an 8-year old Christian girl offers the unique perspective that it would be better if everyone could wear their own clothes to school: *'I really want my clothes. I think we should [do] get are own clothes its more [cofiel] nice.'*



**Temperature regulation** also plays an important role in their like or dislike of the uniform. Children like that the uniform feels warm (n=18) but not hot (n=8). If it makes them feel hot, they are more likely to dislike the uniform altogether. For example, *'I feel this way because I feel like more free instead of having lots of layers on and feeling hot. I like how the T-shirts are more thin.'* or *'I really like it because its cufey and your not to hot'* versus *'because it makes me hot. i dont like the fleece lining inside.'* or *'Because in the hot days i swet'*. The temperature sensations of course directly link to the children's physical activity levels as well. Increased movement might also make them feel more hot, as their body temperature raises above average.

- *'I can do stuff.'*
- *'I really like it because its just easy to do stuff'*
- *'I like it because its easier to play and do sports.'*
- *'I feel like i have energy.'*
- *'I feel this way because I feel like more free'*
- *'I like the fact I'm able to move freely and am more in active uniform and it's more comfortable to play and be sporty.'*
- *'I like that it gives us freedom to run and to do sports and its comfortable'*
- *'I can always be active and I can play and run as much as I want to.'*
- *'I can play more with my friends at playtime.'*

The majority of children feel that active uniforms have enhanced their ease of movement, and their perception of energy and ability to be active. There is a notable use of **'can do' statements** in their responses, unprompted by the survey instrument. Around 2/3 of the responses which comment on increased freedom and ability come from girls, from a mix of white and Asian ethnicities, and different religious backgrounds. Their perception of increased ability is opposed to feelings of tight clothing which hinder movement, for example *'It's not restraining me when I do sports. It's reall comfy.'*

## Children feel free and empowered in active uniform.

*'It makes me feel warm. It feels better than normal school uniform. It [it] is fluffy like my teddy. It makes me feel like I can do stuff.'*

This was written by a 10-year old black Muslim girl, who are statistically the most likely to disengage with physical activity given the known correlators with age, gender, ethnicity, and religion (Sport England, 2024).

### Tactile elements of the uniform matter greatly to a child's comfort at school.

The children's main reason for liking active uniform is that **they feel comfortable or more comfortable than in their old uniform.** 'Comfort' is a complex emotion and a difficult word to spell, yet children are able to identify their tactile experience (see speech bubbles on the left) and then use this in their argumentation for liking or disliking something. The nature of the clothing impacts their sensation of movement, and their body's temperature regulation.

*fluffy*

*soft*

*cosy*

*stretchy*

## D. Children's fitness

This part of the research examined the hypothesis that active uniforms may positively impact physical fitness. This data was collected by the same external PE teacher on three separate occasions: once in the first week of the school year (September 2024), once near the end of the first school term (November 2024), and then a third one at the start of the next school term (January 2025). This constitutes a five-month period, which notably includes a term break in the winter season, when most children will celebrate Christmas and New Year with their family. Individual data was collected for two different fitness tests on each of these three data collection points. The two fitness tests were not held in the same session, so fatigue from one test would not compromise the next test's outcomes.

If a child missed the second running test (for example, because they were absent from school that day), but they did complete their third running test, this data was still included because two data points still allowed progression analysis. Having done the baseline fitness test was, however, a prerequisite. Five children joined the school later in the school year or missed the first test, therefore did not have a baseline score, so their fitness data for that test was not included or analysed in this research. Sixteen children did not complete a second or third fitness test in running or jumping, therefore had insufficient data to analyse fitness progression. (Five of these children also had mostly incomplete qualitative data on their surveys, so their entries were entirely removed from analysis.) The other eleven children's surveys were still included in the perception analysis, but not the fitness data analysis. Therefore, the final overall sample for fitness data is 342 children. For this research, outliers have been kept in the data, to represent real-world factors that contribute to a child's physical (dis)engagement in school.



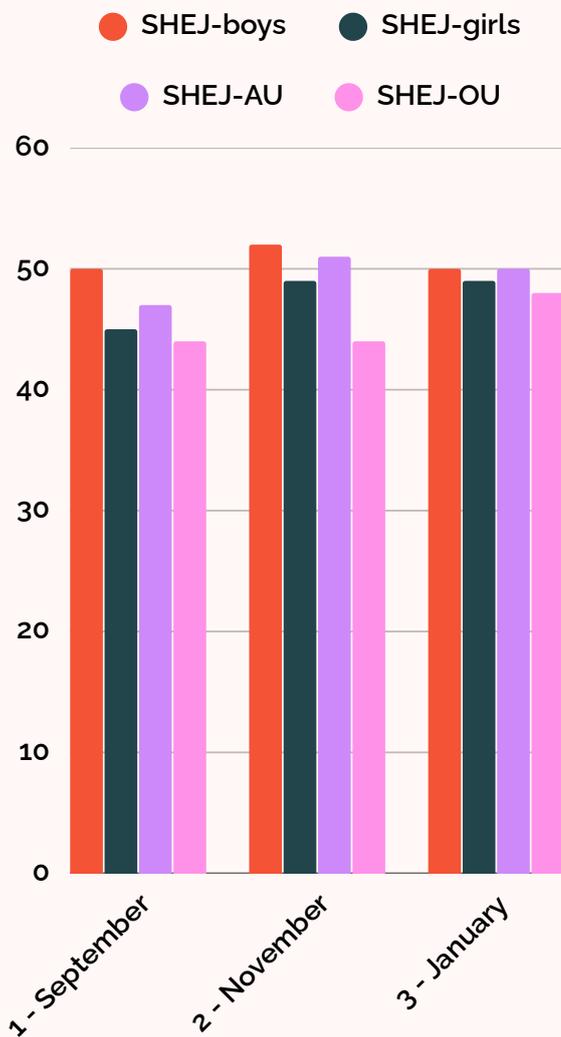
### Modified-Shuttle-Test-Paeds (MSTP)

In this test, a child will run a ten-metre shuttle, picking up a small item such as a hand-held bean bag or ball, turn around and return to the start point to place item there. This is repeated as many times as possible in three minutes. The score is the number of items placed at the starting point of the shuttle. The MSTP is considered a more child-friendly version of the classic 'beep test' or, more formally known as, the 20m Shuttle Run Multistage Fitness Test. Though it is a newer fitness test, there is good initial research on predictive validity of the test for children aged 6-12 years (Aertssen et al., 2024). Overall the test factors in speed, agility, balance, coordination, flexibility, but in a playful and self-paced way.

### Single Hurdle Endurance Jump (SHEJ)

The second fitness test is a repetitive, one-minute endurance jump over a single, low hurdle of 20cm high, on thin mats. The Single Hurdle Endurance Jump (SHEJ), in contrast to the MSTP, requires immediate, explosive energy, focused more intently on the lower body muscle groups. Still, it allows for some self-pacing across the endurance minute duration.

Single Hurdle Endurance Jump (SHEJ)



On the SHEJ or 'jump test', boys started on a higher average than the girls (on average, were able to do five more jumps in the given time).

By the second test, boys' performance had slightly improved. The girls' average score showed a greater improvement (+4 jumps per minute) and nearly matched the boys' initial average.

Girls then maintained this average for the third test after the term break, while the boys' average dropped back to their initial result. **This tentatively indicates that active uniforms may enable physical activity for boys and, but benefits girls especially.** It also shows an overall physical benefit of being in (this) school.

When comparing the children who wear their old school uniform and formal school shoes (n=13 - OU on the graph to the left) with the children who wear the full active uniform and trainers (n=299, AU), it appears the former children start on a lower average. This indicates these children were already less physically fit than other children from the start. (This comparison excludes children who may be combining elements of the old and new uniform, or are not wearing active uniform consistently.)

Children wearing active uniform and trainers showed a +4 average improvement by the second jump test, but dropping their performance slightly over the school break. Children not wearing the active uniform did improve their physical fitness over that time but did not break the average threshold. **This builds confidence in the positive impact of active uniform wear on physical fitness, given the rapid cross-term improvement.**

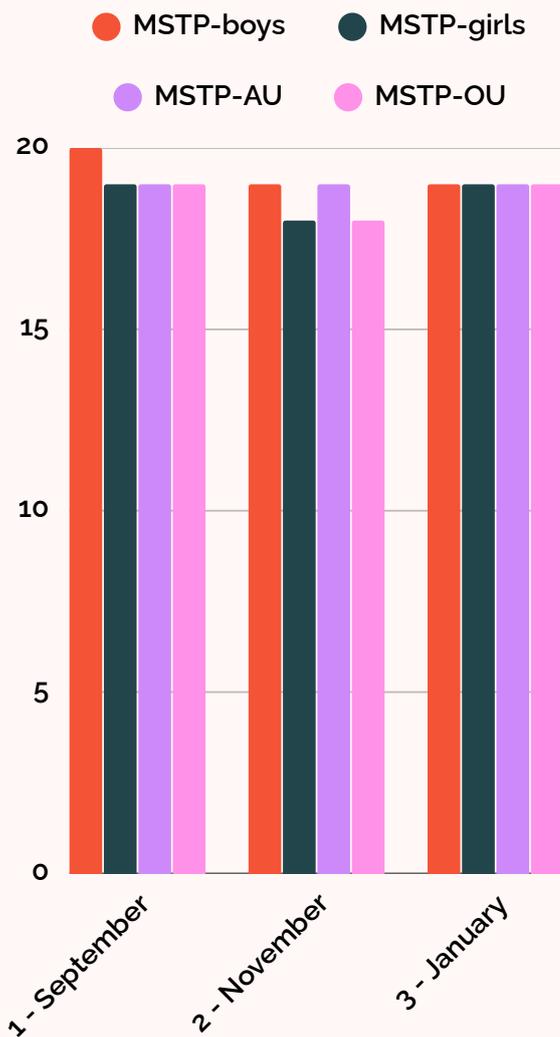
Ethnicity

There is a notable difference in the baseline SHEJ test for children of black ethnicities, and children of mixed ethnicity: respectively, 43 jumps versus 50, making a 7-jump difference. Children of mixed ethnicity also showed the greatest improvement by the second fitness test in November, making a difference of 6 extra jumps on average. They also, however, show the greatest decline in their fitness over the term break, losing the ability of 5 jumps per minute on average.

Religion

A similar trend can be observed when differentiating according to religious backgrounds. Children from Christian-Catholic backgrounds improve over the term break by 3 jumps, as do children from atheist or agnostic families. Children from other religious backgrounds improve over the school term, when most of their day is spent at school, in active uniforms. Especially Hindu children improve for the SHEJ test by a notable 5 additional jumps in the given time.

## Modified-Shuttle-Test-Paeds (MSTP)



Overall results for the MSTP are very similar for both boys (n=189) and girls (n=162), and the average result remained very similar on all three test points, neither rising nor dropping significantly. In comparing active uniform wear with children still wearing their old school uniform (AU versus OU on the graph), it appears results for the MSTP test are again very similar. Sociodemographic predictors also did not affect the outcomes of this test.

This shows the importance of not relying on a single test to acquire nuanced results. It may be that the MSTP does not sufficiently parse impact evidence to show any significance, or that it requires a longer intervention period. Other types of fitness testing such as a 30-meter sprint time or exercises involving upper body muscle groups could be considered, or other data collection through body health measurements, observational studies, or pedometer data would help to build and broaden the evidence base.

Across a sample of more than 300 children, a first consistent trend emerged showing the improvement of children's physical fitness between the first test in September and the second test in November. This shows an overall beneficial effect on a child's physical fitness when spending most of their waking day in (this) school: playing with their friends at break times, mandating physical activity during PE, possibly active travel,... Similarly, a consistent trend occurred in the small performance decline between the second test in November and the third test at the start of the next school term, in January. This indicates the term break over winter does not positively impact a child's physical fitness.

A main limitation remains that this was observed over a rather short period of time (five months), the winter season. Over term break, children wearing traditional uniform would have worn their 'normal' day clothes at home, which are considered more comfortable than the school uniform. But weather and family activities around this time of year may have impacted physical activity beyond normal parameters. A variation of fitness testing and a longer-term intervention period are recommended for future research.

## 6. Conclusion

It is not possible to attribute a child's physical (dis)engagement to one causal, isolated factor. Active uniforms can be a catalyst for positive change but should be seen in a more holistic approach to children's physical and emotional wellbeing, which includes playground infrastructure, break times, healthy eating, safe learning environments, family culture, happy friendships, etc.

**Active uniforms can indeed be a catalyst for positive change in the physical and also emotional wellbeing of children at school.**

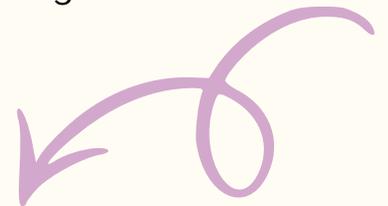
The difference in the children's fitness performance overall remains very small and should not be taken as conclusive evidence that active uniforms definitely improve children's physical activity.

However, given that 7-11 year old children mostly engage in physical activity by free play and spontaneous activity during school day breaks (Sport England, 2024, p.7), it is significant that children **consistently convey how much more comfortable and free they feel**. Their perceived ability to be active has dramatically risen by the changing uniform policy. Children feel happier, free and able to run and play.

While the MSTP is accepted as a cardiovascular fitness test for children, it did not show significant variations. The SHEJ test, however, did show small but consistent variations. Typically, this beneficial effect was more pronounced when considering the fitness of children wearing the active uniform versus those who wear the old uniform. Also, while both boys and girls improved their average, the data showed a greater improvement for girls. Marginally, girls also reported feeling happier and finding it easier to play. In terms of ethnicity and religion, there were variations that are aligned with general trends noted by Sport England (2024): children from white and Christian-Catholic backgrounds are more likely to engage in physical activity, but some tentative indicators show that active uniforms erode this difference during school term.

Children are very aware of the underlying messages of clothing and contexts, and also very sensitive to the tactile features of clothing. This has previously been explored by Mitchell, Gray, and Inchley (2015) as a way to support girls' engagement with physical activity in schools. O'Reilly et al. (2023) further held focus groups with adolescent girls (and their male peers) about P.E. clothing in secondary schools. They also noted significant commentary on 'feeling comfortable', which related to sensory and tactile aspects of the clothing. They found this to be more so the case for girls than boys.

Parents and guardians form direct stakeholders in the school uniform policy, so it is important to consider their primary motivators and concerns for the transition to an active uniform policy. **Most parents see benefits for their children in terms of overall comfort and happiness at school.** They also point out active uniforms makes life easier for them as a parent, e.g. it is easier to wash and removes the burden of remembering P.E. days and extracurricular activities that require clothing or footwear changes, or to walk home from school. This raises interesting potential in considering **active uniform as part of a more holistic school change**, for example facilitating active travel alongside. There is also a common perception that active uniforms facilitate physical activity, without causing a distraction during lessons. Particularly parents to girls appear to feel that there will be a benefit for their child. A small core of parents remains deeply unhappy about active uniforms, and they dislike every aspect of it. Parents' main worries are the transition to secondary school, and the overall image of school uniforms as 'looking smart' (or not). Cost perceptions varied greatly, even with financial support offered by the school and factually lower prices than the national average cost.



## Active uniforms can enable positive change.

**Children overwhelmingly expressed greater comfort levels at school, and an enhanced ability to be active. They framed their experience in a potent narrative of freedom and empowerment towards more physical activity. Children are aware of the subliminal messages that clothing carries, and within that message lies the freedom to move, or not. For parents too, there are many positives: for their own lives in managing school runs, and in observing their children's wellbeing. Parents' concerns over cost, image, and transition to secondary school can be addressed through positive and holistic change management.**



# 7. Recommendations



## 'Looking smart'

This is a key factor. It is still possible for active uniforms to look smart, and for a school to maintain high expectations. This may be achieved by adopting a common colour scheme, standardising colours of self-selected elements like footwear, mandating a school logo, etc.

## Colour schemes

May be subjective, however, this emerged as a factor for liking or disliking the uniform for both parents and children. To facilitate the transition, it is worth considering this explicitly as a factor in the uniform co-design.

## Inclusivity

Small elements may have a big impact. For example in this study, not having a full zip on the fleece jumper was highlighted as potentially problematic for some children. This reiterates the importance of co-design.

## Parts to whole

The uniform is comprised of many elements. Footwear plays a big part, but zippers, buttons, logos, and other details all play into visual uniformity as well as comfort, physical freedom, and inclusivity. Non-clothing elements of the uniform policy like hairstyles may further impact a child's experience.

## Transition time

Changing uniform policies can be transformative, but all change can be a jarring experience. Both parents and children need time to adjust to the change. A period of facilitation by co-design or a phased introduction can help a smooth transition.

## Co-Design

Rather than design or re-design. Children can co-design colours and elements of the uniform, they are aware of behavioural expectations through clothing, and their sensory experiences matter greatly. Equally, parents and staff are invited to embrace change by first creating the space for their input.

## Optionality

It is possible to achieve a uniform look while still allowing some optionality. In this study, all clothing came in a standard colour scheme, but choice of trainers and shorts, skorts, legging, or trousers still allowed optionality, while maintaining visual consistency for the school in other ways.

## Sense of belonging

Both parents and children relate a sense of belonging and identifying with the school through visual elements of the uniform. This reinforces the importance of colours and logos. There may be variations, for example, in having an additional logo or a colour variation to indicate belonging to specific houses or year groups within the school, or changeable elements such as a clothing badge or pin.

## Cost

There appear to be cost-saving benefits to active uniform wear, which can be factually confirmed but are also subject to cost perceptions. The transition period will also help to alleviate cost burdens, accepting a possible delay in the introduction of a full active uniform.

## Gather insight

It's important to keep track of the evidence and feedback from the initiative. This can be anecdotal information on the 'wins' for certain children, as well as larger research data in collaboration with an academic partner. It helps grow our collective knowledge as well as track your school's transformation.

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**Stockman, C. (2026) Active Uniforms – Research Report. When School Leadership Makes a Bold Decision for Transformation.**

This research was approved by the University of Winchester's Ethics Committee. The approaches follow the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fifth edition (BERA, 2024). It is aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals: (1) to promote quality of life by quality education, and (2) to promote strategies for physical health and wellbeing (UN, 2015).

*To educate, to advance knowledge  
and to serve the common good.*

The University of Winchester

January 2026

