



Gender-neutral changing is growing as councils seek to cut staff costs  
ALAMY

## Unisex changing rooms put women in danger

### Our investigation shows single-sex facilities are far safer

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Unisex changing rooms are more dangerous for women and girls than single-sex facilities, research by The Sunday Times shows. Almost 90% of reported sexual assaults, harassment and voyeurism in swimming pool and sports-centre changing rooms happen in unisex facilities, which make up less than half the total.

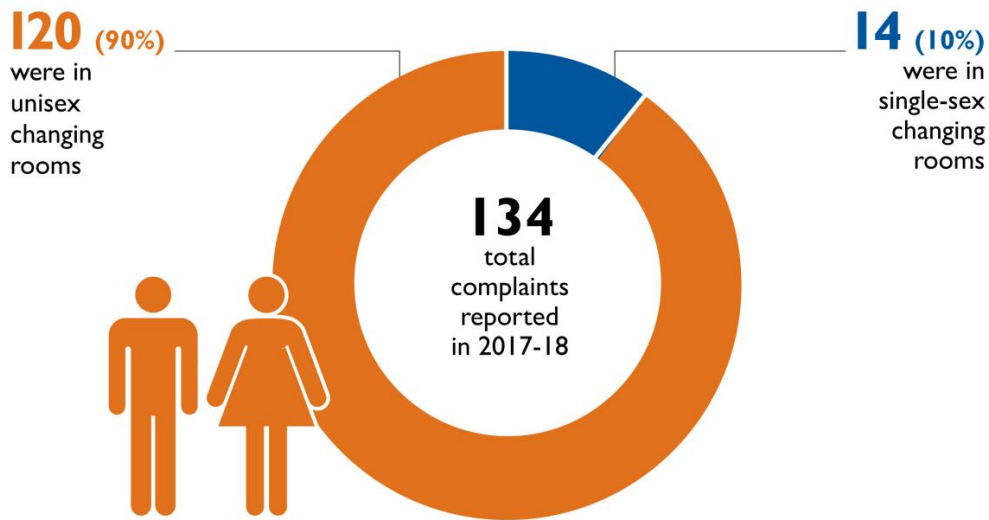
Gender-neutral changing is growing as councils seek to cut staff costs and cater to transgender people. But one MP said it risked becoming a “magnet” for sex offenders and increased the danger to women and girls.

At least two-thirds of all sex incidents in public pools and leisure centres, whether inside or in the grounds, happen in unisex changing areas. Only a handful occur in single-sex changing rooms, the figures, released under freedom of information (FoI) laws, show.

David Davies, MP for Monmouth, said the data showed it would be “wrong and dangerous” for the government to pursue controversial plans for transgender people to “self-identify” as women.

## UNSAFE SPACES

Changing room sex attacks in council sports centres or swimming pools



Feminists claim that the proposals, which are out for consultation, will turn every female facility into a mixed space, allowing any man to identify as a woman and enter. Campaigners do not suggest that the main threat to women comes from trans people, but from men.

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“These figures show that women and girls are more vulnerable in mixed changing rooms and there is a danger these places are becoming a magnet for sexual offenders,” Davies said. “It simply doesn’t make sense to enable men to have greater access to women’s spaces. The reforms to gender recognition will grant that access.”

Trans campaigners have dismissed concerns about women’s safety in gender-neutral spaces, with one prominent trans activist, Paris Lees, saying that “making bathrooms more trans-friendly hasn’t led to any problems”.



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However, Nicola Williams, the spokeswoman for Fair Play for Women, said “spaces where women are undressed should be single-sex as a matter of course. This is obvious, elementary safeguarding.”

The data emerged four days after Darren Johnson, a serial voyeur, was sentenced to 16 months’ imprisonment after stalking schoolgirls in the mixed changing area of Putney leisure centre in southwest London. Johnson was caught after two 14-year-olds spotted his smartphone poking through a gap from the adjoining cubicle. When police raided his house, they found 150 files of photos taken at the centre. A second voyeur, Anthony Gomes, was caught in the same unisex changing area a few weeks later.

Johnson was co-founder of the children’s soft play chain Eddie Catz, where he also filmed his staff and customers via peepholes.

There were 134 complaints of sexual misconduct in sports centre and swimming pool changing rooms last year, councils said in their FoI responses. Of these, 120 related to incidents that took place in unisex changing rooms and 14 to incidents in single-sex changing rooms. As well as voyeurism, offences recorded in unisex facilities included harassment, sexual assault and rape.

In 46 more cases, councils said, sex incidents were reported in other parts of the premises, such as in or beside the pool, in sports halls, corridors or car parks or an area of the building they could not specify. Some of those not specified could also have been in changing rooms. Not all incidents were reported to police or resulted in prosecutions.

Councils said the vast majority of changing rooms for “dryside” activities, such as fitness training and court or pitch sports, were still single-sex. About half of “wetside” changing rooms, for swimming pools, were mixed.

In Cardiff a 1,000-signature petition has recently been collected against gender-neutral facilities at the new Star Hub leisure centre. Bernie Breen, who started the protest, said the sexes “need to be separate because there isn’t enough staff to keep an eye on everybody”.

The figures show that sports centres in the same city have big differences in sex incidents depending on their changing room arrangements, even where user numbers are similar. In Wolverhampton, two centres, Aldersley Leisure Village and the Central Baths, have only single-sex changing rooms. Between them they had 506,000 users last year and no reported sex incidents.

A third venue in the city, Wolverhampton Swimming & Fitness Centre, has a mixture of single-sex and unisex changing. It had 517,000 users last year and 11 reported sex incidents, all in the unisex changing area.