



Credit: Rui Vieira/PA

# Fitting the female form

As a police officer the last thing you want to have to worry about is your uniform. However, for many female police officers, uncomfortable and badly-fitting garments are a reality of the job. *Company Clothing* reports on the efforts that are being made to change this situation.

**W**e all know that our police do an important job and therefore officers need clothing that is appropriate and protects them from the dangers of the job. But it seems there is a group of people within the police who often do not have a uniform that fulfils their needs, and that's women officers.

There has been a steady increase in the number of women in the UK's police forces, particularly in the last ten years, from officers on the street to those in the control room or working in crime scene investigation, but many feel that the garments they are issued

with are neither comfortable nor designed with their needs in mind.

Mark Lloyd, the procurement coordinator for Nottinghamshire Police, brought the matter to *Company Clothing's* attention as a result of feedback he had received from female officers within his force. The feedback centred on the issues of sizing and fit for basic garments such as trousers and shirts, with many women finding them both unflattering and uncomfortable. About 30 percent of Nottinghamshire's officers are women, and Mark says many prefer to wear male garments – but why should they have to?

The problem is not confined to

Nottinghamshire Police, but is nationwide, and the British Association for Women in Policing has been involved in trying to find a solution for the last two years. 'It is a huge issue,' says Liz Owsley of the BAWP: 'It started for us back in 2006 when we were touring the country doing workshops for the Gender Agenda 2, talking to female officers. There are five long-term aims of this agenda, with consistently valuing women police officers at the top of the list, and uniform and equipment at number five. However, we found that female officers were constantly putting uniforms as their top priority – how much value can the police be >>>

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►► putting in female officers if we can't even provide them with a decent pair of trousers?

There is pressure from female officers for garments that are designed to fit the female form, and the question that is asked of us, is why can't we get it right?' agrees Mark. The work that we are doing is based on the perception that the needs of female staff are being overlooked in this instance. The discussion we have been having has centred around the fact that female officers should be treated as females and should have appropriate garments.'

In September Mark organised an open day to discuss the issue. He invited female officers, members of the Nottinghamshire Police Women's Network and other local police forces along with representatives from uniform suppliers, including Harrison Field, which supplies the trousers, and Dimensions, which supplies the shirts, to come along and debate issues such as fit, fabrics, design and the procurement process. 'On the procurement side, there is the fact that we buy as part of a consortium, and so other forces have the same trousers for certain roles, and there is also the issue of our national image to consider – how the public sees the police – because the customer is at the heart of everything we do.'

One of the main issues with the trousers is that the traditional female cut – sitting on the waist – is unpopular with staff as few women now wear trousers with this design and many find them uncomfortable. They are designed this way to fit in with other items of kit such as the utility belt and body armour, explains Mark. The other problem is that of size coding, which everyone involved in the supply or purchase of uniforms will sympathise with. 'Regardless of what we do individual officers will compare sizes with the high street and there is an emotional attachment to size.

'At the open day we looked at the current trousers and got a wider range of staff comments. Through debate we focused on elements of the design, which arguably seem to be derived



**The risk of changing the public's perception of officers is often cited as a reason not to alter uniforms, and forces like the Met (pictured) have a long history in their uniform, but this should not prevent female officers from having appropriate garments.**

**“When I talk to suppliers they are as frustrated and confused as I am”**

from a male garment. It was agreed that the specification should be challenged on performance and fit grounds, and we are also going to look at different fabrics for different situations. Different roles have different requirements in design and fabrics, depending on whether the wearer is sitting down all day, or on their feet, or working in crime scene investigation where they have to kneel a lot.'

The other garment that causes problems is the shirt, which is a standard pilot shirt, worn by both men and women with male and female options. When women join the force they are asked for their collar size, as the shirt is worn with a tie, but asking a woman for their collar size is like asking a man if they are size ten or 12. They just don't know, and in most normal circumstance don't need to.

'Again, there are all sorts of things we need to look at,' says Mark. 'We need to consider the style of shirt, the sizing, and then think about things like body armour, which has its own issues such as heat management. We have contacted the BAWP because they are pushing this issue further and we want to work with them, as well as regional colleagues, to find solutions that work for female officers and staff.'

It would be easy to blame the suppliers for these issues, but that isn't

where the problem lies. The difficulty is in the police garment specifications themselves, which the suppliers have to conform to. 'When I talk to the suppliers they are as frustrated and confused as I am,' says Liz Owsley. 'They can make whatever we want and they do have female specific garments. The problem is that the police are tied into a bureaucratic tender and specification process that is complicated and hard to change. So, instead of female officers getting garments designed for them, they are often wearing men's garments that have been adapted slightly.'

'Clothing for women officers must be comfortable, fit for purpose, and fit properly. If you adapt a male garment how will it be any of these things? There's also the problem of different sizes and shapes and special measures, but if the average woman – whoever she might be – can walk into a high street shop and find trousers that fit, why can't we provide female officers with that as part of their uniform?'

'This is not an issue with suppliers, it is an issue with the police – it's about getting the procurement people to understand some of the problems surrounding women's clothing. People need garments that are appropriate to their roles, whether they are men or women, and that means different styles and different fabrics. However, getting the police to change anything is a slow and frustrating process and so we are looking at what is happening in Nottinghamshire with great interest.'

In Nottinghamshire, Mark and the force uniform working party are looking at challenging the problem specifications to see whether they can

improve the situation. 'We are focusing on specific designs for women that suit them, that work with other garments and fabrics and reflect new technologies, and that don't adversely affect the public perception of officers.'

This is one of the main concerns with changing garments, the fact that this might alter the appearance of officers, and for an organisation like the police this is perhaps more important than most. 'We have to consider the question of what the national police uniform is supposed to do,' says Mark. 'Some garments are uniform across whole swathes of the country – what effect will changing these have? We need to work together with our regional colleagues to find a solution.'

Liz agrees that there is a concern about public perception of officers, and that this may be inhibiting change, but she is less sure it is as important to the public as those in the police think. 'We're not talking about major changes. Would the public really notice the style and fabric of an officer's trousers?'

The bottom line, says Liz, is that women officers need appropriate garments, and this should be a simple matter to solve. Nottinghamshire is not the only force working on the issue, but the lack of a mechanism for sharing best practice means forces are often operating in isolation and possibly duplicating work and wearing trials that have already been carried out elsewhere – a waste of time and money. So, if there are any other police procurement officers out there experiencing similar problems, get in touch with Liz, or Mark, or *Company Clothing*, and benefit from the work that is already going on. ■