

Kent gets proactive with uniform issues

If you are a male officer, imagine having to spend your day wearing a uniform that was initially designed for a woman. This may sound funny, but for thousands of female officers across the country having to wear modified male uniforms is no joke, in fact it has been an uncomfortable reality. Kent Police has recognised that to supply 'unisex' clothing for women, which is essentially made for men, is not appropriate and has employed part-time officer Sergeant Abigail Gilson to tackle the uniform issue in the force. Here she explains what she's done to improve the lives of female officers in Kent which includes turning her hand to clothes design.

Sgt Abigail Gilson models the new style town beat coat (left) and the new high visibility full-length coat

I STARTED by carrying out a review of the uniform stores facility at Kent, looking at the service it provided to officers and staff. I then focused on the uniform garments individually and listened to what officers and staff had to say about their uniform. The majority of complaints were undoubtedly from women who argued that the uniform they were provided with just did not fit properly and was therefore uncomfortable.

My next step was to hold a workshop for women to further encourage the debate around uniform and get them to suggest where the force could make realistic improvements. The debate was lively and pointed me towards the anoraks and shirts that women wore which they were clearly not happy with.

Tasked with addressing this I decided that if there wasn't products on the market which fitted the needs of our female officers then we would get creative and design them ourselves. A small team of women from the force, including me, got together and worked with a design team from our current supplier of jackets and coats to create exactly what the female officers had asked for in high visibility motorway jackets and outdoor coats – which we have called town beat coats. We addressed problems with sleeve length, cuffs and waist size. We also asked for them to be sized differently, so instead of ordering in a



small, medium or large – female officers just ask for a 12 or a 14. The jackets are available in sizes 8-20 and smaller and larger sizes can also be catered for.



The old unisex outdoor coat in a size medium

The success of the trials was overwhelming and Kent's Chief Constable, Mike Fuller and Mrs Ann Barnes, the Chair of Kent Police Authority, supported the introduction of the new uniform.

At the same time Kent Police became the first in the country (I believe) to trial a new style of black patrol shirt which comes in male and female designs and uses high street sizing.

Again the officers testing these shirts gave them the thumbs up and from mid-summer these shirts will replace the traditional white shirts for all operational officers.

It is clear from listening to both female and male officers that when they feel

untidy, unprofessional and look like a sack of potatoes they are less likely to do their job well. Our aim has been to give female officers a uniform they are proud of. It is not about being fashionable; it's about being comfortable in your role.

For example the sleeves on the old style high visibility motorway jackets were so long many female officers had to keep rolling them up so they could write in their pocket notebooks. As one female officer put it: "I dread putting mine (uniform) on every shift as it is so uncomfortable".



Two officers model the new black shirts

"It is not about being fashionable; it's about being comfortable in your role"

My work has led me to engage with the Gender Action Group here in Kent and the 'Kent Network for Women', a force support group. This has proved invaluable and has led to uniform becoming an integral part of the agenda.

Since undertaking this project, the force has also made improvements to the female and male trousers, shirts, jackets, coats, PSU wear and PCSO clothing. Maternity wear is now also under review.

Other forces are watching with interest at what we are doing. There's really no excuse for issuing female officers with poorly fitting uniforms initially designed for men and we're doing something about it in Kent."