

# The big issue

What's big and baggy and looks like a clown's outfit? It could be your clothes if you are a pregnant police officer. But the fashion police, or more accurately the practical comfort police in Cumbria have now introduced a maternity outfit that allows ever-expanding officers to do their job and look smart as well as being comfortable. Syreeta Lund reports

Nationally, around 400 police officers, mainly female, responded to a Federation questionnaire on clothing during pregnancy. *Police* magazine (June, 2007) reported that that more than three quarters believed they should be able to wear an alternative. More than half, 51.6 per cent thought the current maternity wear was not fit for purpose.

As a fulltime response officer PC Gill Atkinson, from Cumbria Constabulary, certainly felt there was a lack of adequate smart clothing available during her two pregnancies and wanted to change what was on offer to those in the same situation.

There are 1,243 officers in the force and around 30 percent are female, with recruitment drives attracting more women to join the police.

"The whole thing around uniform can be difficult because you already feel different. When I had my first child I was in a specialist unit and as soon as you announce you're pregnant you are out on restricted duties, which is understandable, but does add to your feeling of being different," she says.

Nationally there have been reports of women wearing men's trousers to fit their growing bumps, says Julie Nesbit, on the Federation's equality subcommittee.

PC Atkinson, who has 13 years service and is a federation representative with Cumbria Police Federation decided enough was enough after her experiences. She says that in her specialist role she could wear her own clothes but was still attending courts and taking statements so looking smart and professional was costing a fortune.

As deputy equality lead for the force, PC Atkinson took the issue forward after carrying out research among colleagues and discovering that there was no maternity uniform on offer to those working in forces in the North West Region.

The mother-of-two requested samples of maternity wear from a supplier and again showed them to friends and colleagues, including pregnant officers. They were given the thumbs up and taken to the local federation meetings as well as raised at the regional equality meeting.

Tracie Laurie models the new uniform



“The new uniform is very different to what has come before – people used to be quite resistant to it because they used to get the option of wearing a tent smock and no-one wanted to wear it. I wanted it to be different for those women coming in behind me, to move things forward. We have quite a few women in various roles, not just police officers but CSOs and police staff too who are of child bearing age.”

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PC Atkinson, presented the clothing in the best way possible to senior officers, the procurement manager and health and safety manager among others - using a pregnant officer as the model.

The force listened and has recently introduced new maternity uniforms for all pregnant police officers and staff aimed at being stylish, practical and comfortable.

The new uniform (photograph on the left) includes a smart wrap top from maternity wear shop, Crave, but they are also practical and the material is stretchy to expand with the bump rather than simply expecting officers to wear clothes that are too large.

Det Ch Supt Michelle Skeer, is head of professional standards in the force and has three children so has experience of the issue. She supported the move towards a more suitable alternative for pregnant officers.

“The black trousers in the uniform are stretchy and grow with you if you’re pregnant. Women are different and they grow at different rates, some just grow right towards the end of their pregnancy. . With some trousers you can get that horrible pouch effect so these are much more stylish and professional.”

## The national perspective

Julie Nesbit, a member the Federation’s equality subcommittee, said: “It is important when female officers are pregnant that they are comfortable at work. No two pregnancies are the same. A number of forces are now offering pregnant officers a maternity uniform.

“What the officers are actually being offered is maternity wear; they are given a range of maternity clothes to chose from that don’t look like a police uniform. The force has a duty of care to protect the mother and unborn child and any garment that identifies the officers as such could potentially put them in a difficult position when carrying out their duties or travelling to and from work.”

She added that all officers should be subject to a continuous health and safety risk assessment whilst pregnant and all risks should be highlighted on this and then reduced.

“Should the officer feel more comfortable wearing her own clothes then she should be allowed to do so.

The Federation conducted a survey last year regarding the provision of maternity uniform and most respondents didn’t wish to wear uniform whilst pregnant.

“Any officer who returns to work and is still breast feeding should also be risk assessed and provisions need to be in place to facilitate this. Obviously a breast feeding woman has to wear garments to enable her to breast feed so again consideration needs to be given to what new mothers will wear on their return to work.”

**What do you think?**

**Do you have maternity wear in your force?**

**If not, what are you expected to wear?**

**Send your comments on this to:**

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