

Fit for the job

Fitness tests for specialist posts such as firearms officers, dog handlers and those on armed response vehicles could be about to change to a recommended national standard. *Police* magazine reports exclusively on research which recommends minimum standards for specialist posts across the country

In some forces the test for a specialist post could mean swimming through a river fully clothed, running ten metres with a riot shield in the driving wind and rain or scaling a 10 ft fence - basically it is currently a complete mish-mash of different fitness standards. This is one of the reasons why the PAB Fitness Working Group commissioned research to try to ensure tests conform to consistent standards across forces which truly reflect the requirements of the posts – minimising any potential for discrimination against women and older officers.

The working group, which includes representatives from the Police Federation, ACPO, NPIA, physical education and rehabilitation are now recommending on the back of that work that all forces adopt the same standards using the running multi-stage fitness test, known as the ‘bleep test’.

Sports scientist John Brewer and his team at the Lilleshall Consultancy Service, carried out the work, they had also been involved in the research to set the standard for the job-related fitness test for police recruits.

Using the benchmark of 5:4 on the bleep test, the running standard set for recruits, they assessed more than 1,200 officers in 21 forces in 2009. Those tested were carrying out a range of 13 specialist roles from the marine police unit and dog handlers to authorised firearms officers. The results from the bleep tests were then compared with the results for officers measured doing their current fitness tests in a simulated situation. For example, a dynamic intervention authorised firearms officer was measured simulating a dynamic entry; running ten flights of stairs wearing 16kg of protective kit and dog handlers measured using full body armour whilst tracking over fields for more than a mile.

The overall pass rate for those taking tests was 94 percent, and the results will not be without controversy in some quarters. There were still some differences between younger and older officers and between men and women performing firearms roles. Pass rates in the three firearms-related specialisms, authorised firearms, armed response and dynamic intervention authorised firearms showed a significant disproportionate impact on women – between ten and 17 percent in favour of men.



Photography: Getty Images

Regular training will ensure police officers hit the mark

However, Paul Davis, secretary of the Federation’s operational policing subcommittee, says that the standards are to help make the tests fair across the country in the long run.

“Most of our officers with a reasonable level of fitness should be in a position to undertake any requirements expected of them in many of the specialist posts, those that require a higher level of fitness in very demanding roles

where could be running up stairs with vast amounts of heavy kit on, we have to ensure those officers are fit for the jobs for both their sake and their colleagues safety.

“It’s about consistent standards so, for example, you don’t have an officer going for a role in one force and having to swim in a river in clothes and in another force running up and down a hill. It is being fit to do the kind of things you are expected to do in the job.”

To ensure the standards are justifiable under discrimination legislation and to confirm to health and safety legislation, fitness tests need to measure the fitness that is required for the job and they have to be operationally necessary for performance of the role. “They are not a test of health or fitness; they are designed to test if someone can physically undertake the role,” says Jayne Monkhouse, independent equality advisor working for the Federation on the working group.

The Fitness Working Group also recommended that the bleep test should be the only measure and should not be increased, altered or there be any additional requirements added to it. The group also wants to ensure officers are properly supported to increase their fitness levels to meet the new standards.

“With help and support we believe officers can make these standards. They are robust standards and defensible, we need people who are fit for the job,” says Jayne.

The PAB Fitness Working Group recommend:

- There should be an 18-month window for forces to move to the new standards
- A pass for a role is ‘time limited’ linked to a regular re-test programme
- There is a post implementation review 12 months after the new tests are implemented

Specialist post	Recommended (Level: shuttle) standard
Marine police unit	5:4
CBRN	5:4
Method of entry	5:4
Dog handler	5:7
Mounted branch	5:7
Police cyclist	5:8
Police support unit	6:3
Air support	6:4
Police divers	6:8
Marine police (tactical skills)	7:2
Authorised firearms officer	7:6
Armed response vehicle	9:4
Dynamic intervention AFO	10:5

The legislation

If the fitness tests for the specialist posts has the same pass mark for both men and women but significantly more women than men cannot pass it, it could indirectly discriminate against women if it is not shown to reflect the requirements of the job. Indirect discrimination can be shown to be a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

Case study – Alison, C019

Alison has been working as a specialist firearms officer in the Met for 15 years and a specialist firearms instructor for seven years. She has to ensure her fitness levels are kept up to standard and would be required to run to the top level, 10:5 on a shuttle run.

Do you think there should be a job-specific national standard for all police forces?

“Yes, it should be everyone working on a level playing field; it’s all about what job you are in the police to do. If you are 5ft 2 inches with spindly arms and weigh six stone you still have to lift equipment or may have to move an injured colleague.”

How relevant is the shuttle run standard to the role you carry out?

“It is difficult because someone who is six stone and quite slight could fly through a shuttle run but we really think the agility test we do is more relevant; it tests someone carrying something like an enforcer climbing over a fence in body armour. The fact is you may be sitting in your car eating Haribo one minute then the next you have to be fit enough to run up 13 flights of stairs with all the kit.”

Paul Davis notes: The new fitness standards are designed to replicate the physical requirements of the role - so if you are required to carry an enforcer whilst climbing over a fence in full body armour, then the bleep test standard has been designed to reflect that.

Do you think the new suggested standard would discriminate?

“Well we had one officer who has just retired but he was not the typical firearms officer, he is the English breakfast every morning type and six months ago he did the fitness test and passed it at a level of 10.2 on the shuttle run, the current standard in the Met. In terms of discriminating against older officers and women, it may be harder to reach the level but with training most could do it.

“I am really keen to get more women firearms officers on board and run inset days specifically aimed at women for C019 where they can try the fitness tests.”