

Equality & Diversity and the Integrated Clothing Project

The Integrated Clothing Project (ICP) of Firebuy is the first national procurement project for clothing for the Fire and Rescue Service – from station wear, sportswear and corporate wear through to personal protective equipment (PPE).

In light of the recently published *Fire and Rescue Service - Equality and Diversity Strategy 2008 – 2018*, this article looks at the project from an equality and diversity perspective and considers how a Fire & Rescue Authority (FRA) can benefit from taking up the opportunity ICP presents.

How clothing fits into the Equality & Diversity agenda

There are impressive incentives for a FRA to invest in clothing designed specifically for a diverse workforce and as a consequence, demonstrate firm commitment to the government's new equality and diversity strategy for the FRS. For instance:

- Authorities will provide leadership in championing equality and diversity and promoting inclusion for all staff, who will feel valued and better motivated as a result.
- By addressing the issues affecting areas such as clothing and personal protective equipment, Authorities will encourage a safe and supportive working environment, leading to reduced injuries and improved employee recruitment and retention.
- A fire service uniform that presents a clearly recognisable identity to the public that is modern, professional and approachable has the potential to break down barriers and foster better relationships with local communities.

The initial brief to those businesses that tendered for the ICP contract emphasised the importance of addressing equality and diversity issues. The aim was to encourage the clothing industry to move forward with us and eliminate the view that clothing should be provided to fit the male workforce and anyone else would just have to 'make do'. The successful bid by Bristol Uniforms Ltd was particularly impressive in this respect, having carried out its own research with FRS staff and also the public.

Research

When it came to designing the clothing, the particular needs of a diverse workforce required some careful thought. As part of their research, the design team at Bristol Uniforms conducted a wide ranging review of data from many sources, including the Harvard Pluralism Project and especially an in-depth study of the ACAS publication on Employment Equality Legislation (2003), which covered religion and belief for both genders. Additionally, the Disability Discrimination Act in special size offer, and

size adaptations was also considered and the information gathered was fed into the research.

Amongst their findings were that women - and particularly those of certain faiths - may wish to dress 'modestly'- in other words, to conceal the contours of the body. This may require shirts and blouses to be worn out, not tucked in; clothing that is loosely cut, as opposed to sharply tailored; longer hemlines and sleeves. Some may wish to avoid trousers; others may wish to cover their head. Fabrics must be dense enough not to be see-through.

Consequently, Bristol Uniforms submitted within their clothing range a variety of options designed to address the specific needs of our staff. Items such as the turban and hijab/headscarf, full length skirts, loose-fit blouses and long-sleeved shirts were all included as part of the standard range. Non-leather alternatives were provided where necessary, for example footwear and belts. Importantly, a range of suitable maternity wear was provided.

Consultation

During the evaluation of the bid, ICP carried out an equalities impact initial assessment, which led to further consultation on the clothing during wearer trials and subsequent engagement with FRS stakeholders. This included meeting the Equality & Diversity Stakeholder Group (EDSG), the Network for Women in the Fire Service (NWFS) and representatives of minority groups from London Fire Brigade. A national survey of the general public was also carried out by the ICP team.

With the refinements made following the consultation, a complete range of protective and non-protective clothing is offered that is suitable for all FRS employees. ICP is particularly grateful to all those who contributed and made this process so successful.

So what about PPE?

As a starting point, Bristol's designers asked a simple question – *will the PPE be suitable for everyone?* What they came up with is a range of PPE that incorporates many important equality & diversity features:

Sizing

- Cut for optimum fit and comfort for all body types for maximum flexibility and freedom of movement
- Full range of 28 sizes as standard, cut from patterns that conform to human physiology
- Sizing based on MOD National anthropometric surveys and size range extended at both ends of the scale in the light of many years experience

supplying firefighters in over 110 countries worldwide. This international dimension is important in light of the increasingly diverse UK population.

Female adaptations

- Full female size range of 28 sizes as standard, cut from specially developed blocks to conform specifically to female physiology (not simply cut-down male patterns)
- Female sizing based on national anthropometric surveys and modified to include smaller sizes as part of the standard range, reflecting the data from the Fire Service's own Anthropometric Survey of women firefighters
- All fastenings reversed
- Extra thermal protection on chest
- Braces anchor points on trousers repositioned to avoid pressure on breasts.

Equality/Faith issues

- Special sizes and fit combinations readily available 'special measure' for personnel who need them
- Able to accommodate disabilities requiring unique adaptations to garments as part of the 'special measure' service
- Materials restricted to include no leather components in the clothing
- Fulfils most modesty requirements alongside protection.

Firehood

- Variety of sizes to accommodate different hairstyles, whether adopted for religious reasons or through personal choice (within the limits of relevant Health & Safety guidance).

Helmet

- Developed to accommodate the variables in physiology between male and female (size of skull, differences in shape and balance)
- Special measure sizes available
- No leather components (leather forehead band and chin cup replaced with a non-leather alternative).

Gloves

- Full size range developed to be suitable for male and female sizes
- Special measure sizes available
- Non leather alternative.

Boots

- Two types offered for a variety of incidents, 'Firefighting' and 'Tactical'
- Firefighting boot has separate male and female size ranges and 'specials' (not cut down male sizing)
- Tactical boot has full size range and 'specials'

- Non leather alternative with separate male and female size ranges.

Achieving the goal

The Integrated Clothing Project of Firebuy has worked hard to achieve its goal to make appropriate clothing available for *all* fire & rescue staff, regardless of their beliefs, gender or disability.

As Fire & Rescue Authorities decide how they can demonstrate their own commitment to the national equality and diversity agenda, it is worth considering the opportunity that the ICP presents.