

Support for mothers returning to work

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Practice note: Authorised Firearms Officer Maternity Support Programme

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The creation of the All Armed Command Authorised Firearms Officer (AFO) Maternity Support Programme originated via an armed response vehicle female focus group in 2019.

There was a common theme about the process of returning to operational duty following maternity leave. Some officers were positive about their return to armed duties but many reported negative experiences, which resulted in them not returning. These retention issues have led to a significant loss of female AFOs across all armed role profiles.

Returning to work following maternity leave can be daunting, especially with the pressures of demonstrating skills in weapon classifications, obtaining the required fitness level, tactics and search training. This reflected my own experience after the birth of my daughter in 2015, where juggling my new responsibilities as a mother, feeling physically different following child birth and the disconnection with work – having been away from my team and training for over a year – all added to the doubt about returning to the job I once loved. The working group agreed that more should be done to support officers from the moment they declared themselves pregnant, during pregnancy, while on maternity leave and on their return.

Aim

The programme provides returning AFOs with a supported route back to armed duties. It allows them to take part in various elements of training once they feel ready, via a graduated development. This contrasts with the longstanding regulations of being expected to achieve the required fitness level and do an AFO reaccreditation ('back to ops') course immediately after returning to work, without any personalised acclimatisation.

The programme is implemented when an AFO has been absent from an operational firearms role due to having a baby. Depending on the length of leave taken, this period of absence can vary from 10 months to three years.

How does it work?

The officer opts in to the five-step programme.

The minimum requirement is achieving entry-level job-related fitness test 5.4 on the bleep test and passing the AFO standard eyesight and hearing test, as part of the one-stop shop health screening. Participants must be signed off by Occupational Health and have a risk assessment completed by their line manager.

The officer is then allocated a dedicated national firearms instructor. With this instructor, they develop an individual training plan in a Back to Operations Workbook, which plots the training required to return to armed operational status.

Extra support is offered in integrating back into the tactical training environment, building confidence, weapon familiarisation and shooting practice on the range.

If required, a physical fitness instructor specialising in post-natal physical training can be allocated to assist in achieving the required role-specific fitness level. Mental health and wellbeing support information is also made available with a guide for line managers and participants, in conjunction with occupational health resources.

The programme recognises that being away from the AFO role and training environment may require time for readjustment.

A personal touch is the key to success. Its ethos is to treat each armed officer as an individual with their own personal concerns and experiences, as shared with their dedicated national firearms instructor.

Since the programme's launch, it has already assisted officers, particularly where the required fitness level has been achieved but the individual had concerns about returning to the training environment. Specific familiarisation sessions reduced fears and increased confidence to attend

reaccreditation 'back to ops' courses.

The programme is in its infancy and, as more women are attracted to a career in firearms, we anticipate that AFO Maternity Support Programme will support the retention of officers returning post-maternity leave. It also aims to encourage those considering an armed role by reinforcing that officers will be valued and supported throughout their career, including return to armed operations from maternity leave.

- This article was peer reviewed by Detective Chief Inspector Heather Whoriskey, West Yorkshire Police

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