



New Clothing Solution: a new service for the 21st century

The New Clothing Solution project is an ambitious new initiative to modernise and fully integrate the Defence Clothing supply chain. In this special feature, Terry Hughes, Assistant Head of Commercial, Joint Support Chain Commodities Cluster, tells MOD DCB more.

The New Clothing Solution (NCS) project seeks to improve the service provided to tri-Service personnel and uniformed MOD civilians and increase the efficiency of inventory management, warehousing, order satisfaction, distribution and returns. This will result in increased levels of satisfaction among the user community and better value for money for the taxpayer.

Entitlement to clothing varies across the services and also according to individual role and location, but most items of uniform are supplied and maintained free of charge, as they have been for many years. Currently service personnel visit unit, Garrison or base clothing stores to obtain replacement items, which for many can be inconvenient and it could be that the required item is not in stock thus necessitating a return visit.

As several different information systems are used in the supply chain that feeds the stores, management is sub-optimal and NCS seeks to follow modern examples of best practice by capturing accurate demand data at the point of consumption, and then exploiting the information throughout a closely integrated supply chain. With the technology that is now available there is no reason why a database that holds accurate statistics on sizes and demand patterns shouldn't be available so that the Services do not need to stockpile huge amounts of clothing to accommodate the unknown.

By introducing an online clothing catalogue that personnel can access 24/7, order what they need and have it delivered to their door within 3-4 days, the whole concept of clothing provision is quickly brought into the 21st century. As a result, there will be much less stock in the system, reducing our overheads, and a much clearer sight of the clothing and size demands that are actually required by the tri-Service and other uniformed personnel.

NCS will introduce a personalised online catalogue that only displays items of clothing the individual Service person is entitled to. It also stores the user's measurements and recommends the correct size garments for orders based on previous order history. The online system allows Service personnel to have their orders delivered to an address of their choice, eg unit or home. A pilot scheme has been running since the end of March 2008 and already has 3000 customers.

It has been used to gather information about an online ordering system, and draws on the central stock held at the Defence Stores and Distribution Agency (DSDA) in Bicester. After the first six weeks, 98 per cent of users rated the system easy or very easy to use and 84 per cent were satisfied or better with the service it provided. Since then, performance has varied by only 1-2 per cent. This pilot was superseded by an interim solution – iNCS – in January 2010 so that the benefits can be demonstrated in a wider variety of circumstances and the project team can continue to gather information to refine requirements. More units are being added, and the feedback on the system still remains strong with high satisfaction and usability. iNCS is intended to bridge the gap until full implementation of NCS from mid-2012.

A competition to select the NCS provider was launched in December 2009.

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The NCS project team is looking for a single contractor or consortium that can supply the full range of requirements – from boots and socks to uniforms, backpacks and berets – and handle the considerable logistics operation necessary to store and deliver approximately 2.6 million items annually, worth up to £100 million per year. The winning bidder will need to demonstrate expertise in providing online ordering services, sourcing, storage, distribution, inventory management.

Expressions of Interest have been received from over 70 companies, including a number of household names in the UK and major international concerns, and the team now faces the difficult task of conducting an intense pre-qualification exercise and arriving at a shortlist of up to six companies that will be invited to Tender. These tenders will be evaluated alongside a range of in-house proposals and the best value for money offer will be selected.

This will be the largest and most complex contract for military clothing ever awarded in the UK and it is essential that the right choice of NCS provider is made. Consequently, bidders will undergo a lengthy evaluation process including rigorous testing of samples and examination of company capabilities. The final stage in the selection process will be an Electronic Reverse Auction which will provide an opportunity for bidders to revise prices in a dynamic environment which should result in further savings to the MOD.

Defence Clothing and NCS Team Leader Colonel Stephen James commented on the online system: *"Systems like NCS have been very successful in Canada and Germany. We're very pleased with the way the pilot has worked out. We survey everybody who places an order and we have maintained the percentage of people who are either satisfied or very satisfied with the service in the high eighties and that compares very favourably with satisfaction with the current system. At the same time we are controlling demand effectively. Consumption hasn't increased, and solving some unexpected difficulties has helped us understand what we need for a really good service in the future."*



The NCS project team is looking for a single contractor or consortium that can supply the full range of requirements



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The MOD is actively seeking* to build its database of suppliers in the following areas:

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