

Background quality report

1. Introduction *This section provides the context for the quality report.*

Overview:

The Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces (SCOAF) has a statutory role defined within Part 14A of the Armed Forces Act 2006 (c.52), to provide independent assurance on the efficiency, effectiveness and fairness of the Service Complaints system to the Secretary of State for Defence by way of an annual report which is laid before Parliament.

This 'background quality report' relates only to statistics within the latest SCOAF annual report (2019), available at the link below:

<https://www.scoaf.org.uk/annual-reports/>

The SCOAF annual report aims to:

- provide an evidence-based assessment of the Service Complaints process;
- hold the Services to account for efficiency, effectiveness and fairness in their operation of the complaints system;
- provide recommendations to the Services and the Ministry of Defence, and see that lessons are implemented swiftly and effectively;
- summarise the SCOAF activity, including referrals, investigations, visits and budgetary statements.

Although the annual report is not primarily released as a standalone statistical bulletin, it contains a significant statistical content and uses statistical trends to inform readers.

SCOAF is not currently considered a producer of Official Statistics; however, the annual report is produced in line with the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) Code of Practice for Official Statistics and follows professional statistics best practice where possible.

Methodology and production:

The statistics covered in the annual report are primarily focused on (i) SCOAF operations and (ii) Service Complaints.

SCOAF operations

The statistics produced cover the following subjects:

- number of contacts received;
- number of referrals made;
- number of investigation applications received;
- eligibility of investigation applications;
- annual change in the number of open investigations;
- timeliness and average time taken to complete and close investigations;
- outcome of investigations.

These statistics cover years 2016 – 2019 and are broken down by case type, Service, gender and rank.

The main data source for these statistics is eCase, the case management system SCOAF uses to record and monitor contacts, referrals and investigations.

An annual extract of all SCOAF contacts, referrals and investigations is taken from eCase at the earliest available date after 31st December.

The extracted data is then validated. Any records with validation fails are checked with individual case workers and the data revised to achieve consistency (e.g. decision dates should be recorded if and only if a decision is recorded).

Provisional statistical tables are then drafted and a summary version of these is circulated to SCOAF's management board, with a view to help identify and confirm any trends indicated in the data.

Service Complaints

The statistics produced cover the following subjects:

- Number of Service Complaints ruled admissible;
- Rate of Service Complaints;
- Number of complaints for all complaint procedures (i.e. Service Complaints and informal complaints);
- Number of open Service Complaints;
- Number of referred Service Complaints;
- Number of statements of complaints handled;
- Number of Service Complaints with Assisting Officers accepted by Complainants;
- Timeliness and average time taken to close Service Complaints;
- Outcomes of Service Complaints;
- Reaction to Service Complaint outcomes (inc. appeals);
- Proportion of Service Complaints/inadmissible statements of complaint leading to a SCOAF investigation.

These counts cover years 2017 – 2019 and are broken down by Service, and complaint category.

Statistics for average time taken is based on the median¹ statistic.

The main data source is the Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system. JPA is used for the administration of all Service Complaints by all three Services.

An annual extract is taken at the end of the calendar year by single Service secretariats and transferred to SCOAF. The extracts detail complaints received, closed and outstanding throughout the period by each Service.

Validation scripts are run to ensure the accuracy of all underlying base data, where possible. Issues raised by validation are passed to single Service secretariats for quality assurance, allowing corrections to source data where

¹ The median time provides a measure of the middle point in the distribution of time taken, with half of cases taking less than the median time and the other half of cases taking longer.

necessary and revised extracts if required.

Further data processing and production of statistics

Rounding is routinely carried out which occasionally results in percentage profiles where the components percentages do not sum to 100%.

Disclosure control is routinely carried out and a personal identification risk assessment was undertaken and the associated risk was considered to be minimal.

The annual report also includes reference to published Ministry of Defence statistical bulletins, including the Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey (AFCAS) and the UK Armed Forces biannual diversity statistics report.

Quality guidance for these releases can be found at the links given below:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/armed-forces-continuous-attitude-survey-2019>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tri-service-personnel-bulletin-background-quality-reports>

2. Relevance *This section is about the degree to which the statistical product meets users' needs in both coverage and content.*

Principal users and uses

- Ministers and Parliament – duty of SCOAF to report on workings of the complaints system and provide an overview of the referral function of SCOAF.
- Ministry of Defence Chief of Defence People (CDP) and complaints policy - provide evidence base and recommendations for future improvements of the complaints system.
- Armed Forces personnel (including Service Complaints secretariats, Service Complaints teams and affiliated support organisations) - used to inform on emerging issues and share best practice to encourage improvements.
- Complainants – provide summary of complainant experience of process and assurances regarding efficiency, effectiveness and fairness of the complaints process.

A strategic review of statistical analysis within SCOAF annual reports was undertaken to better meet user needs and a report on this will shortly be published by SCOAF.

Coverage and content

SCOAF operations

The statistics in the annual report cover all contacts received by SCOAF, including contacts which were (i) out of scope or (ii) not pursued; all referral made; and all investigation applications received.

Service Complaints secretariats

The statistics in the annual report cover all complaints (including admissible Service Complaints, inadmissible statements of complaint and informal complaints) submitted to the Services and recorded on the JPA system. It does not cover informal complaints not recorded on JPA or discipline matters internal to the Services.

3. Accuracy and reliability *This section is about the differences between the estimates and the unknown true values.*

SCOAF operations

All contacts received by SCOAF are logged by a SCOAF caseworker on the eCase casework management tool. eCase is used to record case progress from receipt to sign-off and all key milestones in the process that require further review and sign-off. As a result, the headline totals are felt to be accurate. More detailed breakdowns of SCOAF cases can be less accurate due to variable quality of the data entered for these fields (e.g. where ethnicity was not recorded).

The extracted datasets are passed through a range of semi-automated validation routines to ensure the accuracy of key variables. Where necessary, individual records are queried with caseworkers and explanations or revisions sought.

Service Complaints

The main data source is JPA, which is used for the administration of all Service Complaints by all three Services.

Although there is no inbuilt validation within the JPA system, JPA uses drop downs for data entry to maintain data quality and consistency. However, the data is still mostly reliant on Services to centrally record and update complaints accurately.

In 2015, an audit by Defence Internal Audit concluded that satisfactory progress was being made towards implementing the required actions (from a 2011 audit) to improve the consistency and quality of data. Any lack of confidence in the effectiveness of JPA was unfounded and a marked improvement on case completion time was observed without any anomalous trends. It concluded that by continuing to work collaboratively, understanding requirements and making dedicated SCOAF statistical resources available, a step-change had been seen towards driving JPA improvements.

Once extracted, the datasets are passed through a range of semi-automated validation routines to ensure the accuracy of key variables. Where necessary, returns are queried with the Services and explanation or revisions sought. Furthermore, data quality reports are produced by the Services to improve recording, where possible (e.g. number of blanks or duplicates).

4. Timeliness and punctuality *This section reports on the time gap between publication of the annual report and the reference period (timeliness); and the gap between planned and actual publication dates (punctuality).*

Approximately three months is taken between the point of data extraction as at the end of the calendar year and the final publication of the report. The time is currently required to process and validate returns with single Service secretariats; to create and quality assure tables and graphics; to enable proof reading, final sign-off and publication of the report.

The timing of the publication is dependent on Parliament sitting and being able to receive the report. Where possible, a future publication schedule of provisional dates will be published on SCOAF's website.

5. Accessibility and clarity

This section reports on: the ease with which users are able to access the data, the format in which the data are available, and the availability of supporting information (accessibility); and the quality and sufficiency of the metadata, illustrations and accompanying advice (clarity).

Accessibility

All Service Complaint Commissioner (SCC) and SCOAF annual reports (dating back to 2008) are available, free of charge, in PDF format from the SCOAF website:

<https://www.scoaf.org.uk/annual-reports/>

Since 2015, statistical reference tables were made available in Excel format alongside the annual report PDF.

Clarity

In addition to this background quality report, SCOAF's annual report contains a guidance section detailing relevant background information, a glossary of terms and any associated methodological notes.

6. Coherence and comparability

This section examines: the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar (coherence); and the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain (comparability).

Coherence

Within the annual report, there are clear similarities between the data held by SCOAF in terms of contacts received and the complaints data held by the Services. Although there is some cross-over in terms of the likely appearance of individuals on both systems, the statistics held by SCOAF and the Services operate on a different counting basis: as such they are not directly comparable.

The annual report is the one of two published sources of: (i) SCOAF operations; and (ii) Service Complaints. The other published source is the Quarterly Statistical Report (QSR).

The QSR contains quarterly figures on volumes, median duration, upheld rates and timeliness, as well as profiles of case type and outcome. All its figures and statistics are directly comparable with SCOAF's annual report.

Comparability over time

Comparability over time has been significantly affected by:

- the granting of new powers to SCOAF on 1st January 2016;
- reforms to the Service Complaints system introduced on 1st January 2016;
- the impact of historic changes in data sources and developments to administrative systems prior to this date;

- abolition of mid case investigation reviews;
- introduction of investigation triaging.

This has meant that figures relating to both (i) contacts received by, and investigations made by SCOAF (but not referrals made by SCOAF); and (ii) complaints raised with the Service Complaints secretariats, are not directly comparable between 2016 and 2019.

7. Trade-off between output quality components

This section reports the extent to which different aspects of quality are balanced against each other.

The main trade-off is between timeliness and quality: the three months between data receipt and publication are used to provide an extensive quality assurance period and reflect the fact that the delivery of the report is contingent on the provision of data from external data suppliers.

A further trade-off exists between the annual report as an assessment of performance and as a statistical output. This includes aspects such as the objectivity and impartiality of statistical commentary; the costs associated with printing, distributing and promoting the report; and the final format of the output – e.g. hosting online content in Excel format. Wherever possible the latest report has sought to clearly separate the statistical and non-statistical content of the report.

A general limitation of the statistics is that it is a snapshot of the live complaints system at the time of extraction. The possibility for a seasonal variation in complaints received or completed around the extraction period (31st December) will therefore not be taken account of until the following year.

8. Assessment of user needs and perceptions

This section relates to processes for finding out about users and uses, and their views on the statistical products.

SCOAF's Statistics Team frequently meet with key users and suppliers via the coordination of a statistical working group. The group provides a forum for members to discuss future data needs, agree key milestones and provide feedback on outputs.

Users are encouraged to provide feedback via contact details given in the report and available online. Additionally, throughout the year SCOAF visits numerous Armed Forces units, running focus groups with personnel, and actively promotes the published statistics.

9. Performance, cost and respondent burden

This section relates to the effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the statistical output.

The resources used to produce the statistical outputs of the annual report are currently small - one SCOAF statistician, together with other staff within SCOAF providing assistance (e.g. proofreading). There is also assistance from Service secretariats in interpreting the figures.

The main non-staffing costs behind the production of the annual report relate to the printing of hard copies and non-web based material by an external contractor as part of the publication and distribution of the report. These costs are detailed in full as part of the annual report.

Collaboration between SCOAF and the Service complaint secretariats continues to better align data and statistical requests with existing data system capabilities and by developing an automated means of sourcing data. This includes working with single Service secretariats at the point of system change to minimise supplier burden, automating data collection from consistent outputs, and creating headline validation checks.

10. Confidentiality, transparency and security *This section relates to procedures and policies used to ensure sound confidentiality, security and transparent practices.*

Confidentiality

Disclosure control is routinely carried out. Furthermore, a personal identification risk assessment was carried out and the associated risk was considered to be minimal.

SCOAF's role includes a need to scrutinise case level data and where a case study is sourced, it is not taken from groups where there is only a single respondent (e.g. minimise ability to identify further complainant details or characteristics) and is included only with the complainant's permission.

Security

All staff involved in SCOAF's annual report production process adhere to the Civil Service data protection regulations and have undertaken the required level of mandatory training. Additionally, all members of the statistics team follow the Office for Statistics Regulation's Code of Practice for Statistics with regards to data security:

<https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Code-of-Practice-for-Statistics-4.pdf>

All data is stored, accessed and analysed using SCOAF's restricted network and IT systems.

Transparent practices

The production process is considered to be transparent. Background documentation is provided alongside the annual report and suitable caveats to provide context to the reader and flag potential issues are included alongside statistical tables. This quality report informs users of the method, production process and quality of the output. Any significant errors identified after publication will result in revisions in line with the published SCOAF revisions policy.

Any statistical developments to be undertaken will be consulted on via a public statistical business plan for the coming 12 months, hosted on SCOAF's website.

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