

# SCOAF Quality Assurance Guidance

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## Contents

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1. Introduction .....	4
2. Our role and purpose .....	5
3. Our complaint handling and quality assurance oversight .....	5
3.1 Reach a Fair Answer .....	5
3.2 As Timely as Possible .....	6
3.3 Provide Excellent Customer Service .....	6
4. Training and developing our people .....	7
5. Quality assurance process and governance .....	8
6. How do we measure quality .....	9
7. Improvement activity and learning from our mistakes.....	10

## 1. Introduction

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This policy will be reviewed annually and the most current version will be made available as a PDF document via the internal SCOAF IT System.

The Chief of Operations owns this document. For further information on any aspect of this policy or questions not answered within the subsequent sections or linked documents, or to provide feedback on the content, contact:

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## 2. Our role and purpose

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The Office of the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces was established in 2016. The role of the Service complaints Ombudsman is to provide independent and impartial oversight of the Service complaints process for Service personnel in the United Kingdom

To do our job effectively, we need a highly skilled and motivated workforce – and the flexibility to adapt in response to a changing mix of complaint types that people are bringing to us. Underpinning all that we do is a core focus on delivering fair answers to our customers

## 3. Our complaint handling and quality assurance oversight

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All applications to investigate are dealt with by a team of investigators. The Ombudsman has the authority to make a final decision or delegate this decision to the Chief of Operations for undue delay and admissibility. The Ombudsman's final decision marks the end of our process. Quality assurance is therefore built into the heart of our case handling process, with the requirement for any investigation to be reviewed and referred to a more senior colleague. The process gives the Ombudsmen regular sight of our investigators' work – helping ensure we're reaching fair and reasonable answers.

***Reach a fair answer.*** If we treat our complainants well and communicate effectively, we are more likely to get to the heart of the issue earlier and identify the relevant information we need, which enables us to make an informed decision. We work hard to ensure that our process and approach to completing investigations is consistent across all our areas of work. Because we are ultimately required to make decisions about what is fair in all the circumstances of an individual complaint, our investigators are often required to make finely balanced judgements about the specific facts involved in a case. In considering what is fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of the case, we take into account relevant law, regulation and guidance.

Reaching a fair answer isn't often black and white. While sometimes a fair answer is one that agrees with one party's view of a complaint, often it will involve working through a complex set of individual facts and circumstances to establish that fairness may lie somewhere between both parties' views of the issue. So there may be a range of outcomes that may be fair and reasonable in the individual circumstances of a complaint. We ensure the quality (or reasonableness) of our answers by providing high quality training and time to develop into a given role.

***As timely as possible:*** SCOAF's aim is to resolve complaints fairly and in-line with current time targets. SCOAF is acutely aware of the delay in the internal Service Complaints process and recognise that when something goes wrong a complainant who approaches SCOAF with an application to investigate will want to be assured that the situation will be dealt with in a timely manner and that they've had a fair chance to have their say about what's happened. SCOAF is also aware that the longer a case is with us, the greater the impact on the individual's wellbeing and the chance to get closure. The ability and capacity to work at appropriate pace is a core part of our investigators training. Using technology and giving our investigators access to shared knowledge and experience helps our staff deal with complaints of varying complexity as quickly as they can.

***Provide excellent customer service:*** Actively listening to what people are telling us to get to the heart of problem is crucial. As well as providing a better understanding of the issues and what may have gone wrong (and why), it also enables us to tailor the way we engage with each customer – taking account of the impact the problem is having on the individual parties involved. This is underpinned by ensuring our investigators work collaboratively so they can share experience. We provide a service to customers from throughout the UK (and sometimes beyond) who come from very different backgrounds and may be dealing with issues that impact their lives far beyond the concerns raised by their specific complaint. Some people are less able or confident than others and some have particular needs that it's important we recognise and support. All SCOAF investigators are trained in Mental Health First

Aid<sup>1</sup>. We tailor our service as far as we can to meet the needs of the people who come to us and will often signpost them to other organisations who would also be able to provide support. We're mindful too of our own legal obligations under relevant legislation that protects individuals' rights – whether that is in relation to data security, discrimination or other important issues

#### **4. Training and developing our people**

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Being an investigator is a challenging role – involving reconciling sometimes-conflicting perspectives, knowing the right questions to ask and evaluating lots of often-complex information. Reaching and explaining an answer that feels fair requires not just sound judgement, but empathy and excellent communication skills. This requires a complex set of skills and knowledge – combining core analytical and reasoning capability with effective communication skills, and the ability to understand and empathise with the huge range of circumstances complainants come to us with.

Investigators are required to undertake the Queen Margaret University–Professional Award in Ombudsman and Complaint Handling Practice.<sup>2</sup>

#### **5. Quality assurance process and governance**

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SCOAF currently operates three main work strands:

- Referrals and Enquiries – issuing guidance on the referrals process, signposting to welfare or other organisations/charities, writing and issuing referral letters

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<sup>1</sup> The wider SCOAF Team can undertake Mental Health First Aid training but it's not mandatory for them

<sup>2</sup> This course is not currently running but will be reviewed in 2021. An alternative course will be identified if future courses are not made available

- Admissibility reviews and undue delay investigations
- Investigation of maladministration and/or substance

Although the referrals and enquiries element differs slightly from investigations, our principles and approach to quality assurance remain the same. We ask the same core questions within a common QA framework across all areas of casework – although we may carry out QA checks at different points and with different frequency to reflect the nature of our operational process in each area. We also operate a risk-based approach and carry out additional activity where the potential for error or misunderstanding may be higher – for example, in relation to new recruits or where a change in process was implemented.

**SCOAF Assurance:** All SCOAF reports have to go through a comprehensive series of checks. Reports are peer reviewed; this enables the content to be fact checked and provides an opportunity for questions to be asked. Once the report has been initially peer reviewed and all changes agreed the report is then signed by the Ombudsman or in their absence the Chief of Operations

**Triage Process:** This process was introduced to provide greater clarity for Service personnel around the remit of the Ombudsman. The purpose of the triage is to conduct an early assessment of the application to determine whether the matter warrants further investigation by SCOAF. The reviews are undertaken by our most senior and experienced investigators and decisions not to investigate are signed off by the Ombudsman.

In reaching a decision, the submitted application and all key documents are carefully considered to determine whether:

- there is a reasonable prospect that a new investigation would result in a different outcome
- an investigation would be a proportionate use of the Ombudsman's powers
- the redress requested can be achieved
- there is a public interest in conducting an investigation



A decision not to accept an application for investigation is never made based on resource; only whether it is appropriate for SCOAF to investigate when the above criteria is considered

**Executive file reviews** this has been recently introduced to the review process. Executive file reviews will be carried out yearly, on complex investigations. This provides an opportunity for the operational arm of SCOAF to review and discuss some of the key themes, challenges and opportunities in how this type of investigation are delivered, including wellbeing of both the investigator and complainant.

The purpose of these reviews and quality checks is to provide value in helping SCOAF generate and explore issues and themes – giving us the means to deliver a clear and consistent message about what we think good (and great) looks like and where we aspire to be as an organisation.

## 6. How we measure quality

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Whenever we do quality assurance check of a referral, admissibility review or investigation, the things we measure ourselves against are the same. In each case the following things, need to be considered be it checking how well we've handled a phone call with a complainant or stakeholder, or looking at a case from beginning to end:

- Did we listen and care?
- Did we get to grips with the issues and use common sense?
- Were we clear and honest in our communications with our complainants?

The COO and HOI peer review the all investigations

SCOAF has always been a learning organisation and this applies to the way the office works internally. Are aim is to ensure we did everything we could to deliver a fair answer, within timescales, and in a way that was clearly understandable and sensitive to the needs of our customers. We want our staff to be proud of the work they have done, recognising it's often challenging.

We ask the team to weigh up whether or not the service we provided was something that we, as an organisation, should be really proud of – in the sense that we also carry out specific focussed quality assurance peer reviews to ensure we are following the correct processes. These include checking we are recording the correct dates for the purpose of measuring our performance

## **Customer Satisfaction**

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As well as our own internal measure of quality, we collect regular feedback from complainants about how satisfied they are with how SCOAF has dealt with their investigation. Customer satisfaction levels are also highlighted within the Ombudsman’s Annual Report and on the SCOAF website. In surveying complainants, we ask the same set of questions – whether we listened and cared, got to grips with their case and were clear and honest – that we ask in our own internal quality assurance checks. This provides us with directly comparable measures of what both we and our customers think of the service we have provided.

## **7. Improvement activity and leaning from our mistakes**

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Reviewing how we carry out our legislative duties is not just for measurement and assurance purposes – but designed to provide meaningful and actionable insight which helps us learn and improve.

The weekly investigator meetings enable the operational arm of SCOAF to identify risks, challenges and opportunities which drive improvement activities both individually and collectively.

SCOAF is a learning organisation regularly reviewing process, applying feedback where it is appropriate to do so and continuing to improve year on year in line with strategic objectives.