



SCOAF Business Plan

2022-2023

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Foreword by the Ombudsman

This Business Plan is my second as Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces (SCOAF), and represents a continued step towards delivering our new Strategic Objectives. It sets out how SCOAF intends to deliver these objectives and continue to support the Service Complaints system, while aligning with our vision and mission. This plan builds on the great work carried out by SCOAF throughout 2021/22 where we delivered against 24 objectives out of 34. Of those 10 which remain ongoing, some of these have now become part of business as usual for example the move to a paperless office.

Our new 5 year Strategic Objectives set out what we intend to achieve by the end of my tenure in 2025. These objectives focus on quality of our service, our independence, the importance of outreach and sharing insight to improve understanding, and playing an active role in the wider legislative landscape.

This Business Plan outlines the specific activities we will deliver in 2022-23. These activities underpin the strategic objectives and are key in continuing to build an organisation that provides a quality service - one where we listen and provide fair and reasonable outcomes in a timely manner.

The key themes for this year are:

- 1. Continue to provide an efficient and high-quality service to complainants.** This includes the further reduction of our backlog and a full review of our internal KPI's and process.
- 2. Raising awareness and knowledge of SCOAF across the Armed Forces,** through improved training, education and increased visibility.
- 3. Improving services within my office.** This includes improvements to operational efficiency and the introduction of a governance framework, and a renewed focus on the development and wellbeing of our staff.

A new year brings new challenges and with a number of expected Service Complaints reforms due to be implemented this year, SCOAF will continue to improve, develop and raise our standards, as we pursue our goal of helping to build a better Service Complaints system for all Service personnel.

Mariette Hughes, Ombudsman

Who we are

The Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces (SCOAF) was established on 1st January 2016 as part of wide reforms to the Service Complaints process. This replaced the Office of the Service Complaints Commissioner which operated from 2008-2015.

Role

The role of the Ombudsman is to provide independent and impartial oversight of the handling of the Service Complaints system for members of the UK Armed Forces. The Ombudsman achieves this through 3 main functions:

- Helping Service personnel access the complaint system;
- Investigating, and
- Reporting to Parliament.

The Ombudsman cannot deal with enquiries or complaints that fall outside of their jurisdiction – this includes dealing with queries from members of the public or family members' matters.

Legislation

The legislation governing the role of the Ombudsman includes:

- [Armed Forces \(Service Complaints and Financial Assistance\) Act 2015](#)
- [The Armed Forces \(Service Complaints\) Regulations 2015](#)
- [The Armed Forces \(Service Complaints Miscellaneous Provisions\) Regulations 2015](#)
- [The Armed Forces \(Service Complaints Ombudsman Investigations\) Regulations 2015](#)

Mission

To provide independent oversight and investigations in support of an effective, efficient and fair Service Complaints process for members of the UK Armed Forces.

Vision

The Ombudsman's vision is that all Service personnel have access to and confidence in a Service Complaints system that is efficient, effective and fair.

Values

SCOAF's values have been developed in close consultation with our staff so we all have a shared understanding of the type of ombudsman service we want to be.

The values are:

- **Independence** – The SCOAF is independent from the Service's we investigate. We will hold them to account for service failure or injustice.
- **Impartiality** – The SCOAF is fully impartial. All investigations are undertaken on their own merits. We do not take sides.
- **Integrity** - The SCOAF ensures it is consistent in its approach, adhering to policy and process and acting within the confines of jurisdiction.

SCOAF Strategic Objectives

SCOAF's priorities for this year have been drawn from three Strategic Objectives identified for the next five years. The strategic plan was developed in consultation with staff, all of whom have contributed ideas and insight. This is important as an organisation can only succeed if its people understand and buy into its purpose and its objectives.

Consideration has also been given to the nature of the existing relationships with key stakeholders and the Services, and their reflections on what value SCOAF could provide in support of the shared goal of a better Service Complaints system.

Finally, SCOAF has considered this strategy in the context of the wider ombudsman landscape, and how we can best fulfil our role as a champion of good complaints handling, and how we can ensure we are playing an active role in shaping the legislative landscape around Service Complaints.



Look back

When we set our objectives for 2021/22 we wanted to focus primarily on how we could improve how we worked as an organisation both internally – how we worked with each other and externally – our customer facing service.

A lot of time was spent reviewing operational practices: were we sharing learning and examples of best practice to aid investigations to ensure continuity. We completed a comprehensive review of our Enquiries and Referrals process to reduce duplication of effort and enhance the customer experience. We have placed greater emphasis on capturing shared learning and improved our internal processes.

We looked at training and development, producing a training manual which highlighted a variety of opportunities including mentoring and shadowing as well as identifying specific courses.

As a small team we started to lay the building blocks required to provide resilience. Initially this was through the introduction of “job manuals” which provide staff with detailed guidance on how to undertake a specific role. The aim to support staff when posts are vacant. This work will continue with a greater focus on workforce and skills planning during 2022/23.

We also looked at how we could improve customer interaction with the introduction of a bespoke survey. With work commencing on a new website and application portal.

While COVID limited what outreach SCOAF could undertake, we were able to visit training establishments across all three Services. Through the introduction of a new bespoke survey, in addition to the visits this provided a broader picture of the issues with the Service Complaints process, which helped inform our Annual Report 2021.

The Ombudsman published her first shared learning piece in Autumn 2021 to provide a useful guide on admissibility and common mistakes, based on the observations we see via admissibility reviews.

The above is a snapshot of work undertaken, but it highlights the importance that SCOAF needs to remain relevant; continues to understand the diverse needs of its customers while having the foresight to adapt to an ever changing political, technological and sociological landscape.

Our plans 2022-23: Delivering our objectives

With the introduction of three new strategic objectives, the SCOAF Senior Management Team has looked at how those strategic objectives will be met in the short, medium and long term. SCOAF recognises that to “get things right” can take time.

The specific business plan activities identified are designed to be fluid. They will be kept under constant review to ensure they are appropriate and relevant to shifting priorities. This enables SCOAF to respond to changing internal and external dependencies, whilst maintaining focus on the key areas.

SCOAF's main priorities for this year are:

- To improve operational performance
- Ensure consistency and quality of decisions made
- To improve staff engagement and development
- To deliver an improved outreach programme with greater focus on interaction with personnel across all ranks through re-designed focus groups.
- To work collaboratively with key stakeholders to increase awareness and understanding of the Ombudsman's function, while sharing best practice to achieve a common goal
- To produce an Annual Report in line with SCOAF's statutory obligations

SCOAF In-Year Activity 2022-23

| Strategic Objective | Business Plan Activity 2022/23 | Target Date | Mid Year Update |
|---|--|-------------|-----------------|
| <p>Improve organisational performance to ensure SCOAF operates in a way that is efficient, effective and fair</p> <p><i>SCOAF should be able to hold themselves to the same standards used in appraising the performance of the Services. By improving the way we operate, SCOAF will be able to provide a better experience for those accessing our service, to the Services, and to our own staff.</i></p> | <p>Continue to improve the customer experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Review current KPIs -Continue to reduce backlog -Increase information shared with users | Dec 22 | |
| | <p>Set up programme of activity with staff engagement group to help them deliver meaningful positive change for staff</p> | Aug 22 | |
| | <p>Produce a workforce/skills plan to ensure SCOAF has a greater understanding of its workforce; how it can improve resilience and respond to challenges.</p> | July-22 | |
| | <p>Finalise and publish the MoU with MOD to give reassurance around our independence and governance</p> | June 22 | |
| | <p>Develop more structured/organised training for new starters, to cover all aspects of the role, department and Service Complaints system.</p> | July 22 | |
| <p>Increase confidence in the service complaints system by sharing knowledge and insight, and driving awareness and visibility of the</p> | <p>Deliver a full outreach programme maximising focus groups to increase learning and understanding of the Service Complaints process and issues faced.</p> | March 23 | |

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| <p>Ombudsman</p> <p><i>SCOAF must go further to share the trends, learning and insight in order that improvement to the Service Complaints system as a whole can be made, along with ensuring that Service personnel are aware of SCOAF and the services provided.</i></p> | <p>Commit to producing quarterly thematic which will be shared with the Services to help improve their knowledge about complaint handling and customer service</p> | | |
| | <p>Anonymised examples of good responses/language to share with Services to highlight good work</p> | <p>Oct 22</p> | |
| | <p>Liaise with Service charities and federations to explore the option of publishing articles on the work/powers of SCOAF</p> | <p>Oct 22</p> | |
| | <p>Development of an online form to increase the accessibility of SCOAF to complainants</p> | <p>Dec 22</p> | |
| <p>Identify and drive forward systemic change through [continued] engagement with wider stakeholders</p> <p><i>SCOAF must ensure it is correctly positioned to be able to drive systemic change through focused engagement. By ensuring our voice is heard in the right places, we will be in a better position to improve the system</i></p> | <p>Engage with CDP on plans/recommendations to ensure they are aware of issues and successes</p> | <p>Aug 22</p> | |
| | <p>Build networks with the ICOAF and OA community to share best practice</p> | <p>Dec 22</p> | |
| | <p>Hold a Stakeholder Symposium</p> | <p>July 22</p> | |
| | <p>Begin a scoping exercise to understand the feasibility of participating at events/roadshows.</p> | <p>Aug 22</p> | |
| | <p>Work collaboratively with the SC Reform Team to drive forward the legislative changes delivered in June 2022</p> | <p>Dec 22</p> | |

SCOAF Strategic Objectives 2021-2025

Improve organisational performance to ensure SCOAF operates in a way that is efficient, effective and fair

SCOAF should be able to hold themselves to the same standards used in appraising the performance of the Services. By improving the way we operate, SCOAF will be able to provide a better experience for those accessing our service, to the Services, and to our own staff.

| | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| Performance Improved operational performance will result in the elimination of the backlog, and an improvement in the timeliness KPI. Reducing wait times for our service will result in an improvement in customer satisfaction, and will free up operational resources for focus on other areas of work. | Quality Ensuring the consistency and quality of the decisions made by SCOAF improves the experience for service users, as well as the Single Service secretariats. It ensures that the right decision is reached in every case, and that the reasoning for our decisions is clearly understood by all parties. Elimination of silo working means that lessons learned are shared more effectively across the organisation, and can be fed into learning and outreach for the Services. | People Our people are our most valuable asset. By focusing on staff engagement and development, we will improve retention and ensure that our people are empowered to provide the best service possible. | Infrastructure & Governance SCOAF needs to be able to operate efficiently, ensuring the appropriate levels of assurance being given to MOD. This will be demonstrated in the improvement of internal operating and reporting protocols, and the establishment of clear protocols with MOD. This priority also addresses the need to move away from reliance on paper files, and ensure IT services are fit for purpose. |
|--|--|--|---|

Increase confidence in the service complaints system by sharing knowledge and insight, and driving awareness and visibility of the Ombudsman

SCOAF must go further to share the trends, learning and insight in order that improvement to the Service Complaints system as a whole can be made, along with ensuring that Service personnel are aware of SCOAF and the services provided.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Awareness SCOAF must ensure that Service personnel are aware of the Service Complaints process, and the ombudsman's role within this. Further work must | Learning Sharing the trends, insights and learning gained through investigation of Service Complaints will allow for improvements to be made by the | Accessibility Ensuring that our service is accessible, by making sure our material is easy to understand, and service users understand what they can expect |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
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| be done to understand the reasons why individuals may not feel comfortable accessing the Service Complaints system | Secretariats in their handling of matters. The Ombudsman has a responsibility to share best practice in complaints handling, and provide practical tips and guidance to the Services | from our investigations. Ensuring our language and approaches take into account all relevant aspects of EDI, and reflect best practice for the sector |
|--|--|---|

Identify and drive forward systemic change through [continued] engagement with wider stakeholders

SCOAF must ensure it is correctly positioned to be able to drive systemic change through focused engagement. By ensuring our voice is heard in the right places, we will be in a better position to improve the system

| Collaboration | Building Networks |
|---|---|
| Ensuring that recommendations are understood and readily accepted, for the benefit of the system as a whole. Ensuring continued engagement with MOD and HCDC, along with each of the Services | Reaching out to a wider range of stakeholders, to ensure that all perspectives on the Service Complaint system are heard and understood |

Finance

The SCOAF budget is provided by Defence and is bid for annually based on the previous year's activity and any future one-off projects. The business costs cover machinery, accommodation, IT, training etc.

Table [1] – SCOAF ABC ¹Allocation

| | 19/20 | 20/21 | 21/22 | 22/23 |
|----------------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| Staff Costs | 1,414,855 | 1,600,00 | 1,700,000 | 1,464,052 |
| Business Costs | 584,527 | 500,000 | 600,000 | 497,000 |
| Fee Earner | 159,181 | 200,000 | 200,000 | 204,200 |

People

SCOAF has 25 active² permanent positions. In addition, SCOAF has a pool of three fee-earning investigators utilised on an ad-hoc basis to carry out maladministration and/or substance investigations as required.

Over the course of the year, we will be considering our staffing structure and looking to ensure that our resources requirements are optimised and understood.

Table [2] –Position Profile

| Employee Type | 20/21 | 21/22 | 22/23 |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Civilian | 24 | 24 | 24 |
| Fee Earner | 5 | 4 | 3 |
| Crown Appointee | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Fixed Term | 3 | 0 | 0 |

Table [3] – Current Post Profile (for permanent posts)

| Employee Type | Posts | Vacant |
|-------------------------|-------|----------------|
| Chief Operating Officer | 1 | 1 ³ |
| Head of Investigations | 1 | 0 |
| Senior Investigator | 8 | 0 |
| Investigator | 3 | 0 |
| Enquiries/Referrals | 2 | 0 |
| Head of Office | 1 | 0 |
| Business Support | 5 | 2 |

¹ ABC – Activity Based Costing

² By “active” we mean open positions which may or may not be filled.

³ The post will be filled from 13 June 22 following a successful recruitment campaign.

| | | |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Statistician | 1 | 0 |
| Administrative Support | 2 | 1 |

Table [x} – Manpower Profile⁴

| Employee Type | Posts | Filled | Vacant |
|-----------------|-------|--------|--------|
| Civilian | 24 | 20 | 4 |
| Fee Earner | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Crown Appointee | 1 | 1 | 0 |

Training and Education

All SCOAF staff complete mandatory training covering areas such as Health and Safety, Information Management, diversity and inclusion. The Business Manager monitors completion of mandatory training.

During 2021-22, SCOAF organised a number of in-house/virtual training sessions which focussed on lived experience of Service personnel. This will now form part of “business as usual” along with the opportunity for staff to accompany the Ombudsman on outreach visits.

In addition, investigators new to SCOAF will undertake the Queen Margaret University course in Public Services Complaint Management Award. This will be a mandatory requirement.

Other opportunities such as mentoring, and shadowing are also open to all SCOAF staff.

Wellbeing and staff engagement

SCOAF has established a Staff Engagement Team who is responsible for driving forward change in line with Staff Survey results and ensuring that all members of SCOAF have an active role to play in meeting business objectives.

SCOAF has two Mental Health First Aiders who are a point of contact for an employee who is experiencing a **mental health** issue or emotional distress. This interaction could range from having an initial conversation through to supporting the person to get appropriate help.

Risk and Assurance

SCOAF's top 3 risks are:

Increased risk of [successful] Judicial Review applications: this relates to the increased volume of judicial review applications received during 2020/21. Activities to address this risk are increased shared internal learning, peer reviews and fact checking

⁴ As at April 2022

SCOAF operational performance targets are missed; this risk relates to the existing backlog of cases, staffing issues, and the efficiency with which SCOAF operates, and affects our ability to instil trust and confidence in the system. Key BP activities to address this risk include the introduction of casework audits; improved knowledge sharing via a formulised feedback and learning loop and a review of the existing enquiries and referrals function to ensure it's working optimally.

Annual Report recommendations are not implemented by the Ministry of Defence (MOD); this risk relates to the number of open recommendations following publication of Ombudsman Annual report dating back to 2016. While measures have been put in place to address this with the MOD providing quarterly updates, this has made minimal material difference.

All SCOAF risks are monitored monthly with a full in-depth review every quarter.

Holding to Account

The SCOAF holds monthly management boards which address key issues, risks and trends. All actions are recorded.

All investigative work is peer reviewed to ensure it meets jurisdiction in line with the SCOAF internal operations manual.