

# SCOAF Business Plan

## 2023-2024

## Version Control

<b>Date</b>	<b>Version</b>	<b>Details</b>
February 23	1.0	Draft
April 23	1.0	Final

## CONTENTS

Foreword by the Ombudsman .....	4
Role .....	5
Legislation.....	5
Mission.....	5
Vision .....	5
Values.....	5
Look back.....	8
Our plans 2023-24: Delivering our objectives.....	9
SCOAF In-Year Activity 2023-24 .....	10
SCOAF Strategic Objectives 2021-2025.....	13
Finance .....	15
People .....	15
Training and Education .....	16
Wellbeing and staff engagement.....	16
Risk and Assurance .....	17
Holding to Account.....	17



## Foreword by the Ombudsman

---

This Business Plan is my third 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. We have delivered 35 objectives across 2021 and 2022.

Our five-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 2023-24. 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 setting ourselves stretch targets to mirror the standards expected from the Services and the introduction of improved application forms via the SCOAF website.
- 2. Raising awareness and knowledge of SCOAF across the Armed Forces.** This is through improved training, education and increased visibility.
- 3. Improving services within my office.** This includes the introduction of a governance framework, driving forward implementation of Annual Report recommendations and a focus on the training, development, and wellbeing of our staff.

Some key reforms were made to the Service Complaints system in 2022, with the expectation of more to come in 2023. 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

---

SCOAF was established on 1 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 three main functions:

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

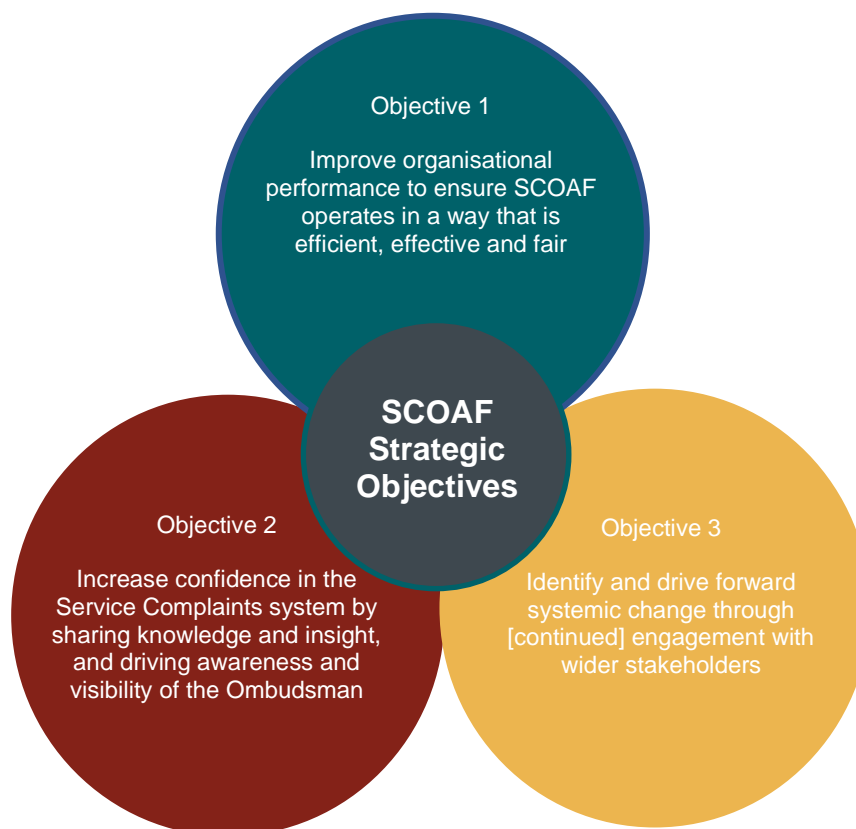
## SCOAF Strategic Objectives

---

SCOAF's priorities for this year have been drawn from three Strategic Objectives identified for delivery over a five-year period. 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, 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

---

2022/23 was an opportunity to continue to build on the work started in the previous year, while looking at other areas where improvements could be made.

Since the arrival of our new Communications Officer in September 2022, we have taken a step back to look at how we manage our communication both internally and externally. From an external perspective, we have launched a Facebook site, made better use of Linktree, and re-looked at how we use Twitter to increase our reach and improve our messaging. As we move into 2023, we will be looking to improve accessibility with the roll out of enhanced online application forms for undue delay, admissibility, and substance and/or maladministration.

SCOAF held its third Stakeholder Symposium in June 2022 following a hiatus of two years due to COVID-19. This was the first Symposium under the new Ombudsman, Mariette Hughes. The purpose of the Symposium is to bring SCOAF's stakeholders together to share updates on the work of SCOAF and the Service Complaints system following publication of the Ombudsman's Annual Report. This was the first-time focus groups had been included in the Symposium – these proved useful, evoking some meaningful discussions.

Throughout 2022 and into the first part of 2023 the Ombudsman has carried out an extensive outreach programme. This enabled the Ombudsman to visit Armed Forces units throughout the UK to meet personnel and hear, first hand, about their lived experience and their experience of the Service Complaints system. This anecdotal evidence helps build a picture during the year which can inform the Ombudsman's Annual Report.

The investigative arm of SCOAF has undertaken a full review of existing processes to see where improvements can be made. This has involved lengthy engagement with all investigating staff to understand the stages of our internal process from initial contact to final report with the aim to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The results of this work will be implemented from 1 April 2023.

Some key changes were made to the Service Complaints system in 2022, with the implementation of a couple of key reforms. SCOAF worked collaboratively with the Ministry of Defence's Service Complaints Transformation Team, providing feedback on JSP amendments and highlighting concerns with some of the proposed legislative changes. Work to reform the Service Complaints system remains ongoing and SCOAF will continue to engage with the Ministry of Defence on this piece of work.

The above is a snapshot of work undertaken, but it highlights the importance that SCOAF needs to remain relevant. SCOAF 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 2023-24: Delivering our objectives

---

With the introduction of three new Strategic Objectives, SCOAF's Senior Leadership 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
- To improve staff engagement and development
- 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 2023-24

Strategic Objective	Business Plan Activity 2022/23	Target Date	Mid-Year Update
<p><b>Improve organisational performance to ensure SCOAF operates in a way that is efficient, effective and fair</b></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>	Ensuring the overall time taken for a substance and/or maladministration case does not exceed 24 weeks (to include time in the backlog queue) by setting a stretch target and plans to achieve this.	Mar-24	
	To reduce the number of unallocated cases in the backlog queue with a stretch target that the oldest case is no more than four weeks old.	Mar-24	
	Organise and deliver a series of team building events for SCOAF staff to enhance wellbeing, team ethos and collaborative working.	Mar-24	
	Improve internal SCOAF communications through increased use of the tools available to staff such as MS Teams and SharePoint.	Aug-23	
	Aid the learning and development of SCOAF staff: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review training for investigators and identify appropriate training where necessary.</li> <li>• In house training sessions focussing on areas such as leadership and line management.</li> </ul>	Oct-23  Mar-24	

<p><b>Increase confidence in the Service Complaints system by sharing knowledge and insight and driving awareness and visibility of the Ombudsman</b></p> <p><i>SCOAF must go further to share the trends, learning and insight in order that improvement to the Service Complaints system can be made, along with ensuring that Service personnel are aware of SCOAF, and the services provided.</i></p>	Finalise and publish the governance document detailing our working relationship with the Ministry of Defence to give reassurance around our independence and governance.	Aug-23	
	<p>Continued development of SCOAF's media presence with the introduction of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online application forms to increase the accessibility of SCOAF to complainants.</li> <li>• Use of videos to enhance messaging.</li> <li>• Publication of a minimum of four blogs every year.</li> <li>• Acting on user feedback.</li> </ul>	Mar-24	
<p><b>Identify and drive forward systemic change through [continued] engagement with wider stakeholders</b></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>	To work with the Parliamentary branch to arrange a formal session in front of the House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC).	Mar-24	
	Organise and deliver a Stakeholder Symposium for 2023.	Jun-23	
	Produce and deliver an Annual Report focussing on the efficiency, effectiveness and fairness of the Service Complaints process.	Mar-24	
	Undertake a review of existing SCOAF surveys to ensure that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They meet requirements.</li> <li>• They are well advertised.</li> <li>• Information obtained is used to inform continuous learning and/or improvements.</li> </ul>	Oct-23	

	<p>Work collaboratively with the Service Complaints Transformation Team to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a plan of action detailing how the Ombudsman’s Annual Report recommendations will be implemented, particularly those legacy recommendations.</li> </ul>	Jul-23	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand and monitor the impact of Annual Report recommendations on the Service Complaints system.</li> </ul>	Mar-24	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor the impact of legislative changes delivered in June 2022 and 2023 to the Service Complaints system to ensure they are working as intended.</li> </ul>	Mar-24	

## 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.*

<b>Performance</b>	<b>Quality</b>	<b>People</b>	<b>Infrastructure &amp; Governance</b>
<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>SCOAF needs to be able to operate efficiently, ensuring the appropriate levels of assurance being given to Ministry of Defence. This will be demonstrated in the improvement of internal operating and reporting protocols, and the establishment of clear protocols with Ministry of Defence. This priority also addresses the need to move away from reliance on paper files and ensure IT services are fit for purpose.</p>

<p><b>Increase confidence in the Service Complaints system by sharing knowledge and insight, and driving awareness and visibility of the Ombudsman</b></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><b>Awareness</b></p> <p>SCOAF must ensure that Service personnel are aware of the Service Complaints process, and the Ombudsman's role within this. Further work must be done to understand the reasons why individuals may not feel comfortable accessing the Service Complaints system</p>	<p><b>Learning</b></p> <p>Sharing the trends, insights and learning gained through investigation of Service Complaints will allow for improvements to be made by the 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</p>	<p><b>Accessibility</b></p> <p>Ensuring that our service is accessible, by making sure our material is easy to understand, and service users understand what they can expect from our investigations. Ensuring our language and approaches take into account all relevant aspects of EDI, and reflect best practice for the sector</p>
<p><b>Identify and drive forward systemic change through [continued] engagement with wider stakeholders</b></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><b>Collaboration</b></p> <p>Ensuring that recommendations are understood and readily accepted, for the benefit of the system as a whole. Ensuring continued engagement with Ministry of Defence and HCDC, along with each of the Services</p>	<p><b>Building Networks</b></p> <p>Reaching out to a wider range of stakeholders, to ensure that all perspectives on the Service Complaint system are heard and understood</p>	

## Finance

---

SCOAF's 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<sup>1</sup> Allocation

	21/22	22/23	23/24
Staff Costs	1,700,000	1,464,052	1,542,000
Business Costs	600,000	497,000	460,000
Fee Earner	200,000	204,200	208,488

## People

---

SCOAF has 26 active<sup>2</sup> permanent positions. In addition, SCOAF has a pool of three fee-earning investigators utilised on an ad-hoc basis to carry out substance and/or maladministration 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	21/22	22/23	23/24
Civilian	24	24	25
Fee Earning Investigators	4	3	3
Crown Appointee	1	1	1
Fixed Term	0	0	0

Table [3] – Current Post Profile (for permanent posts<sup>3</sup>)

Employee Type	Posts	Vacant
Chief Operating Officer	1	0
Head of Investigations	1	0
Senior Investigator	9	1
Investigator	3	0
Enquiries/Referrals	2	0
Head of Office	1	0
Business Support	5	3
Statistician	1	0

---

<sup>1</sup> ABC – Activity Based Costing

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

<sup>3</sup> Excluding the Ombudsman which is a fixed term five year appointment

Administrative Support	2	1
------------------------	---	---

Table [4] – Manpower Profile<sup>4</sup>

Employee Type	Posts	Filled	Vacant
Civilian	25	20	5
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.

The introduction of in-house/virtual training sessions which have focussed on lived experience of Service personnel from late 2021 will continue throughout 2023. This is in addition to the Ombudsman’s wider outreach programme which all staff are encouraged to volunteer for.

SCOAF’s Senior Leadership Team will also be looking to identify in-house training which covers civil service behaviours such as, but not limited to, leadership and change. This training will be available for all SCOAF staff.

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.

---

<sup>4</sup> As of April 2022  
Version 1.0



## Risk and Assurance

---

SCOAF's top three risks are:

**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 Reports 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.

**SCOAF is not seen to add value (reputational):** This risk relates to possible perceived lack of independence in addition to limited powers and recommendations not being implemented in a timely manner.

**Changes to Service Complaints legislation effect SCOAF's ability to deliver our objectives:** This risk relates to the implementation of Service Complaints reform changes: how they are implemented and what impact delivery may have on SCOAF's operation outputs. Since the introduction of some reform changes in June 2022, SCOAF has seen an increase in applications.

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

### Holding to Account

---

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 SCOAF internal operations guidance and policies.