

SCOAF Business Plan

2025-2026

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Foreword by the Ombudsman

This Business Plan is my fifth and final as Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces (SCOAF) and represents a continued step towards delivering our Strategic Objectives. While we have continued to set ourselves some stretch targets for this coming year, I am mindful that the landscape is changing with the introduction of an Armed Forces Commissioner in 2026, which is why several objectives have a target date to align with the end of my tenure.

Our five-year Strategic Objectives set out what we intended to achieve by 31 December 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.

We have made some significant strides to deliver against these Strategic Objectives. As a team we have continued to improve the quality of our own service delivery, which can be seen in our timeliness Key Performance Indicator (KPI) and the eradication of our backlog. Working collaboratively with the Services and Ministry of Defence we have seen the introduction of Central Admissibility Teams (CATs), which has removed the chain of command from making admissibility decisions, and seen an overall uplift in the volume of Service Complaints submitted.

This Business Plan outlines the specific activities we will deliver in 2025-26. 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.

In 2025, we will continue to build on this work 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 complaints about matters affecting family members.

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 and impartial oversight of the Service Complaints system for all 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:

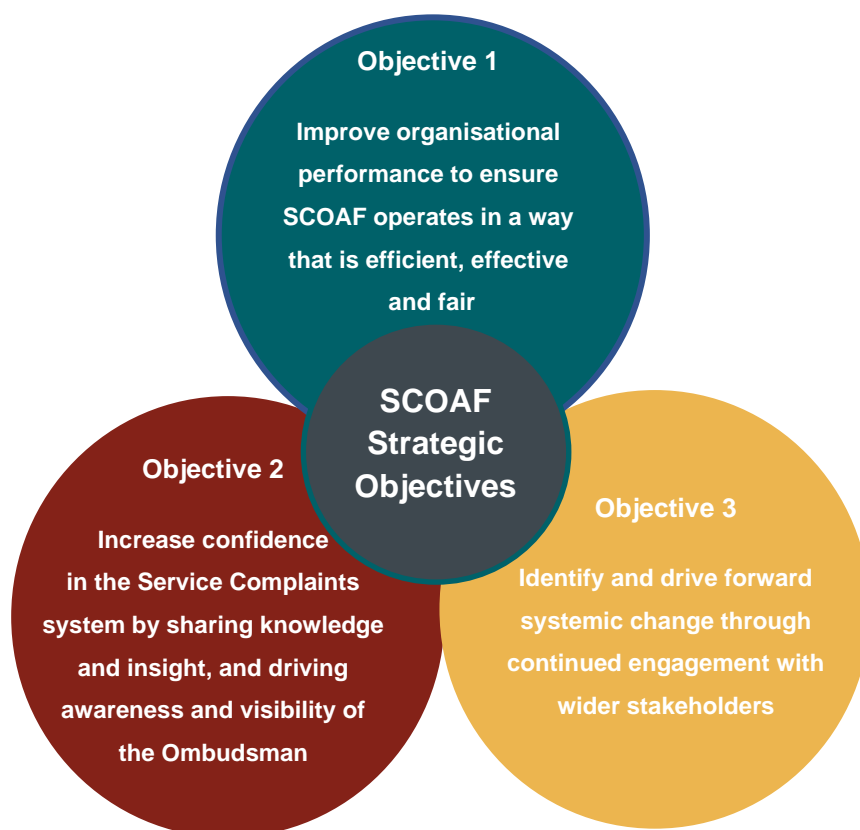
- **Independence** – SCOAF is independent from the Services we investigate. We will hold them to account for service failure or injustice.
- **Impartiality** – SCOAF is fully impartial. All investigations are undertaken on their own merits. We do not take sides.
- **Integrity** – SCOAF ensures it is 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

The 2024-25 period has been challenging, partly due to the number of vacancies the team has carried. Despite this the team has continued to deliver to a high standard, with nearly all the objectives set having been implemented.

SCOAF has continued to improve its communications both internally and externally, despite the loss of the permanent Communications Officer in May 2023¹. There has been a drive to improve the overall user experience of our SCOAF website. This has included updating language, so it is more aligned to Plain English standards, making information easier to find, and removing out of date guidance. Internally we have looked at updating and re-issuing the SCOAF Process Manual and house style guide. SCOAF has also utilised the British Forces Broadcasting System and the Family Federation magazines to advertise our Service Complaints User Feedback Survey.

SCOAF held its fifth Stakeholder Symposium in May 2024. 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. The event was extended to a full day, with the introduction of a panel session, alongside the focus groups.

Throughout 2024 and into the first part of 2025, 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 investigations team has continued the excellent work of 2023, exceeding our KPI of completing 90% of investigations within time targets and clearing the unallocated case backlog, which has been in place since 2017.

In December 2024, the Ombudsman was invited to present oral evidence to the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill Scrutiny Committee. She was also invited to provide an update to the House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC) in January 2025, on the work of the Service Complaints System and SCOAF. Both evidence sessions were well received, with the HCDC recognising and publicly thanking the professionalism of the Ombudsman and her team.

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

¹ Due to ongoing recruitment controls

needs of its customers while having the foresight to adapt to an ever changing political, technological, and sociological landscape.

Our plans 2025-26: 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 produce an Annual Report in line with SCOAF's statutory obligations.
- Work collaboratively with the Armed Forces Commissioner Implementation Team to support with the creation of and transition to the Armed Forces Commissioner.
- Work collaboratively with the Ministry of Defence and Services to ensure that Annual Report recommendations are implemented.
- Deliver a Stakeholder Symposium.

SCOAF In-Year Activity 2025-26

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.

Business Plan Activity 2025/26	Target Date	Mid-Year Update
Carry out a process review and update the Enquiries and Referrals process.	Oct-25	
Review the handling and presentation of statistics at SCOAF, maximising applications such as Power BI and AI where appropriate.	Aug-25	
Ensure all SCOAF policies, procedures and ways of working are up to date and documented. This is in readiness for any transition to the Armed Forces Commissioner.	Dec-25	
Carry out a full review and update of SCOAF's internal SharePoint site.	Dec-25	
Commence an internal quality audit of SCOAF investigation work to see how process changes are being embedded.	Dec-25	

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 can be made, along with ensuring that Service personnel are aware of SCOAF, and the services available to them.

Business Plan Activity 2025/26	Target Date	Mid-Year Update
Produce and deliver an Annual Report focussing on the efficiency, effectiveness and fairness of the Service Complaints process.	Mar-26	
Identify and procure an Armed Forces Commissioner website in collaboration with the Armed Forces Commissioner Implementation Team.	Mar-26	
<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>		
Business Plan Activity 2025/26	Target Date	Mid-Year Update
Engagement at ministerial/Westminster level to raise awareness of the importance of an Ombudsman service.	Mar-25	
Organise and deliver a Stakeholder Symposium for 2025.	Jun-25	
Work collaboratively with the Armed Forces Commissioner Implementation Team to support with the creation of and transition to the Armed Forces Commissioner.	Dec-25	

<p>Work collaboratively with the Service Complaints Transformation Team to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand and monitor the impact of Annual Report recommendations on the Service Complaints system. - Continue to monitor the impact of legislative changes delivered in June 2022 and 2023 to the Service Complaints system to ensure they are working as intended. - Driving forward implementation of open Annual Report recommendations over the next 12 months. 	<p>Mar-26</p> <p>Mar-26</p> <p>Mar-26</p>	
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SCOAF Strategic Objectives 2021-2025

<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>			
Performance	Quality	People	Infrastructure & Governance
<p>Improved operational performance will result in the elimination of the backlog, and an improvement in the timeliness KPI.</p> <p>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. 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 are being given to the Ministry of Defence. This will be demonstrated in the improvement of internal operating and reporting protocols, and the establishment of clear protocols with the 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>Increase confidence in the Service Complaints system by sharing knowledge and insight, and driving awareness and visibility of the 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 available to them.</i></p>		
<p>Awareness</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>Learning</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>Accessibility</p> <p>SCOAF must ensure our service is accessible. We will do this by making our material easy to understand, so that service users know what they can expect from us. We will also ensure our language and approaches consider all relevant aspects of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and reflect best practice for the sector.</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>Collaboration</p> <p>Ensuring that recommendations are understood and readily accepted, for the benefit of the system as a whole. Ensuring continued engagement with the Ministry of Defence and HCDC, along with each of the Services.</p>	<p>Building Networks</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.

SCOAF ABC² Allocation

	23/24	24/25	25/26
Staff Costs	1,542,000	1,789,000	1,330,000
Business Costs	460,000	666,000	450,000
Fee Earners	208,488	200,000	N/A

People

SCOAF has 26 active³ permanent positions. Over the course of the year (2025-26), we will be considering our staffing structure and looking to ensure that our resource requirements are optimised and understood. Position Profile

Employee Type	23/24	24/25	25/26
Civilian	25	25	25
Fee Earners	3	0	0
Crown Appointee	1	1	1

Current Post Profile (for permanent posts⁴)

Employee Type	Posts	Vacant
Chief Operating Officer	1	0
Head of Investigations	1	0
Senior Investigator	9	2

² Activity Based Costing

³ By "active" we mean open positions which may or may not be filled.

⁴ Excluding the Ombudsman, which is a fixed term five year appointment

Investigator	3	1
Enquiries and Referrals Officer	2	0
Head of Office	1	0
Business Support	4	1
Statistician	2	1
Administrative Support	2	1

Workforce Profile⁵

Employee Type	Posts	Filled	Vacant
Civilian	25	19	6
Crown Appointee	1	1	0

Training and Education

All SCOAF staff complete mandatory training covering areas such as Health and Safety, Information Management, and EDI. 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 2025. This is in addition to the Ombudsman's wider outreach programme which all staff are encouraged to volunteer for.

Following on from the successful delivery of three external training courses in 2024/25, SCOAF's Senior Leadership Team will seek to identify some further in-house training covering 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.

⁵ As of April 2025

Wellbeing and staff engagement

SCOAF has produced a team engagement plan for the 2025/26 calendar year which will focus on key activities, whether that is training and development, team engagement days or ad hoc events such as internal presentations. All SCOAF staff will have the opportunity to lead and/or take part in these events.

SCOAF has three 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 three risks are:

1. **The recruitment to identify an Armed Forces Commissioner is delayed**

This risk relates to the implementation of a new Armed Forces Commissioner, who the current SCOAF powers will be transfer to. If there is a delay in recruitment, this will impact the operational arm which focuses on Service Complaints, as investigators work under delegated powers.

2. **SCOAF is not appropriately staffed to meet its objectives**

This risk links to current recruitment controls in place within the Ministry of Defence. While independent of the MOD, SCOAF must adhere to any recruitment controls implemented by them or the wider Civil Service, in line with managing public money.

3. **Loss of personal or sensitive data**

This risk relates to the loss of personal or sensitive data, either through mishandling internally or via cyber-attacks. While SCOAF staff are trained in handling information correctly, hybrid working has created greater opportunity for data loss to occur.

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.