

The Ombudsman Association (OA) is the professional association for Ombuds institutions and complaint handlers in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the overseas dependencies/territories. The purpose of the OA is to:

- Support and promote effective systems of complaint handling and redress.
- Encourage, develop and protect the role of an ombudsman as the ‘best practice’ model for resolving complaints, in both the public and private sectors.
- Provide an authoritative voice and promote best practice and policy for those involved in complaint handling and redress to ensure an effective service for the public.
- Support open and transparent accountability and endorse principles of good complaint handling.<sup>1</sup>

As part of this role, the OA developed its Service Standards Framework, which came into effect in 2017. The framework sets out what is considered to be good practice in the provision of fair and efficient complaint handling. SCOAF has adopted this framework and will report against it annually. This year’s assessment is detailed below.

OA Service Standard	Our performance
<p><b>Future Improvement work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Members’ service should be free to complainants.</li> <li>- Members should ensure that their procedures are customer focused.</li> <li>- Members should work with complainants to understand their needs, in order for complainants to access their service easily.</li> <li>- Members should make reasonable efforts to support access to their services for any user, including working with representatives and others to support complainants through their service, and publish their procedures for doing this.</li> <li>- Members should listen to what complainants want from them and</li> </ul>	<p>SCOAF is a free and impartial service open to current and former members of the UK Armed Forces.</p> <p><b>Surveys and feedback</b></p> <p>SCOAF has a bespoke survey which is designed to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand how members interact with our services,</li> <li>• the level of information users wants us to provide and</li> <li>• the opportunity to provide overall feedback.</li> </ul> <p>This ensures our external facing media presence remains current, as well as enabling us to make continuous improvements.</p>

<sup>1</sup> [OA guide to Principles of Good Complaint Handling](#)

<p>ensure they understand their complaint. If a complainant is complaining about an organisation or issue that the member cannot consider complaints about, where possible they should direct the complainant to the relevant Association member, or another organisation who may be able to help.</p>	<p>We also seek feedback following a completed investigation to understand the end-to-end user experience.</p> <p><b>Procedures for understanding and processing complainants' needs.</b></p> <p>Individuals continue to make enquiries by phone and email. We still hold a PO Box address for those who wish to post applications and/or correspondence.</p> <p>Every person making an application to our office is asked about restrictions in contacting them and can specify when and how they wish to be contacted.</p> <p><b>Enquiries and blogs</b></p> <p>Enquiries relating to any issues outside of our jurisdiction, are signposted to the most appropriate organisation. We provide a link to the OA's Ombudsman finder on our website and include this in our social media content and blogs.</p>
<p><b>Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Members should treat service users courteously, respectfully and with dignity.</li> <li>- Members should communicate with complainants through complainants' own chosen method where possible.</li> <li>- Members should explain their role to service users.</li> <li>- Members should let complainants know what they can and cannot do, and, if they are unable to help them explain why.</li> <li>- Members should clearly explain to service users their process for handling complaints about</li> </ul>	<p>SCOAF sets out what individuals can expect from us when accessing our services. This incorporates the values of respect and open communication.</p> <p>The principles set out in the customer charter are incorporated in all our internal processes and procedures.</p> <p><b>Explaining our processes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An introductory step by step process was updated on the website documenting how people can access our office. This also facilitates the release of internal process pamphlets and factsheets which gives a better perspective of how we provide effective communication.</li> </ul>

<p>organisations and likely timescales.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Members should keep service users regularly informed of the progression of their case, and how long things are likely to take.</li> <li>- Members should tell service users who they can contact if they have any questions at different stages in the handling of the case, and how they can do so.</li> <li>- Members should be accurate in their communications with service users using plain and clear language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals are provided with contact details for the investigator responsible for their case throughout the process. Once the case is allocated, the investigator is responsible for providing information on the process, in addition to regular updates, throughout the life of the investigation. Prior to allocation, our Investigation Support Officer provides regular updates on the estimated wait time. The office continues to move towards plain language to ensure that our communication is as succinct and accurate as possible.</li> <li>• The survey data provides a summary of areas where we tend to score highest on our feedback and service. 36% of users are satisfied with SCOAF investigation services – this is a drop of 14% from the previous year.</li> <li>• We are actively offering better communication to the services and continue to encourage shared learning. We have had several open communications through facilitating meetings and inviting complainants to explain things in a succinct way to enable clearer understanding and better results.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Professionalism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Members should ensure that the staff who consider complaints have the relevant knowledge, training and skills to make decisions, or have access to suitable professional advice.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Staff knowledge and skills profile</b></p> <p>All operational staff are trained to the same standard when joining our office, regardless of previous experience or education.</p> <p><b>Timeliness handling of complaints</b></p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Members should deal with complaints in a timely manner, considering the complexity of the case.</li> <li>- Members should ensure that remedies are appropriate and take account of the impact any identified faults have had on the complainant.</li> <li>- Members should use the outcomes of complaints to promote wider learning and improvement of the service and the sector complained about.</li> <li>- Members should ensure their record keeping is accurate and that they hold data securely.</li> <li>- Members should ensure that when sharing of information is necessary, it is done appropriately.</li> <li>- Members should follow their published processes when dealing with complaints about their own service, and they should acknowledge and apologise for any mistakes they make.</li> <li>- Members should actively seek feedback about their service and use it to improve.</li> </ul>	<p>We publish timelines for all aspects of our work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 working days to respond to an enquiry.</li> <li>• 7 working days to make a referral.</li> <li>• 10 working days to allocate an application to an investigator for an eligibility assessment.</li> <li>• 17 working days to complete an admissibility review.</li> <li>• 17 working days to complete an investigation into undue delay.</li> <li>• 100 working days to complete substance (merits) and maladministration investigations.</li> </ul> <p>Where we are likely to exceed the published timeframe, the individual will be informed of the reasons why and the expected date of completion.</p> <p>We publish a comprehensive set of statistics on our website and provide an annual assessment on our backlog in our Annual Report and monthly backlog updates on our website.</p> <p><b>Redress and recommendations</b></p> <p>The Ombudsman does not have the power to grant redress, only to make recommendations for redress and wider learning points that seek to bring about systemic change.</p> <p>In making these recommendations, several factors are taken into consideration, including the circumstances of the complainant and the impact the wrong has had on them.</p>
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	<p><b>Secure case management</b></p> <p>Our records are maintained on a secure iCASE system and strict information protocols are in place. All staff are required to complete information management training.</p> <p><b>Freedom of Information (FOI) and Subject Access Request (SAR)</b></p> <p>We have clear policies on FOI and SAR on our website. In 2023, we processed one SAR and 12 FOI applications.</p>
<p><b>Feedback</b></p>	<p>SCOAF owns three feedback surveys with the aim to provide information which can be used to improve our internal service and inform the Annual Report.</p> <p><b>SCOAF Investigation Survey:</b> Feedback on satisfaction with the service SCOAF provides is routinely sought from everyone who makes an application to our office. Response rates are low. In 2023, 102 responses were received.</p> <p><b>Service Complaints User Feedback Survey:</b> This was launched in 2021. Following an initial high response rate the volume of responses has continued a downward trend. In 2023, 68 responses were received.</p> <p><b>Outreach/Visits Survey:</b> These are handed out, where practicable, on visits throughout the year following focus group sessions.</p> <p>A comprehensive review of the above surveys was undertaken in Autumn 2023 to ensure the surveys remained “fit for purpose”. The amended surveys were re-issued on 1 January 2024.</p>

<p><b>Fairness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Members should work with service users without discrimination or prejudice.</li> <li>- Members should make decisions on cases based on their independent and impartial evaluation of the relevant evidence.</li> <li>- The reasons for decisions should be documented and explained to relevant parties.</li> <li>- Members should publish information concerning any opportunities that may exist for service users to challenge their decisions.</li> <li>- Members should make clear to service users their approach to unacceptable behaviour.</li> </ul>	<p>SCOAF is independent and impartial. All service users are treated equally and with respect in accordance with our customer charter.</p> <p><b>Our decisions</b></p> <p>Thorough and independent investigations are undertaken, and findings are supported by decision reports.</p> <p><b>Appealing our decisions</b></p> <p>There is no mechanism to appeal a decision made by SCOAF. However, if an individual believes the correct process was not followed, they can seek a judicial review. Information on the judicial review process is available on our website and included in all decision letters.</p> <p><b>Unacceptable behaviour</b></p> <p>Our customer charter includes information on our right to place restrictions on access to our service should an individual consistently fail to meet their responsibilities under the charter.</p>
<p><b>Transparency</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Members should publish information about the most senior staff in charge of decisions on complaints within their organisation, including the rules under which members operate.</li> <li>- Members should have procedures in place to deal with any conflicts of interest around the handling of complaints.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Our senior staff</b></p> <p>Information about the Ombudsman is published on our website alongside information about the legislative framework the organisation operates within. The Senior Management Team is not made up of staff of Senior Civil Servant grades and therefore no personal information about the senior managers is made available on the website.</p> <p><b>Conflict of interest</b></p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Members should be transparent about their investigation with the relevant service users.</li> <li>- Members should publish the learning that can be drawn from the complaints they handle in order to drive service improvement across the sector.</li> <li>- Members should provide service users with information explaining the approach they take to handling complaints about their own service.</li> <li>- Members should explain to complainants the procedures in place about what action can be taken if remedies are not implemented by the organisation complained about.</li> </ul>	<p>We have a clear conflict of interest policy. This is reviewed on an annual basis.</p> <p><b>Transparency</b></p> <p>Investigators are transparent about their work as far as is allowed within the boundaries of privacy and national security. Preliminary reports are made available to complainants and other affected parties for substance (merits) and maladministration investigations. This allows for any errors or concerns to be addressed. Information on how to make a complaint about members of the Ombudsman's team or our service is made available on our website and upon request.</p> <p>The Ombudsman publishes an Annual Report in which learning about the complaints that are handled is analysed and discussed and recommendations made to improve the complaints system.</p> <p>The Ombudsman does not have the power to compel the Armed Forces to provide redress; only to make non-binding recommendations.</p>
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