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PRESS RELEASE

9th International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces held in London 8th – 10th October 2017.

On 9th – 10th October the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces in the United Kingdom co-hosted the 9th International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces (ICOAF) in conjunction with the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF).

The annual conference, held at The Tower of London, drew over 90 delegates from 40 countries, making it the highest attended ICOAF to date. This serves to highlight that it has become an “important international forum for promoting and ensuring democratic oversight of the armed forces”¹.

Under the broad umbrella of “The Moral Compass of the Armed Forces: How Ombuds Institutions can Break Down Barriers to Achieve Change”, delegates explored a range of issues including:

- Maximising the role of ombuds institutions within legal and ethical boundaries
- Mental health
- Building an inclusive armed forces: addressing the needs of diverse groups
- Duty of care in international missions
- Are Armed Forces personnel reluctant to complain?

The breadth and scope of the delegates in attendance ensured a dynamic exchange of ideas over the two days as reflected in the [conference statement](#).

Nicola Williams, Service Complaints Ombudsman, said: “ICOAF is the only platform of its kind for independent Ombuds institutions for the armed forces to share good practices, and learn from each other on a variety of challenges facing us as Ombudsmen in this specialist sector. At 9ICOAF we explored a range of moral and ethical issues, and ethics are at the heart of all Ombuds institutions’ purpose. We achieved a lot over the two days and I look forward to continuing this work in my own organisation and with my international colleagues over the next year”.

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¹ 9ICOAF Conference Statement

https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b86d90_ba2b523b4e7b4baf82fc230991849bb1.pdf

1. About ICOAF

The International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces (ICOAF) was established in 2009. The conference aims to bring together Ombuds institutions with responsibility for the armed forces from around the world to share best practice and lessons learned. The annual conference is co-hosted by the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF).

9ICOAF is the first time the conference has been hosted in the UK. 10ICOAF will be hosted in South Africa.

The [ICOAF website](#) contains further information on the history and purpose of ICOAF.

There is a separate [website for 9ICOAF](#) containing all of the information for the conference, including the programme.

You can review the social media engagement from the conference on Twitter using #9ICOAF

2. About the Service Complaints Ombudsman

The Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces (SCO) replaced the role of Service Complaints Commissioner from 1 January 2016.

The Ombudsman was created by the Armed Forces Act 2006, as amended by the Armed Forces (Service Complaints and Financial Assistance) Act 2015.

The Ombudsman provides independent and impartial oversight of the Service complaints system. The primary way in which she does this is through her powers of referral and investigation. Using these powers the Ombudsman can:

- Refer a Service person's intention to make a Service complaint to their chain of command
- Review a decision by the chain of command to not accept a complaint for investigation or to not allow a complaint to proceed to appeal for a further decision
- Investigate allegations of undue delay in the handling of a Service complaint or Service matter
- Investigate allegations that there was maladministration in the handling of a Service complaint which has completed the internal system
- Investigate the substance (merits) of a Service complaint which has completed the internal system

Nicola Williams took up the appointment as Service Complaints Commissioner in January 2015 and was subsequently appointed as the first Service Complaints Ombudsman on 1 January 2016. Ms Williams was previously the Complaints Commissioner of the Cayman Islands.

3. About the changes to the Service complaints system

Following the Secretary of State's announcement on planned reforms to the Service complaints system in March 2014, the [Armed Forces \(Service Complaints and Financial Assistance\) Act 2015](#) received Royal Assent on 26th March 2015. The Act, which amends the Armed Forces Act 2006, sets out the new Service complaints system and established the role of the Service Complaints Ombudsman.

The new system reduced the three stage complaints process to a two stage process, involving a decision and at most one appeal stage. This will reduce delay as the decision body will be empowered to grant redress in the first instance.

The role of the Ombudsman provides independent and impartial scrutiny of the handling of Service complaints. While the responsibility to resolve Service complaints remains firmly with the chain of command, the Ombudsman has been vested with significant new powers to hold the Services to account for their handling of individual cases.

4. Photographs and biography of the Ombudsman available on request

Further information

For more information about the Service Complaints Ombudsman, please visit www.servicecomplaintsombudsman.org.uk

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