Ministry of Defence

The service complaint process

Easy-read guide

Introduction

The service complaint process (the SC process) provides a way of dealing with complaints relating to life in the armed forces. This guide provides a short summary of the process and what you can expect from it. There is more detailed information in JSP 831.

The SC process should be efficient, effective and fair to everyone. It aims to deal with complaints as soon as possible and at the lowest appropriate level.

For certain types of complaint, special-to-type procedures should be followed before the SC process is started. Such complaints include those relating to:

- housing
- pay and allowances, and
- healthcare and medical treatment.

This is not a full list, and there is more information about special-to-type procedures in JSP 831.

If you have a complaint

If possible, you should try to settle the matter informally before going through the SC process. You can do this by:

- speaking or writing to the person responsible for the matter you are complaining about
- asking the chain of command or a colleague to look into the matter, or
- asking for mediation.

Full information on settling complaints informally is given in JSP 763: Behaviours and informal complaint resolution.

Making a formal complaint

Timescale

If you want to make a formal complaint, you must normally do so within three months of:

- the date of the incident (if the matter is a single event)
- the date of the latest incident (if the matter took place over a period of time), or
- the date the special-to-type procedure ended.

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Step one
To make a complaint, complete a service complaint form on the My Complaint application (accessed via Defence Gateway), or complete the Service complaint form and send this to your single Service Secretariat. You can ask your unit's HR team for advice if you are not sure who to make your complaint to.
During the SC process, the person you make your complaint to is referred to as the specified person.

Step two
The specified person may contact you to discuss the matter. They may then get legal advice before deciding whether the matter can be treated as a formal complaint.
If the specified person decides that the matter can be treated as a formal complaint, they will tell you this. The complaint will then go to step three of the SC process (see below).
If the specified person decides that the matter can't be treated as a formal complaint, and you disagree with that decision, the Armed Forces Commissioner can review this for you (see further details below).

Step three
The single Service Secretariat will appoint a decision body to investigate the complaint. The decision body will usually choose a person (or people) to carry out the investigation, and will tell you who that is. That person will contact you during their investigation, and you will be able to give them further information about the complaint and suggest witnesses.
The decision body decides how the investigation should be carried out, and any further evidence or witnesses can only be considered if the decision body agrees it is appropriate.

Step four
The decision body will send you a copy of the investigation report, which will include details of the evidence. You will be able to give comments on the report, and the decision body will consider these when making their decision.
The decision body will then write to you with their decision and any action that will be taken.

If you disagree with the decision

If you disagree with the decision, you can appeal against it within two weeks of the date that you received the decision. If you decide to appeal, you need to fill in a Service complaint application to appeal form and send it to your single Service Secretariat. The single Service Secretariat will then decide whether your appeal can be considered. If it can, the single Service Secretariat will appoint an appeal body.

If the single Service Secretariat decides that your appeal can't be considered, and you disagree with this decision, the Armed Forces Commissioner can review this for you (see further details below).

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If your complaint involves an allegation of bullying, harassment, discrimination, dishonesty or biased behaviour, the appeal body will include an external independent member.

The appeal body will look at your whole complaint and decide whether any further investigation is needed. If a further investigation is needed, you will be able to comment on the evidence, and the appeal body will consider your comments when they are making their decision. They will then write to you to explain their decision and any action that needs to be taken.

Oral hearings
A decision body or appeal body may decide that there needs to be a hearing so that they can speak directly to you, any respondents you named in the service complaint form and any relevant witnesses.

Who can help you

Assisting officer
An assisting officer can help and support you through what can feel like a stressful time. They can help you set out your complaint, attend interviews and meetings with you, and help you prepare any responses you want to give to the decision body or appeal body.

You can choose someone to be your assisting officer, or your unit's HR team can find one for you. The assisting officer should:
- be at least SNCO rank (or an equivalent)
- be familiar with the SC process, and
- have no personal interest in the matter.

Armed Forces Commissioner
The Armed Forces Commissioner provides independent and impartial oversight of the handling of the SC system. You can contact the commissioner at any time during the SC process.

You can ask the commissioner to:
- help you get access to the complaints system through the referrals team
- review any decision not to treat a matter as a formal complaint
- review any decision not to consider an appeal
- investigate any delay in the SC process, and
- investigate issues relating to the handling or outcome of a complaint.

Further information on the Armed Forces Commissioner is available at www.afcommissioner.org.uk