

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Pre-appointment hearing for the Service Complaints Ombudsman, HC 989

Tuesday 1 December 2020

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Sarah Atherton; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Gavin Robinson.

Questions 1-24

Witness

I: Mariette Hughes, Government's preferred candidate for the post of Service Complaints Ombudsman.



Examination of witness

Witness: Mariette Hughes.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this Defence Committee pre-appointment hearing with the Service Complaints Ombudsman on 1 December 2020. I am delighted to welcome Mariette Hughes, who has beamed in from Birmingham. Thank you for your time this afternoon and for wanting to pursue this important role. We have lots of questions for you, although you don't have your feet under the table yet. Will you please introduce yourself and say a little about how you ended up where you are today?

Mariette Hughes: Thank you very much. I am currently with the Legal Ombudsman and have been there since 2014. I first joined as an investigator before becoming an ombudsman in 2016. I moved up to be head ombudsman in charge of transformation and impact and external affairs and service policy. My remit is driving organisational improvement, externally for people who use our service and internally for our own processes and efficiencies.

The organisation has recently gone through a significant period of change. In July I became interim director of operations, on top of my substantive role. I have responsibility for all our operational casework. Since September I have been acting chief ombudsman and accounting officer.

Prior to coming to the Legal Ombudsman, I worked in engineer support administration for a national fire and security company, and prior to that I was office manager for a home safety charity scheme, the job I took straight out of university. I studied modern languages at Durham University, as part of which I lived in Paris for a year before moving back to Birmingham.

Q2 Chair: You have a wealth of experience in the civilian sector, if I may put it that way. This is a new domain. What attracts you to move into the world of the Armed Forces?

Mariette Hughes: A number of things attract me about this role. It is important to me that the work I am doing means something—I have to do something that matters to me.

I am a fundamental believer that access to justice and to redress are cornerstones of our society, so having an effective complaints system and an ombudsman system that works is important to me. Our armed services are such a fundamental part of who we are as a nation. It is so important that they have a system that supports them while they protect us. The work really matters to me.

The variety of the role absolutely attracted me. It is quite rare to have the mix where you can drive organisational change and improvement but still be involved in casework and decision making and take an active role in outreach work and liaison with stakeholders, meeting the people who use the service. The balance of those three aspects of the role really attracted me.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Finally, the fact that it is a five-year appointment attracted me. I am not the sort of person who likes to come in and do a role for 18 months or two years and leave for a leadership position. I very much believe that if something is worth doing it is worth doing right and sticking with until the end. The fact that it is a five-year appointment and there is scope for such improvement, with the ability to make such change, really attracted me to this role.

Q3 Chair: Five years is a long time, but, as you suggest, it is a healthy interlude to move projects forward, to get your teeth into and to effect change, and that is why it is so important.

Interestingly, the job description discourages people with an Armed Forces background from applying. Do you agree with that, and will you say what exposure to date you have had with our Armed Forces?

Mariette Hughes: My exposure to date has been fairly limited. I considered a career in the Armed Forces and was looking at whether to join. I looked at a gap year commission, but unfortunately knee injuries put paid to that at an early stage.

I have a number of family members who have served in the Military. My father-in-law is a retired naval captain—he was a submariner. My mother-in-law was a Wren. But that is the extent of my involvement.

To an extent, that brings a benefit, because you are coming in with a fresh set of eyes and not preconceived notions or opinions about any of the services. You are coming in and looking at something and saying, “Tell me what the system is. Tell me how it is working. Does it make it reasonable?”

It is similar to coming into the Legal Ombudsman: we do not require that any of our staff are legally trained. We have some staff with a legal background, but some of us don’t. As the current chief ombudsman I don’t have a legal background. It is more about the ability to make robust decisions and to judge whether something is fair and reasonable than about any background in a sector.

I recognise how specific this sector is and how much I would need to get up to speed with it in understanding the regulations that surround it, the daily challenges our service personnel face and what is going on with the current service complaint system.

Chair: You are almost overqualified, knowing too much about the Armed Forces, given the stipulation that you are not supposed to have too much contact. You have obviously grown up in the Armed Forces environment, and that will be very helpful indeed.

Q4 Sarah Atherton: We have heard from Nicola Williams, the outgoing ombudsman, about some of the challenges and achievements over her 10 years. What do you see as the main aspects of the ombudsman’s role?

Mariette Hughes: To be ombudsman is about being able to challenge people to do better. The move to the ombudsman from the previous



commissioner role was a positive one because it increased the power to look at things and make recommendations to ask that complaints be reopened.

An ombudsman is about providing a level of assurance to the sector that there is somebody there to hold the system to account and to challenge it to be better—to look into the issues that underpin it, as well as the individual issues of complaint in the day-by-day work, and to look into what is driving the complaints, what underpins the system and where wider improvements need to be made.

Q5 Sarah Atherton: Can you identify some of the areas that are lacking?

Mariette Hughes: The key issues for me, coming in, will be to look into the number of people who express an unwillingness to complain—the people in the continuous attitudes survey who said they wouldn't feel comfortable raising a complaint. That is as much an issue for the service complaints system as it is for the ombudsman. It needs to be an issue for the Service Complaints Ombudsman because we need to pursue a system where, even if people feel they can't go directly to the chain of command, they can come to the ombudsman and be assured that the issue is going to be looked at correctly and that there will be no repercussions for them having spoken up and raised it. That would be a primary issue for me—to address the number of people who don't feel comfortable with the system. The system should support them to do the job they want to do.

The other main issue for me would be the over-representation of black and minority ethnic personnel in the complaints system, as well as the over-representation of female serving personnel. I know that you, Sarah, are very interested in that, and I understand that your Sub-Committee will today start to take evidence on the experiences of serving female personnel. I will be really interested to see the outcome of that. I would want to take that forward as a key bit of work. I know that the Wigston review recommended doing a report on it and I know that Nicola has spoken very passionately about wanting to do it. It is work that I would absolutely support.

I would also be interested to see what the ombudsman could do, separate from that, in engaging with people who have come through the ombudsman service and gone through that process, to get a more thematic understanding of their experiences and what they feel is driving that over-representation and to support that work that has been going on behind the scenes in terms of the data at the other end.

Q6 Sarah Atherton: You spoke of having an effective complaints system. Have you heard of Graham House's Justice4Troops, which recently launched a new independent defence authority to support personnel through service complaints? It is hot off the press.

Mariette Hughes: I haven't heard about that, no.

Sarah Atherton: It is well identified that there are problems with the service complaints system that have an impact on the ombudsman. You



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have identified issues that we hope you will address. What skills will you bring to the job, having identified some of the problem areas?

Mariette Hughes: The main thing I will bring to the role is my experience from every stage of the investigation and ombudsman process. I have worked in almost every stage of that role in my current guise. I have worn a number of hats, many of them simultaneously, and I am wearing many of them right now. I have an ability to understand how casework moves at its basest form—how cases should be handled and progressed through the system.

I am proud of my ability as an ombudsman and decision maker—my ability to write fair and reasonable outcomes based on clear analysis. I am very proud of the fact that none of my decisions to date has been challenged by judicial review. I will bring that level of decision making to the ombudsman.

My key skill is in assessing gaps. I tend to come up to speed fairly quickly with things. I am not naive enough to suggest that I could fix all the problems that there might be at the moment or that I could come in and make a material difference to the system or the backlog straightaway.

Where I do bring skills is in coming in and looking at a system and understanding where the gaps are and what I can build on—if I was a service user of the system, what do I think could be improved?—and then applying that in an operational way to make recommendations and changes to the process to improve the system.

Q7 Sarah Atherton: To make any changes you need good relationships and a good, effective team. How do you plan to build that team around you as the lead, the ombudsman?

Mariette Hughes: It will be more difficult than I would like, given the covid restrictions. I am conscious that the same things that attracted me to the role—it being a five-year term—mean that people have been working for Nicola for a significant time, and they might be feeling anxious about the change of leadership. The onus will definitely be on me to engage with staff to ensure they understand who I am as a leader and what I stand for. You can't just walk into an organisation and say, "Hi. I'm new. We're doing it my way from now on." People need to understand the need for change: have you done all your homework on all the things leading to that change and have you discussed and engaged with them?

There will need to be improvements made, but my primary focus will be on meeting the team, understanding what has been tried to date, how they feel about their casework, how they feel about their role, and what their desires are for improving the service in the future. I can then work with them and make sure that they feel engaged and brought on the journey in any change we put in place.

Q8 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you, Mariette, for joining us. Some of my questions have already been answered but I want to turn the next question on its head. You were asked whether you have professional or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

personal experience of the Armed Forces, and you answered that quite fully. Let me turn that around and ask: how important do you think it is to have independent civilian oversight and implementation of the complaints service?

Mariette Hughes: It is absolutely vital. You have to walk a tightrope between maintaining impartiality and independence—I am the ombudsman and we are here to hold services to account for their handling of service complaints—and simultaneously being appointed and employed by the Ministry of Defence. Maintaining that integrity and balance is something we currently face at the Legal Ombudsman, where customers who use legal services and come to us may be of the view, “You’re set up by the Legal Services Board so you are part of the system and part of the problem.”

For me, the key part in that would be not just in maintaining the stakeholder relationships with senior officials at the MOD and senior officers in the chain of command or within the service complaint process but in making sure visibly to engage with all service personnel so that you attack it from both sides of the issue, dealing with the people who might need to go through the service complaints process and making sure that they understand that you are there to look after their best interests, and maintain that independence and integrity. I might be an employee of the Ministry of Defence, but my decisions must stand on their own: they must be beyond reproach and be absolutely based on evidence and be clear.

Q9 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Based on your experience as an ombudsman, how critical is it for a person making a complaint, especially those who do not traditionally do so—for example, as we have known for a long time, women and members of the Armed Forces from black and minority ethnic communities—to have an advocate such as a separate individual or, God forbid in the Armed Forces, a trade union or Armed Forces representative body?

Mariette Hughes: Within my experience with the Legal Ombudsman we often have people who find it too uncomfortable to raise complaints on their own, and they can appoint a representative to take them through the complaints process. That is important to me in their feeling they have support.

When you make a complaint of that nature it is often looking back to a time when you might have been in a situation of vulnerability—a situation where you might have been uncomfortable—and for many people raising a complaint and going through an investigation puts them back into that position. That can be a really stressful and emotional time for them, so making sure that there is somebody there who can speak on their behalf and act in their interest is a key part of supporting them through the process.

I would balance that with the fact that, in trying to achieve informal resolutions and understand the issues of complaint, it is often far more beneficial to speak to the individual directly. They experienced the issue,



they know how it made them feel and they know what they are seeking. Going through an intermediary sometimes loses some of that direct detail.

- Q10 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Do you agree from your experience that people got to the point of starting to complain only because they were being backed up by a trade union or a representative body?

Mariette Hughes: I do not believe so. It might be different in legal services because people have a different attitude to complaining when they are the purchaser of a service. There is almost a feeling of entitlement to complain: "I've bought something, it has gone wrong and I am entitled to complain."

With the Armed Forces, because it relates to your current, ongoing career and to the important job you are doing, whether there is more of a need for that sort of advocate or backing—to be honest, I don't know how deep that goes within the armed services. I would be very interested in speaking to people who had raised complaints and who had representatives or advocates or who might feel uncomfortable about complaining, to figure out what we could do to make them able to access the service complaints system comfortably and have their issues raised.

- Q11 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon, Mariette. Building on Martin Docherty-Hughes's question about maintaining the independence of the office, do you see the appointment through the Legal Services Board as a vulnerability in terms of independence?

Mariette Hughes: Sorry—looking at my current role at the Legal Ombudsman?

Gavin Robinson: No, do you see your new appointment as the Service Complaints Ombudsman as a vulnerability in terms of independence? Are there concerns within the services about the independence of the ombudsman, and do you hope to address that?

Mariette Hughes: I am not aware of any specific concerns at this point, but it is always an issue that could be faced. When you have an ombudsman who is appointed by the very system that they are there to hold to account, you have that element of, "Who is guarding the guards? Is this a self-serving appointment?" Broadly, the only way to address that is by assuring people—as we are doing now—of the integrity of the person being appointed. All of us who are in the ombudsman sphere feel strongly about our integrity and independence and would do absolutely nothing to bring that into disrepute. While it is really important to understand the key relationships at play, the decision making must be completely untouchable. It must be based on what is fair and reasonable in the opinion of that ombudsman. That cannot and should not be swayed by any sponsoring or appointing body, depending on the jurisdiction.

- Q12 **Gavin Robinson:** So that is something which, personally and professionally, with your integrity, you would highlight if you felt your impartiality or independence was being pressured in any way?



Mariette Hughes: Absolutely. It is often a difficult line to tread between understanding the needs of your stakeholders and the needs of the people who have appointed you to fulfil a purpose and a role. We need to understand not only what the Ministry needs from the ombudsman in order to have an effective and fair service complaints system, but where the lines are in terms of my decisions and observations that cannot be swayed.

Q13 **Gavin Robinson:** Have you considered, in the months to come, a familiarisation plan to gain an understanding of the individual services—the interaction between the three services and their distinct differences? If you have a plan, how will that remain covid-secure and how will you do it in these strange times?

Mariette Hughes: Covid is not making for ideal circumstances for a smooth handover plan. I am fully aware of the extent of what I do not know yet, and I will need to put in place a plan to address that. The primary focus for me will be engaging directly with Nicola to benefit from her experience. I would want to understand as much of the casework as possible. It is really important to go out there and speak to stakeholders, meet the services and understand how their systems work.

The key thing for me will be continuity of service. The work cannot back up while I am familiarising myself and getting my feet under the table. To maintain that onward motion—to keep going with the good work that is being done to address the backlog—a primary focus for me will be understanding the case work and understanding the legislation that underpins it. I have read the joint service publications that relate to complaints, but I do not profess to be completely proficient in them yet. I need to understand how that works with the system so that I can get going as soon as possible.

In terms of familiarising myself with the services, I know that when Nicola came on board, she had a robust schedule of meetings with as many people as possible. You cannot overestimate how good face-to-face contact is for building rapport and introducing yourself as the new leader of an organisation. Obviously, we are somewhat limited in that, but one thing we have learned in the pandemic is that we can work slightly differently. There might be some benefits in that. Although it might be my preference to go out and meet people face to face and really engage, I can balance that with the fact that, on an ordinary day, I may get a good two-hour meeting but lose the rest of the day to travelling, whereas in terms of this handover process and getting up to speed, I can schedule many more meetings to make sure that I am meeting as many people as I can to get that robust background knowledge.

Q14 **Gavin Robinson:** Having had the joy of trying to read and understand the service justice system and service regulations, do you feel that it will be through that operative engagement in casework that you get a true appreciation and understanding of them?



Mariette Hughes: Yes and no. From reading through the case work you will get a good sense of where things are going wrong, but there is a separate element in which I would want to talk to people about their daily service lives to understand all the stuff that falls in between. Service life is about so much more than the narrow remit of things that end up on the ombudsman's desk. I would really want to understand the wider context, particularly in terms of the differences between the services and how those individuals' experiences might be different depending on where they are based and who they work with. I really want to see this through the full spectrum of life in the Armed Forces as well as through the lens of operational casework.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you very much. I am now handing back to Martin Docherty-Hughes.

[Martin Docherty-Hughes took the Chair]

Q15 **Chair:** I am sorry, Mariette, but the Chair has had to head back to the Chamber and I have been unceremoniously dropped into his place. The hon. Member for South Dorset, who had hoped to be asking the next couple of questions, has not yet joined the meeting. We do not want to keep you long, so we will just push on. There are many interested parties in the system, including complainants, the chain of command, the public and, of course, Parliament. How would you work to ensure confidence in the service complaints system?

Mariette Hughes: As you say, there are a number of different interested parties. Giving confidence to different stakeholders relies on understanding what they are seeking from the system and from the engagement. Are we talking about the Ministry wanting assurance that the service complaints system is working properly? Are we talking about Parliament wanting assurance that the ombudsman is operating efficiently? Or are we talking about individual engagement with service personnel who want assurance that their complaints are being dealt with in the round? To really understand the personas with which you are working in terms of what they hope to get out of the engagement is a key part in ensuring that you can have good communication and that you are providing the right amount of information—and the information that really matters to them—to be able to give them that confidence and assurance in the system.

Q16 **Chair:** How would you engage with the senior officers in the chain of command while maintaining your independence? I am sure you will do it very well, but can you say something about that?

Mariette Hughes: Again, it is tricky, because you are very reliant on those senior officers in the chain of command to tell you how the process should work and to tell you how things should be, while also maintaining the independence and integrity of the ombudsman. There is a bit of skill in balancing the need to take in the information you are being given but also having the confidence to push back if something does not feel right, or if it does not sit well with what you think the system should be. Being able to challenge appropriately, regardless of the level of the individual you are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

speaking to, is a key part of the role. I have always treated my ombudsman career very much like this: if I am coming into something brand-new, you need to be able to explain to me why it works that way and why it is reasonable. If you cannot explain it to me in a way that makes me understand and believe in it, the chances are that it may not be reasonable.

- Q17 **Chair:** To turn the question on its head, rather than engaging with senior officers in the chain of command, how would you ensure that the ranks have access to your service and that the ranks feel able and confident to access your service, given some of the experiences that we have seen from previous reports?

Mariette Hughes: This is a key focus. Visibility is key. I know that Nicola has done a lot of work going out and speaking to the ranks, making sure that people are aware of the ombudsman. Although I would want to build on that awareness of the ombudsman service—I think there is a base level of awareness—what concerns me is the people who are aware of the ombudsman service but not comfortable enough to approach it. I do not have the answers at this stage, but I would like to look at how we can identify those people and ask them, “What are your conceptions of the ombudsman service? How do you feel that this will go? Why might you not be comfortable about raising a complaint?” We could have those in-depth focus groups to get to the bottom of it. At present, there is an understanding that there is an issue, but no deeper understanding of what drives it. Without that deeper understanding, it is hard to know how to address it.

- Q18 **Chair:** Finally, on the issue of engagement, what about engagement with Parliament and media and public scrutiny? What are the key ingredients for your engagement, not just with this Committee, but with 650 Members of the House of Commons, and also media and public scrutiny?

Mariette Hughes: There is an element of ownership. As the ombudsman, the buck would stop with me, so I have to be prepared to stand by my decisions. I have to be the one who stands up and talks with authority about any challenges that I am making or difficulties I am experiencing. I have to have absolute faith in my decision-making—that those decisions are right and stand up to scrutiny.

In terms of parliamentary and media scrutiny, there is a level of integrity that you would expect from public figures. It is so important to me that organisations like this are ombudsman-led, because it puts that fairness and impartiality at the forefront of everything we do. The person leading an organisation has that at the forefront of their mind and understands casework and what you are trying to achieve. It drives that fairness and access to justice at every level of decision making, which gives confidence in the organisation as a whole.

From a separate perspective, in terms of integrity, it is important that the public figure who leads that organisation conducts themselves with propriety. The minute there is any perception of a lack of integrity, or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

something to be concerned about, in that leader, it calls into the question the organisation as a whole. That is very dangerous. Integrity in the public eye is very important.

Chair: Thank you. I will now hand back to Sarah.

Q19 **Sarah Atherton:** I would like to drill down a little more into the service complaints system. What do you see as the main challenges with the service complaints system over the next three to five years?

Mariette Hughes: One of the key things that I will need to understand as soon as possible while coming up to speed is how far progressed the work is of the service complaints and justice transformation team. I understand that the Danuta Gray review has been submitted but not yet been made public. I would be interested to see how far that work has progressed.

One of the main challenges facing the system is that it is widely acknowledged that there is a need for some reform, but we need to know how far along that reform is and how it will affect the work you are trying to do at the same time. You need to balance the need to maintain the day job while also looking at the transformation of the service complaints landscape as a whole. The challenges that I have identified as my priority speak to the service complaints system as a whole in terms of the over-representation of female and black and minority ethnic service personnel and the number of people who do not want to complain.

A wider concern in the service complaints system is that we are striving for a system that is efficient, fair and effective, but currently measuring it only on timeliness. That does not do enough to look at all those aspects; it just measures whether it is fast. One issue that was of particular note to me when I was researching the role was looking at the percentage of cases where the ombudsman was upholding challenges to inadmissibility decisions. How many times were those decisions made correctly in the first instance? How many times did they find that there was maladministration, or that something had gone wrong in a substance complaint? That is a key measure that needs to be brought into the service complaints system in order to understand whether the system is fair as well as being effective and efficient.

Q20 **Sarah Atherton:** What I am hearing at the moment is that it is very much the process that people have to go through, as opposed to the outcome. You rightly mention Danuta Gray's review of the Wigston review. I understand that that is imminent, so I am anticipating that that will impact on the complaints system in some way. How will you manage any transformation of the complaints system as well as continuing your day-to-day work?

Mariette Hughes: It can be quite tricky. Good communication and engagement are key—ensuring that you are having the right conversations with the right people so that anything coming on the horizon is not a surprise. You need to be working closely with the transformation team so that you understand what they are striving towards and how that might affect your work and that of the ombudsman as a whole. If changes are



made, you have to have a clear plan of when to apply them. That is particularly important when you have a backlog of complaints. If you are going to change a process, at what point does it change for the people who are going through the system and how will it affect the complaints that are currently in train? There is a knack to keeping an eye on the horizon and understanding the changes that are coming, and seeking the parallel improvement streams, while maintaining—until things get better—the thought, “This is what we have and what we are working with, and this is how we need to handle complaints as we go along.”

Q21 Sarah Atherton: You have the transformation team in place now who are looking at the current system. You will be new in post. How much authority will you have to change what they already want to do, if you do not agree with what you see?

Mariette Hughes: I would not say that I am concerned, but there is a risk that work could be presented almost as a done deal. They could say, “This is what we want to change, so please just accept it and move on with it.” I am not afraid of a robust challenge. As I alluded to previously, if they can make me understand why those changes are being recommended and that they are the best thing for the service, I will get on board. But I need to have that level of understanding. As the ombudsman, the buck would stop with me.

I understand that there is scope to look not just at the service complaints system, but at the infrastructure of the ombudsman. Decisions on infrastructure, and making sure that the office and organisation work as well as they could, must stop with the ombudsman. They are the person responsible for going to Parliament and saying, “This is the work we are doing and you can hold us to account.” I would be loth to put into place the recommendations without fully understanding the need for, and benefit of, them and without knowing that they have been fully thought through.

Sarah Atherton: A lot of fresh evidence will be coming out in the next few months and I would hate to think that that could not be taken into account because decisions had already been made now and you did not have the authority or influence further down the line to change anything. I hope that you stand firm on that one.

Chair: Thank you, Sarah. We now move over to Gavin.

Q22 Gavin Robinson: You have already mentioned the fairness, efficiency and effectiveness of the complaints process, and you fairly highlighted that the focus on timeliness alone is insufficient. You mentioned looking at the percentage of cases in which you have upheld complaints. Are there any other aspects of the effectiveness of the process that you would like to ingrain as new targets?

Mariette Hughes: Yes, there will absolutely be ones that I would like to ingrain, but I am not sure I could say what they are just yet. A fundamental part of complaints resolution is that people raise complaints because they want a particular outcome. They feel that something has



gone wrong and they want it to be rectified. Measuring that satisfaction with the process and the outcome is a key part of whether a service complaints system is effective. The timeliness aspect speaks to whether it is efficient.

I have already spoken about the uphold rates and whether the correct decisions are being made; that speaks to whether the system is fair. In terms of whether the system is effective, in my view that has to do with whether people get the outcomes that they are seeking. People raise complaints because they want a particular element of redress. They want something put right or acknowledged. Whether that has been done to the correct extent, and whether the people who have raised complaints feel that their issues have been addressed, should be a measure of whether the system is effective.

- Q23 **Gavin Robinson:** Going beyond what is routine, if you are able to advance other aspects that are measurable and you can assess the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the process, will you be able to report on those clearly and more regularly to the services, Ministers and Parliament?

Mariette Hughes: Absolutely, and I think that assurance needs to be given outside the annual report. We cannot just wait until once a year to report on the work that is being done and the progress that is being made. I would need to understand more about what assurances are currently given and how often. I spoke about wanting to do focus groups and outreach groups and perhaps looking at thematic reviews of people who have used the service. That is the sort of work that I would like to be reporting on, potentially separate from the annual report. It would give a view of the themes and trends that have been identified, which drive everything.

- Q24 **Gavin Robinson:** You mentioned the attractiveness of the five-year post. What will success look like when you get to the end of that period? We will hold you to this every year you come to us. How do you assess the effectiveness or success at the end of that period?

Mariette Hughes: I would love to be able to say at the end of the five-year tenure that the service complaints system was fair, effective and efficient. Given that the Wigston review suggested that it might take five to 10 years to reach that point, I am not naive enough to think that that is entirely achievable within my tenure. But that has to be the goal. Otherwise, what is the point? If we could bring it forward, we should absolutely strive to do so.

Outside that, I am a firm believer in, "Leave it better than you found it." Making improvements in the things I have identified as being the key issues would be the mark of success for me. I would want to see a step change in the number of people who feel comfortable complaining. I would want the eradication of the backlog and a real understanding of the issues that led to that backlog development, as well as mitigations put in place to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

ensure that the work force and approach to casework are flexible enough to ensure that that does not happen again.

We could also look at potentially widening the remit. Nicola has spoken powerfully about own-initiative powers. That is something for whose benefits I would argue, but it is difficult to do that until the point at which the ombudsman service can keep pace with its own demand. After that, it can look to expand. Being in a position to persuasively make the argument for widening the remit would look like success to me.

Chair: We have now come to the conclusion of this session. I thank you, Mariette, for taking time to meet us today. You will appreciate that, due to covid-19, many Members could not be with us. Like them, we hold your job to be an important part of oversight, access to support and the rule of law and justice within the Armed Forces. All Members will wish you good luck and success in your tenure. We look forward to working with you not only as members of the Committee but as parliamentarians. I now bring the meeting to an end.