# Managing a 400GB Shared Mailbox with 300+ Users: Alternatives & Archiving

## **Overview of the Challenge**

Your organization’s shared mailbox has grown to **400 GB** over the past 36 months and is accessed by **over 300 users** (with send-as rights). This far exceeds Microsoft’s recommended usage: **Microsoft supports up to 25 concurrent users** on a shared mailbox before performance and connectivity issues arise[[1]](https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/admin/email/about-shared-mailboxes?view=o365-worldwide#:~:text=,like%20a%20Microsoft%20365%20group). The mailbox’s size and heavy usage are causing **Outlook/OWA to update slowly** and general slowness for users. Additionally, you have a compliance requirement to **retain emails for 7 years**, which contributes to the mailbox bloat. The goal is to find a **better way to access this mailbox** (other than Outlook or OWA) for hundreds of users, and to implement **improved email archiving** for long-term retention.

## **Why Outlook/OWA Struggle with This Mailbox**

**Outlook performance degrades with large mailboxes and many folders/users:** In Cached Mode, Outlook’s local data file (OST) becomes inefficient once it grows very large (e.g. 25 GB+ OSTs can cause frequent pauses[[2]](https://www.reddit.com/r/Office365/comments/qpzk6x/losing_the_will_to_live_with_shared_mailboxes/#:~:text=https%3A%2F%2Fsupport.microsoft.com%2Fen)). A 400 GB mailbox likely forces a huge OST or heavy online access. Moreover, if the shared mailbox has a **very large number of folders (500+ or thousands)**, Outlook will exhibit sync delays and slow opening of the mailbox[[3]](https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/troubleshoot/outlook/performance/performance-issues-if-too-many-items-or-folders#:~:text=,the%20large%20number%20of%20folders). Microsoft notes that **having over 500 folders in a cached shared mailbox** causes synchronization problems and “decreased performance,” and in extreme cases (10,000+ folders) Outlook may become *very slow to open*[[3]](https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/troubleshoot/outlook/performance/performance-issues-if-too-many-items-or-folders#:~:text=,the%20large%20number%20of%20folders). With **300 users** hitting the same mailbox, Exchange also sees high concurrent connections; beyond 25 concurrent users, clients may start failing to connect or see odd behaviors (like Outbox duplicates)[[1]](https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/admin/email/about-shared-mailboxes?view=o365-worldwide#:~:text=,like%20a%20Microsoft%20365%20group). In short, the current setup pushes beyond Outlook/OWA’s practical limits, explaining the slow updates and frustration.

## **Microsoft Guidelines and Built-in Options**

**1. Use Appropriate Workloads (Shared Mailbox vs. Groups):** Microsoft specifically recommends that if a shared mailbox has too many users, you should **“reduce the number of users or use a different workload, like a Microsoft 365 Group.”**[[1]](https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/admin/email/about-shared-mailboxes?view=o365-worldwide#:~:text=,like%20a%20Microsoft%20365%20group) An Office 365 **Group mailbox** is an alternative meant for collaboration by large teams. Like a shared mailbox, a Group allows multiple members to read and send emails (you can enable *Send As* or *Send on Behalf* of the group address)[[4]](https://practical365.com/office-365-groups-vs-shared-mailboxes/#:~:text=,unless%20deleted%20by%20a%20user). Groups are designed to handle large memberships easily (hundreds or more). They also provide additional features (shared SharePoint site, Teams integration, etc.), and members can optionally subscribe to receive copies of group emails in their own inbox[[5]](https://practical365.com/office-365-groups-vs-shared-mailboxes/#:~:text=Office%20365%20Groups%20have%20additional,that%20shared%20mailboxes%20do%20not). **The main limitation** is that Group mailboxes don’t support subfolders (all messages live in a flat inbox structure)[[6]](https://practical365.com/office-365-groups-vs-shared-mailboxes/#:~:text=However%2C%20shared%20mailboxes%20have%20some,suitable%20to%20teams%20than%20Groups). If your 400GB mailbox relies on a complex folder hierarchy for organization, moving to a Group would require adjusting that workflow (perhaps relying on categories or search rather than folders). However, for many large-team scenarios (e.g. a support@ or info@ address), an Office 365 Group can greatly improve performance and eliminate the 25-user concurrency cap. It keeps the data within your Microsoft 365 tenant (which can be regionally located in the UK if your tenant is UK-based), satisfying data residency needs.

**2. Exchange Online Archiving (In-Place Archive):** Given the 7-year retention requirement, you should leverage an archiving strategy to **offload older emails** from the primary mailbox. In Exchange Online, you can enable an **In-Place Archive** (also called Online Archive) for the mailbox. This moves older emails into a separate archive store attached to the mailbox. Users can still access the archive (it appears as a second mailbox in Outlook/OWA), but archive data is not cached to the OST by default, which keeps the active mailbox lighter. Notably, Exchange Online (Plan 2 or E3/E5 with Archiving) supports **auto-expanding archives up to 1.5 TB**, effectively unlimited for long-term retention[[7]](https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/office365/servicedescriptions/exchange-online-archiving-service-description/exchange-online-archiving-service-description#:~:text=Exchange%20Online%20Archiving%20service%20description,Each)[[8]](https://lazyadmin.nl/office-365/outlook-online-archive-for-office-365-explained/#:~:text=When%20the%20only%20archive%20is,100%20GB%20of%20storage). Since your shared mailbox is 400GB, you likely already assigned an Exchange Plan 2 or equivalent license (unlicensed shared mailboxes are capped at 50GB, or 100GB with license)[[9]](https://macroview365.com/7-simple-steps-to-improve-outlook-shared-mailbox-performance/#:~:text=6). With the archive enabled, you can set a retention policy to automatically **move items older than X years** (e.g. 1 or 2 years) to the archive. This keeps the main mailbox size manageable for better performance, while still **meeting the 7-year retention** in the archive. Users will have a better experience as the active mailbox (the part they sync) is smaller, and they can search the archive on-demand when needed. *(Note: Searching the online archive might be a bit slower than the primary mailbox, but it’s still accessible from Outlook and OWA. Also, ensure all 300 users have at least read access to the archive if they currently need full mailbox access.)*

**3. Outlook Configuration Tweaks:** If you must continue using Outlook, a few settings can mitigate performance issues:  
- **Disable Cached Mode for the shared mailbox** on user profiles, or disable “Download Shared Folders.” This forces Outlook to fetch data on the fly (like OWA does) instead of maintaining a huge local cache[[10]](https://www.reddit.com/r/Office365/comments/qpzk6x/losing_the_will_to_live_with_shared_mailboxes/#:~:text=This%20is%20correct%2C%20I%E2%80%99ve%20also,so%20they%20are%20not%20cached). It can reduce OST size and avoid the 500-folder sync limit because folders won’t sync down locally. The trade-off is slightly slower per-click retrieval, but it often improves overall usability in such extreme cases.  
- **Limit cached timeframe:** In Outlook, you can set download to only last 3 or 6 months of email for shared mailboxes. Given the archive will hold older items, you might only cache recent emails.  
- **64-bit Outlook and sufficient hardware:** Ensure all users run 64-bit Outlook with ample RAM[[11]](https://macroview365.com/7-simple-steps-to-improve-outlook-shared-mailbox-performance/#:~:text=1), as large mailboxes can tax memory. Also, updated clients have better performance improvements for shared scenarios.

These tweaks can help, but ultimately a more structural solution (like archiving or changing the platform) will yield bigger benefits.

## **Third-Party Solutions for Shared Inbox Access**

Since you’re open to third-party software (with the condition that data remains in the UK), several options might provide a **better user experience** than Outlook/OWA for 300+ people:

* **Dedicated Email Collaboration Platforms:** There are tools designed as “shared inboxes” or team email clients, often used in customer support or sales teams. For example, *Zoho TeamInbox* allows a team to share an email address and collaboratively manage messages (assigning threads to owners, adding internal comments, etc.)[[12]](https://www.dragapp.com/blog/shared-inbox-for-large-enterprises/#:~:text=). *HubSpot Conversations* is another, which aggregates emails into a shared team inbox with chat and CRM integration[[13]](https://www.dragapp.com/blog/shared-inbox-for-large-enterprises/#:~:text=Image%3A%20hubspot%20shared%20inboxes%20,100). These platforms provide a web interface where all team members can see incoming mail, avoid duplicating work, and respond from the shared address. Many have features like tagging, automation, and auditing who handled each message – useful for accountability and organization in a big team[[14]](https://www.dragapp.com/blog/shared-inbox-for-large-enterprises/#:~:text=Accountability)[[15]](https://www.dragapp.com/blog/shared-inbox-for-large-enterprises/#:~:text=Inbox%20organization). **Important:** If considering such a service, choose one that **hosts data in the UK** or offers regional hosting to meet your requirements. Some vendors allow EU/UK data centers or offer on-premise versions. Always verify data residency (for example, *Zendesk* and *Freshdesk* are popular helpdesk solutions, but you’d need to configure EU/UK data storage).
* **On-Premises or UK-Hosted Email Archiving Solutions:** For the archival aspect and read-access to old emails, an enterprise email archiving system could be ideal. Products like **Cryoserver** (UK-based) can ingest a copy of all emails (via journaling or forwarding) and store them in a secure, tamper-evident archive[[16]](https://www.cryoserver.com/#:~:text=Cryoserver%20is%20an%20email%20archiving,premises%20or%20a%20cloud%20solution). Such systems typically provide a **fast search interface** for end-users to retrieve any email from the archive, without needing to load it all in Outlook. Cryoserver, for instance, can be deployed on-premises or in a UK cloud, and it **turns your email data into a searchable repository for everyday use**[[16]](https://www.cryoserver.com/#:~:text=Cryoserver%20is%20an%20email%20archiving,premises%20or%20a%20cloud%20solution). Users could be given read-only access to search and view any email from the last 7 years in the archive portal. This would **dramatically improve Outlook performance** because the live mailbox can be kept much smaller (you might keep only the last 6-12 months live, and archive older messages). For sending email, users would still send through Exchange (or the shared inbox platform), but historical referencing is done in the archive. Other archiving solutions to consider include *Barracuda Message Archiver, Veritas Enterprise Vault,* or *Mimecast*, but ensure their deployment/hosting meets the UK data requirement. These can also enforce retention policies (automatically purging items older than 7 years, for example, after export or as per policy).
* **Helpdesk / Ticketing Systems:** If the nature of this mailbox is a support or inquiry queue (e.g. an email where customers or internal users send requests), transitioning to a true **ticketing system** might be the ultimate fix. With 300 people involved, it sounds similar to a customer support scenario. A helpdesk system (e.g. *Jira Service Management, Freshdesk, Zendesk, ServiceNow*) can ingest incoming emails and turn them into tickets that agents (your users) work on. The advantage is that these systems are built for **high-volume, multi-user concurrency** – no one is downloading a giant mailbox; instead, each ticket is accessible on demand. They also provide features like collisions avoidance (preventing two people from answering the same query), internal notes, workflow, and robust search across all tickets. Many allow sending responses that appear as emails from the shared address, satisfying the “send as” requirement. If you require UK-only data storage, look for vendors with UK data center options or consider hosting an open-source ticket system on your own servers. For example, **OTRS** or **osTicket** are open-source helpdesk solutions that you could host in-house, keeping data in the UK. This route requires more implementation effort (and user training, since it’s a new interface), but it can greatly streamline handling of the emails if they are task-oriented (incidents, requests, etc.). It also inherently archives the communications for as long as you keep the tickets, easily meeting retention needs. This is aligned with the idea that sometimes a shared mailbox with subfolders trying to mimic a ticket system is a sign that a “proper ticketing system” would be more efficient[[17]](https://practical365.com/office-365-groups-vs-shared-mailboxes/#:~:text=There%20is%20some%20demand%20for,folders%20is%20quite%20sufficient).
* **Alternate Email Clients:** As a minor consideration, some organizations try alternative email clients (e.g. Mozilla Thunderbird, eM Client) to access large mailboxes via IMAP or other protocols. While an IMAP client might only load headers and could be slightly more lightweight, it **won’t fundamentally solve** the performance problem with so many users and such a large mailbox. It also may not support “Send As” without tricky setup. Thus, switching the client software alone (away from Outlook) is generally not a sufficient solution here. The bottleneck is the mailbox size and concurrency, not just Outlook’s inefficiency. However, if a few users insist on not using Outlook/OWA, an IMAP client in **online mode** (no offline cache) could be an interim workaround for read access. They would need to use the SMTP send-as through Exchange for sending. Again, the above solutions (Group, archive, or helpdesk) are more robust long-term fixes.

## **Better Archiving & Compliance (7-Year Retention)**

Whichever front-end solution you choose for access, **implementing proper archiving is key** to manage the 7-year retention without keeping everything in one giant active mailbox:

* **Leverage Retention Policies:** In Microsoft 365, set up a retention policy that covers the shared mailbox (or its replacement). For example, a policy to **retain all items for 7 years** (and then optionally delete or archive them). If using Exchange Online Archiving, you might configure a retention tag to move items to the archive after, say, 1 year, and a deletion tag at 7 years (if deletion is allowed after that period per your governance). This ensures no email that should be kept is permanently lost, even if users delete something – it stays in the archive or recoverable state until 7 years pass.
* **Third-Party Archive for Compliance:** As mentioned, a product like Cryoserver or Mimecast can automatically capture every email (inbound and outbound) via journaling. This way, even if someone *does* delete an email from the mailbox, the archive still has a copy. These systems are designed for compliance — they often offer **immutable storage**, audit trails, and quick e-discovery searches across the entire 7-year corpus. Users (or at least compliance officers) can search by keywords, senders, dates, etc., across the years without loading the entire mailbox in Outlook. Since your requirement is to keep emails for 7 years, using such an archive means you **don’t have to keep 7 years of mail in the live mailbox**. You could, for instance, keep only 1-2 years live (for convenience) and safely remove older emails from the mailbox (or move to archive), knowing they reside in the separate archive solution. This dramatically reduces mailbox size and improves client performance. **Data residency:** Many of these vendors have UK options – e.g., an on-prem appliance or a cloud instance hosted in UK data centers. Always confirm that in the vendor’s specs or ask for a UK/EU tenancy.
* **Monitor and Maintain:** With any archiving in place, periodically review the mailbox size. If you use Exchange Online auto-expanding archive, the archive can grow but the primary mailbox should stabilize once older mail is consistently moved off. If using a third-party archive, implement a routine (or policy) to **export and remove** emails older than X years from the mailbox to prevent it ballooning again. This might be part of the retention policy (auto-delete from mailbox after 7 years, since it’s safe in archive). Also train the “Full Access owners” or admins on how to manage the archive and ensure new users are given access as needed.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

To address both the **user experience** and **archiving needs**, consider a combination of these strategies:

* **Migrate the shared mailbox to a more scalable platform** – either an **Office 365 Group mailbox** (built for large teams) or a **dedicated shared inbox/ticketing system** if the use-case fits (keeping data in UK). This will remove the 25-user limit and provide a smoother experience for 300+ users sending and reading emails from the shared address[[1]](https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/admin/email/about-shared-mailboxes?view=o365-worldwide#:~:text=,like%20a%20Microsoft%20365%20group). It also avoids the giant-OST issue by not forcing all data to sync to every client.
* **Enable and enforce archiving** of older emails. For example, turn on Exchange Online’s in-place archive with auto-expanding storage so you can keep 7 years of email without a 400GB primary mailbox[[9]](https://macroview365.com/7-simple-steps-to-improve-outlook-shared-mailbox-performance/#:~:text=6). Alternatively or additionally, deploy a third-party UK-based email archiving solution (like *Cryoserver*) to keep an immutable 7-year store of all messages, accessible via a fast search portal[[16]](https://www.cryoserver.com/#:~:text=Cryoserver%20is%20an%20email%20archiving,premises%20or%20a%20cloud%20solution). This lets you drastically **trim the live mailbox** size (improving Outlook performance) while staying compliant with retention. Users will use the archive interface (or Outlook’s archive folder) to retrieve older mails as needed, rather than loading years of email in the main client.
* **Optimize client access** for the new setup. If sticking with Outlook, use Online Mode or limited caching for the shared data to avoid syncing thousands of folders/items locally[[3]](https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/troubleshoot/outlook/performance/performance-issues-if-too-many-items-or-folders#:~:text=,the%20large%20number%20of%20folders). If using a web-based shared inbox tool or helpdesk, users can access it through their browsers (or any provided desktop app), which might be more responsive for large-scale collaboration than Outlook was.

By implementing these changes, you should see a **significant improvement in performance and manageability**. The mailbox (or its replacement) will be right-sized for daily use, and a robust archive will handle the 7-year retention transparently. In similar cases, admins have found that once the mailbox is reduced and not every user is downloading everything, the complaints of slowness drop dramatically. And importantly, you’ll still meet all compliance requirements and enable 300+ people to both **read and send** via the shared email address (just through a better-suited system).

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