

Fact Sheet

Restorative Engagement Program

The Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman (the Office), within its Defence Force Ombudsman jurisdiction, is able to receive reports of abuse within the Australian Defence Force (ADF). As part of its response to support those who report abuse the Office offers reportees the option of participating in its Restorative Engagement Program.

The program is designed to support you, as a reportee, to tell your personal story of abuse to a senior officer from the ADF in a private, facilitated meeting – a Restorative Engagement Conference. The conference also provides the opportunity for Defence to acknowledge and respond to your personal story of abuse.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the program, as well as answers some frequently asked questions about the conference process itself.

How can I participate in the Restorative Engagement Program?

If your report of abuse has been found within the Office's Jurisdiction as a report of *abuse*, you will be provided with the opportunity to participate in the Restorative Engagement Program. Your participation in the program can only commence once your report has been assessed by our Office as being within the jurisdiction of the scheme.

If you elect to participate in the program, a Conference Officer from the Restorative Engagement Team will arrange a time to speak with you. This is an opportunity for you to discuss the expectations of the program and the steps involved in the process leading up to a conference. On page 6, there is a diagram that outlines the week by week steps involved in arranging a conference.

Restorative Engagement conferences must be safe for you and the other participants. This means making sure that the program is suitable for you and ensuring all participants are ready to participate prior to a conference going ahead.

Looking after yourself during the Restorative Engagement process

While we expect the Restorative Engagement process to be a positive one, we are aware the process can be distressing for some people. At any time throughout the process you can contact your Conference Officer if you wish to postpone or withdraw from the process.

If you are feeling in need of support, you can contact:

Lifeline: 131 114

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636

Open Arms - Veterans & Families Counselling: 1800 011 046

Is participation in the program confidential?

A fundamental principle of the program is that your privacy, safety and wellbeing are of paramount importance throughout your participation in the program.

Contact us

ombudsman.gov.au

REDFO@ombudsman.gov.au

1300 362 072

GPO Box 442
Canberra ACT 2601

The Ombudsman has offices in:

- » Adelaide
- » Brisbane
- » Canberra
- » Melbourne
- » Perth
- » Sydney

Your privacy, safety and wellbeing are of paramount importance throughout your participation in the program.

In implementing the conference process, the provision of personal information to the Defence Response Unit (DRU) is restricted to *a need to know basis*.

The DRU are a secure cell within the Command Support Branch, who report directly to the Chief of the Defence Force.

In addition, your personal story of abuse will not be shared with a Facilitator or Defence Representative until you have had the opportunity to review their biographies and approve their participation. Further details on these steps are on page 6.

What if I am still a serving member?

If you are still serving in the ADF, the DRU can put measures in place to protect your privacy and prevent Defence personnel from knowing that you are participating in the program.

Your Conference Officer will be able to provide more information about possible arrangements that can be made to protect your privacy.

How long does the process take?

After you express interest in participating in the program, a referral to the program is made, and the process of setting up a conference commences, usually taking between 10-12 weeks. This time allows for the nomination of a Defence representative, a Facilitator and for logistical arrangements to be made by the Office for the pre-conference meetings and the conference itself.

For an overview of the process, see page 6.

Who participates in a conference?

You, a support person (should you choose to have one), a representative from the ADF and a Facilitator will be present during a conference.

The role of a support person

It is important that you are supported throughout your participation in the program by someone you know. This person may be a partner, family member, friend or even a professional support worker or counsellor (who is supporting you in a personal capacity not a professional or advocacy capacity, as they will not be remunerated by the Office to attend).

You are encouraged to have someone to support you through the process and afterwards. This involves your support person attending the pre-conference preparation meeting and the conference itself. If you elect not to have a support person, you can still participate in a conference.

The role of a Facilitator

The Facilitator's role in the conference process is to assist you in preparing for the conference and to ensure that your interests are the focus of the discussion. Facilitators are trained by the Office's Restorative Engagement team specifically to deliver Restorative Engagement conferences. They are highly experienced professionals who come from a range of backgrounds including social work, psychology, mediation, or law.

During your initial call with your Conference Officer, you will be given the opportunity to advise of any preferences you have for your Facilitator. In the following weeks you will be sent their biography to confirm you are comfortable with their participation in your conference process.

The role of the Defence representative

Defence representatives are senior officers from any of the three services within the ADF. The Defence representatives are trained by the Office's Restorative Engagement team to prepare them for their participation. All of the Defence representatives volunteer to participate in this program.

The Defence representative is selected based on any preferences identified during your initial call with your Conference Officer, such as gender, rank or service history. The Office will nominate a Defence representative who aligns with your preferences as closely as possible, however there is no guarantee that a specifically identified Defence representative will be available.

You will be provided with a biography of the nominated Defence representative to review and confirm you are comfortable with their participation in your conference process.

Participation of senior Defence Officers contributes to building insight into abuse and its impacts on individuals within Defence. It is hoped that the insights achieved through this participation inform ongoing cultural change within Defence.

What is the pre-conference meeting?

As you can see in the diagram on page 6 the pre-conference meeting will occur one week before the conference. The meeting will usually be arranged to occur on the same weekday, and time, and at the same venue. This will allow you to get familiar with the location so it will be easier to navigate the following week.

The pre-conference meeting is an opportunity for you to work with your Facilitator to prepare for the conference. At this meeting, the Facilitator will discuss your readiness and understanding of the program and its aims, answer any questions you may have, and assist you to identify the issues that you may wish to raise during the conference. The pre-conference meeting will generally take between two to four hours.

The Facilitator also has a pre-conference meeting with the Defence representative to provide them with an understanding of the circumstances surrounding your experience of abuse, your motivations and expectations for participating and to answer any questions they may have about the process.

How long does a conference last?

It is estimated that the conference itself will last two to four hours. However, this is not an exact time frame and there may be some instances where a conference will go for a longer or shorter time than this.

Where will the conference take place?

The conference would take place as close as possible to your place of residence, however there will be occasions where a conference will need to be scheduled in the closest capital city. Where travel is required by you and/or your support person, the Office will pay for and arrange any travel and accommodation¹.

Is there any financial support to assist with attending the conference?

Generally conferences will be located close to you to minimise the need for you (and your support person) to travel. However, if you (and your support person) require any travel or accommodation to enable you to attend the pre-conference or conference meetings, the Office will make the reasonable and necessary arrangements. You (and your support person) may also be entitled to reimbursement of reasonable expenses, such as the cost of parking, to enable you to attend.

What are the possible outcomes of a conference?

The conference itself is the intended outcome. However, there may be occasions where a reportee and a Defence representative agree to certain things happening outside of the conference. These are called *follow up actions* and when they arise, Defence is responsible for implementing them.

¹ Where you drive your own car, you will be re-imbursed on a 'cents per kilometre' basis if your residence is more than 50km from the conference venue.

What will happen after a conference?

At the conclusion of the conference the Facilitator will check in with you immediately after and then within a few days of the conference taking place.

It is important that where possible you ensure that you have adequate personal support in place, either through your chosen support person, or with someone else you can speak with before and after the conference.

Feedback from others about participating in the Restorative Engagement Program

Since the first Restorative Engagement conference was held in the second half of 2017, feedback from reportees, support people and Defence representatives about their participation in the Restorative Engagement Program has been overwhelmingly positive. This feedback reflects that participants feel well prepared, safe, and respected during the process. The following is a small selection of de-identified quotes from consenting reportees and support persons.

Quotes from reportees:

'The conference is an outstanding process with a positive outcome, it offers empathy and a mechanism for closure and a platform to be able to move forward. If I was asked by an ex-serving member the value of the conference, I would highly recommend and encourage the process.'

'It went really well. I was extremely apprehensive, nervous and unsure how I would feel during the conference. My facilitator was very nice. She made me feel at ease and explained the process clearly so I understood what to expect. The Defence Representative was also extremely nice. I found her to be very genuine and sincere. She seemed to genuinely care about my story.'

'If I knew of a stronger English word than excellent I would certainly use that word. I could not ask for two [more] professional people than my Facilitator and Defence Representative. They made the Journey worthwhile. Its important that the Navy personnel shows compassion. I was very lucky having this Defence Representative. So lucky'

'Originally I was not interested in a face to face meeting. I am now glad I did and a lot of this was due to the conversations with the facilitator and your office. Thank you for your support and help.'

Quotes from support people:

'I believe the conference was extremely positive. We were given plenty of time and encouragement to express personal thoughts, feelings and reflections. I found it to be a very safe place, where all parties spoke openly and respectfully. It is my belief that my husband was able to receive another level of healing and closure.'

'The conference was a positive experience. I am very happy that the reportee decided to contact the Defence Ombudsman in response to the ads he saw in the newspaper. That he did this and has remained engaged throughout the process to the conference is something I would not have expected given his psychological history. I have greater hope for his peace of mind for the future, thanks to this opportunity through the Ombudsman's office and for this I sincerely thank you.'

'Exceptionally well. We were well prepared beforehand by the facilitator so we knew the conference was going to be one on one for the reportee. A lot less intimidating than a tribunal setting. The Defence rep was very attentive, with total visual engagement and listened to every word. He was respectful and the reportee felt comfortable in his presence. The entire process was worth more than words can express.'

Defence representatives have stated that participating in the conference process has

- improved their understanding of abuse and its impacts for Defence;
- assisted them to better understand and respond to individuals reporting abuse in the future; and
- strengthened their resolve to implement cultural change to eliminate abuse.

Will I have a chance to provide feedback?

You and your support person will be provided with a *feedback form* regarding your participation. Providing feedback is optional but is an important aspect in determining whether the program is meeting its core principles and values. All information received through the feedback process is confidential and is highly appreciated.

Further information

If you have any questions or concerns relating to participating in the program, please contact the Restorative Engagement Team via email at REDFO@ombudsman.gov.au.

The Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman has taken reasonable action to ensure that the information contained in this publication is accurate and adequately comprehensive for the purpose for which it was created. The Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman is not responsible for any damage or loss claimed to arise from any error or omission in this information.

Timeline of Conference Process

The process of arranging a Restorative Engagement conference will usually occur over the space of 12 weeks. Below are the steps involved in the process:

Week 1 - Introductory phone call

Your Conference Officer (CO) will arrange a phone call with you to discuss the conference process. This is an opportunity for you to ask any questions, as well as discuss logistics and preferences for your participants.



Week 2 - Locking in conference dates

Following your phone call with your CO, they will send you an email providing the preliminary dates for your pre-conference and conference. Your CO will take into account any availability or date preferences you advised of during your prior phone call. If the dates provided do not suit you, just let your CO know and they can easily adjust them.



Weeks 3 - 4 - Finding a Facilitator and Defence representative

Your CO, using the preferences you provided to them, will find a suitable Facilitator and Defence representative for your conference.



Week 5 - Providing biographies

You will receive an email from your CO which contains the biographies for the Facilitator and Defence representative for your conference process. If you have any concerns with either participant, simply let your CO know and they will find you an alternate participant.



Weeks 6-7 - Finding a venue and sending briefing information

The CO will find a venue for your conference and make any necessary travel arrangements. They will also send briefing information to both the Facilitator and Defence representative. Only the Facilitator will be provided with your phone number and email address. Both parties will be given a copy of your personal account of abuse, as reported to the DFO at the start of your contact with our Office. If there are any parts of your account you do not wish to have shared with the Defence representative, please let your CO know during your introductory phone call (week 1).



Week 8 - Receive full itinerary

You will receive an email containing the venue location for your conferences and any other relevant travel information related to your attendance of the conference.



Week 9 - Initial engagement with Facilitator

You will be contacted by your Facilitator. This is an opportunity for them to introduce themselves and for you to ask any further questions you may have about the process. This is also an opportunity for you to talk through any concerns you may have. This contact will usually occur two weeks prior to the pre-conference. This is so any concerns regarding participation can be identified, and the conferences can be rescheduled if need be.



Week 11 - Pre-conference

You will attend the pre-conference with your Facilitator and (if requested) your support person. During the pre-conference the Facilitator will talk you through what to expect on the day.



Week 12 - Restorative Engagement Conference

This conference will occur at the same venue as your pre-conference. In the days following the conference you will receive a phone call from the Facilitator to check in with you and to have any further debriefing.