



Fact Sheet

Restorative Engagement Program

The Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman, in its role as the Defence Force Ombudsman (DFO), offers a safe and independent avenue for past or serving Australian Defence Force (Defence) members to make a complaint about abuse experienced during their service.

There is a range of actions the DFO can take in response to a complaint of abuse. One outcome is the opportunity to participate in a Restorative Engagement conference.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the Restorative Engagement program.

The Restorative Engagement program

The Restorative Engagement program is designed to provide a personalised and restorative-focused response to people who may have experienced abuse through a carefully facilitated meeting.

The Office established the program as a means of directly addressing the harm, needs and interests of people making a complaint about their experiences of abuse in Defence. Participation in the program provides an opportunity for complainants to engage in an evidence based, safely led conference where their personal account of abuse is heard and acknowledged by a Defence Representative and receive an apology or response for the harm caused.

A secondary objective of the program is to enable a broader insight into the impact of abuse and its implications for individuals and Defence. This insight is critical to building on cultural change strategies in Defence.

Participation in the program can only begin once a complaint has been assessed by our Office. You can find more information about submitting a complaint about abuse on our [website](#).

Once a complaint about abuse in Defence has been assessed, and you have been offered the opportunity to participate in the Restorative Engagement program, a Conference Officer from the Restorative Engagement team will contact you. Your Conference Officer will work with you to plan your participation in the program.

Contact us:

ombudsman.gov.au

defenceforce.ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.au

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.

Preparing for the conference

The first step of the conference process is the initial call with a Conference Officer. This is an opportunity for you to discuss your expectations of the program, the steps involved in the lead up to a conference, and to discuss preferences for a Facilitator and Defence Representative.

From the initial call with a Conference Officer, the process of setting up a conference commences and will usually take 12 weeks. Please see the diagram on **page 7** for further information on this process.

Generally, conferences will be located near you to minimise the need for travel. However, if you (and your support person) require any travel or accommodation to attend the pre-conference or conference meetings, the Office will make reasonable and necessary arrangements. You (and your support person) may also be entitled to reimbursement of reasonable expenses (such as the cost of parking) for you to attend.¹

Conference structure

The Restorative Engagement program consists of 3 separate meetings:

- the pre-conference between you, the support person (if you choose to have one) and the Facilitator
- a pre-conference between the Facilitator and Defence Representative
- the Restorative Engagement conference with all conference participants.

The pre-conferences

As outlined in the timeline on **page 7**, a pre-conference meeting with you will take place one week before the conference. The meeting will usually be arranged to occur on the same weekday, time and at the same venue as the conference. This will help you become 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 what you are hoping to achieve from the conference, your readiness to participate, answer any questions you may have, and help you to identify the issues that you may wish to raise during the conference. The pre-conference meeting will generally take between 1 to 2 hours.

The Facilitator also holds a pre-conference meeting with the Defence representative to give them 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.

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.

The Restorative Engagement conference

By the day of the conference, you will be well acquainted with your Facilitator and the conference venue. Your Facilitator will have made a plan with you during the pre-conference about what to expect on the day of the conference and how you would like the conversation to go. Not all conferences are the same, and the meeting will be tailored to meet your needs.

A Restorative Engagement conference will usually last between 2 to 3 hours. However, this is not an exact timeframe, and there may be some instances where a conference will run for a longer or shorter amount of time.

Conference participants

You, a support person (should you choose to have one), a representative from Defence, and a Facilitator will be present during the Restorative Engagement conference. Information about who will attend and what their roles are is below.

The 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 as they will not be remunerated by the Office to attend). Your support person will be required to attend the pre-conference preparation meeting and the conference itself.

If you choose not to have a support person, you can still participate in the Restorative Engagement Program.

The Facilitator

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

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

The Defence Representative

During an initial call with your Conference Officer, you will be given the opportunity to discuss any preferences you have for your Defence Representative. These preferences may include the specific service, gender, rank, or career history.

With your preferences, your Conference Officer will seek nominations from our counterparts in Defence, the Defence Response Unit (DRU). The DRU will nominate a Defence representative who aligns with your preferences as closely as possible. You will be sent the Defence Representative's biography to confirm you are comfortable with their participation in your conference process.

All Defence Representatives receive training to prepare for their participation in the Office's Restorative Engagement Program, and all have volunteered to participate in this program.

The role of a Defence Representative is to actively listen to your personal story and provide a meaningful acknowledgement and apology on behalf of Defence for the abuse that you have experienced.

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

Indirect Restorative Engagement

In some circumstances, an indirect conference process may be more appropriate. Indirect Restorative Engagement provides you with the opportunity to engage meaningfully with a Defence representative through a Facilitator. This process will still allow you to seek recognition and acknowledgment from Defence. However, rather than meeting with the Defence Representative in a face-to-face conference, you will receive a letter of apology.

An indirect conference still involves obtaining your preferences for a Facilitator and Defence Representative to participate in the process. You will still also meet with the Facilitator in a face-to-face pre-conference, where you can share your personal story of abuse and discuss any information you wish to convey to the Defence Representative.

The Facilitator will then meet with the Defence Representative, where they will provide details about your experience (all with your approval). This will enable the Defence Representative to write you a letter of apology that is meaningful and reflective of your personal experience.

For indirect conference processes, it is preferable that the Facilitator's pre-conference meeting with you and your support person is conducted face-to-face. However, if you do not wish to participate in a face-to-face pre-conference meeting, the Office can facilitate the meeting via video conferencing or telephone.

All steps outlined in the diagram on **page 7**, up until the pre-conference meeting stage, are applicable to the indirect Restorative Engagement process.

Post conference

In the days following the conference, you will receive a call from the Facilitator to discuss your experience of the conference and to ensure your safety and wellbeing.

The conference itself is the intended outcome. However, there may be occasions where a complainant and a Defence representative agree to certain actions outside of the conference. These are called 'follow up actions'. A common follow up action is to receive a letter of apology from the Defence Representative. In the weeks following the Conference, the Office will ensure follow up actions are implemented and will provide you a copy of the 'Record of Agreed Follow Up Actions' and your consent form.

During the conference, you and your support person will be provided with a feedback form about your participation. Providing feedback is optional but is an important aspect in determining whether the program meets its core principles and values. All information received through the feedback process is confidential and will ensure continuous improvement to the program and that it meets the needs of the participants.

Confidentiality

Your privacy, safety, and wellbeing are all of the utmost importance throughout the process. As part of the conference process, the Office will also provide our counterparts at Defence, the Defence Response Unit (DRU) with a de-identified summary of your complaint and your preferences so an appropriate Defence Representative is nominated for your conference. The DRU is a secure cell within the Command Support Branch, which reports directly to the Chief of the Defence Force.

The Office also provides briefing material to the Defence Representative, which will include a copy of your personal story. The Office will only provide this after you have reviewed their biography and confirmed you are comfortable with their participation.

If you are still serving in Defence, 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.

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. For further details on these steps, see **page 7**.

Feedback about the Restorative Engagement Program

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

'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.'

'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
- helped them implement cultural change to eliminate abuse.

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

- » Lifeline: **131 114**
- » Beyond Blue:
1300 224 636
- » Open Arms – Veterans & Families Counselling:
1800 011 046

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 12 weeks. The steps involved in the process are outlined below:

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 your preferences.



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 consider any availability or date preferences you have advised. If the dates provided do not suit you, simply advise your CO and they will be adjusted.



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 containing the biographies for the Facilitator and Defence Representative for your conference process. If you have any concerns with either participant, simply advise your CO 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 detailing the venue location for your conferences and any other relevant travel information.



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 2 weeks prior to the pre-conference, so any concerns regarding participation can be identified, and the conferences can be rescheduled if necessary.



Week 11 – Pre-conference

You will attend the pre-conference with your Facilitator and (if requested and applicable) 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 engage in any further debriefing.