

GUIDANCE ON APOLOGIES

Making a meaningful apology

When it turns out that a service or commitment has been wrongly denied or delayed, the public service provider should always give a detailed explanation and/or an apology. This guidance note describes what an apology is and what you need to do for an apology to be meaningful.

What is an apology?

Many people tell us that what they are looking for by making a complaint is for the service provider to acknowledge that something went wrong and to receive a meaningful apology. An apology is much more than an expression of regret. It can be relatively simple to say sorry that someone had a 'bad experience'. It is much harder to apologise for your mistakes or for those made by your organisation. An apology is an exchange between two people (or groups), so getting the process right is as important as saying the right things.

Why apologise?

A meaningful apology can help both sides calm their emotions and move on to put things right. It is often the first step to repairing a damaged relationship. An apology can help restore trust and avoid future disputes. It acknowledges that you did not behave in line with your responsibilities or rules.

What do people want from an apology?

Our experience is that people who make a complaint want and expect many different things from an apology.

They may want you to:

- accept that you have done wrong
- confirm that they were right
- understand why things went wrong
- accept responsibility
- reassure them that the problem has been dealt with and will not happen again
- try to repair the relationship between you and them or
- help restore their reputation.

What is a meaningful apology?

To make your apology meaningful you should:

- Accept that you have done something wrong. This means identifying what went wrong. Your apology must describe the offending action or behaviour, whether or not it was intentional. Your description must be specific to show that you understand the offence you have caused. It must also acknowledge the effects of the offence on the person who has made a complaint.
- Accept that you are responsible for the offence and the harm done. This includes setting out who was responsible for the offence.
- Clearly explain why the offence happened. Your explanation should show that the offence was not intentional or personal. Although most people will want or need an explanation, you should understand that this is not always the case. Also, if there is no valid explanation, then don't offer an explanation at all. You might just say that there is no excuse for the offending behaviour.
- Show that you are sincere in your apology. This shows that you understand the effect your action has had on the person who has made a complaint. It can be difficult to communicate how sorry you are in writing. You should take into account the nature of the harm done and the needs of the person who has made a complaint to decide whether you should say sorry in person and then back it up by repeating it in writing, or just make it in writing.
- Assure them that you will not repeat the offence. This may include stating the steps you have taken, or will take, to deal with the complaint and the steps you will take to make sure that the harm does not happen again (where possible).
- Make amends – put things right where you can. (*See our Ombudsman document: "Redress - Getting it Wrong and Putting it Right" on our website.*)

How should I make an apology?

It is important that, when you are making an apology, you understand:

- how and why the person making the complaint believes that they were wronged and
- what they want in order to put things right.

You cannot put together a meaningful apology without understanding these things. We recommend that you ask the person making the complaint what they want and involve them in deciding the content of the apology and how it should be made.

Each complaint is unique, so your apology will need to be based on the individual circumstances.

- The timing of an apology is very important. You should make an apology as soon as possible after you find out something has gone wrong. A delay can increase the damage done and an opportunity may be lost.
- To make an apology meaningful, do not distance yourself from the apology and do not let there be any doubt that you are owning up to your mistake (for example, say 'It was my fault' rather than 'If mistakes have been made...').
- Use clear, plain and direct language.
- Be natural and sincere in your apology.
- Your apology should not question whether the person who has made a complaint has been harmed (for example, by saying 'I am sorry if you were offended').
- Your apology should not make the offence seem unimportant (for example by saying 'no-one else has complained').
- It is also very important that you apologise to the right person or people.

Who should apologise?

As a general rule, where you are willing and able to apologise, you should be supported in doing so.

If you are employed by, or have been contracted by, a public service provider and are unsure whether you should make an apology or whether someone else should make an apology on your behalf, you should ask your colleagues for advice. Your organisation may have guidelines you can use. In some cases, the leader of your organisation may want to make a personal or official apology on your behalf.

In other cases, you may feel that the leader of your organisation is more responsible for the offence and should make the apology. If your organisation is apologising on your behalf, the apology should be made by the person who takes overall responsibility for the services provided by that organisation, such as the manager or owner.

The benefits to organisations of apologising

It is important to remember that an apology is not a sign of weakness or an invitation to be sued. It can be a sign of strength and it can show that you are willing to learn when something has gone wrong.

It can also show that you are committed to putting things right. To apologise is good practice and is an important part of effectively managing complaints.

This guidance note on 'Making a Meaningful Apology' has been adapted from guidance provided by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO).