

Our guidance on **apology**

When we investigate a complaint and find a problem that has not been solved, we often recommend that the organisation offer an apology.

This guidance note sets out what an apology is and what you need to do for an apology to be meaningful.

We can give you this leaflet in other languages and formats (such as large font or Braille) if you ask.

Our guidance on apology

What is an apology?

An apology is much more than an expression of regret. It can be relatively simple – and helpful – 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. It can help to restore dignity and trust. It says that both sides share values about appropriate behaviour towards each other and that the offending side has regrets when they do not behave in line with those values.

What do people who make a complaint 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; and
- help restore their reputation.

What is a meaningful apology?

To make your apology meaningful you should do the following.

- Accept what you have done wrong. This means naming the offence you have caused. Your apology must correctly 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 you have caused on the person who has made a complaint.
- Accept your responsibility 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 you have no valid explanation, then don't offer an explanation at all – you could just say that there is no excuse for the offending behaviour.
- Show that you are sincerely sorry. This shows that you understand the suffering of 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. We deal with this in a separate document called ‘Policy on Redress’.

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 directly 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. There is no ‘one size fits all’ apology, but here is some general good practice.

- 1** The timing of an apology is very important. Once you find out that you have done wrong, if you delay then you may lose your opportunity to apologise.
- 2** 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...’).
- 3** The language you use should be clear, plain and direct.
- 4** Your apology should sound natural and sincere.
- 5** 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’).
- 6** Your apology should not make the offence seem unimportant (for example by saying ‘no-one else has complained’).
- 7** It is also very important that you apologise to the right person or people.

Our guidance on apology

APRIL 2010

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 body 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 a Chief Executive, Director or Head of Department.

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.

**SPSO, 4 Melville Street
Edinburgh EH3 7NS**

Tel **0800 377 7330**
Fax **0800 377 7331**
Text **0790 049 4372**
Web **www.spsso.org.uk**

SPSO
Freepost EH641
Edinburgh EH3 0BR



SPSO Scottish
Public
Services
Ombudsman