



# Guide to apologising

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When we, at the Property Redress Scheme (PRS), investigate a complaint and decide the member is responsible for having caused an injustice or hardship, we will make a recommendation on what the member needs to do to put things right.

A common recommendation is for the member to make a meaningful apology and this guide helps you understand the best way to achieve this.

## What is an apology?

Principally it is telling someone that you accept responsibility, and are sorry for having done something that has caused problems. However it is clear that an apology is much more than an expression of regret.

A meaningful apology is an interactive exchange between parties, where it is not only what we say but how we say it that is important. It follows that the person receiving an apology decides whether or not to accept the apology and forgive the offender.

## What does the person making the complaint want?

Experience shows that people want and expect many different things from an apology. These may include all or some of the following:

- acceptance that something wrong has been done
- confirmation that they were right
- an understanding of why things went wrong
- an acceptance of responsibility
- a reassurance that the problem has been dealt with and will not happen again
- a reconciliation of a relationship
- the restoration of their reputation

## Why apologise?

We all know and understand that not everyone finds it easy to apologise. However, a meaningful apology is often the first step to repairing a damaged relationship. It can also help to restore dignity and trust. It says that both parties share values about how to behave appropriately towards each other, and that the offending party is remorseful where their actions fall short of these values.

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### What is a meaningful apology?

Experts consider that an apology has a number of integral parts which are essential to a meaningful apology. While including all these elements may not guarantee success, without them an apology is more likely to be unsuccessful. The importance and necessity of each element will vary depending on the nature of the offence, and the overall apology should be proportionate to the harm done.

**Top tip** - An adequate or sincere apology will be long enough to be effective and structured in a way that is personal, to the person receiving it.

### Constructing a meaningful apology:

1. **Accept what you have done wrong by naming the offence.** Whether or not it was intentional, an apology must describe the offending action or behaviour correctly. The description must be specific to show that you understand the wrong that was done and the impact of those actions or lack of action
2. **Accept responsibility for the offence and the harm done.** This includes identifying who was responsible for the causing the problem (described in step 1)
3. **Provide an effective explanation of why the offence happened.** This should make it clear that the offence was not intentional or personal.
4. **Express your remorse sincerely.** This shows that you recognise the impact of your actions and are remorseful. It can be difficult to communicate sincere remorse in writing, so the nature of the harm done and needs of those wronged should be considered when deciding if this should be made in person
5. **An assurance or promise that the offence will not happen again.** This may include a statement of the steps that you have, or that will be, taken to deal with the complaint and prevent it happening again in future

**Please be aware** – It is unlikely that one sentence will be acceptable as a meaningful apology.

### What else should I consider?

It is essential to understand how and why the person making the complaint believes that they were wronged and what they want in order to put things right. It is impossible to construct a meaningful apology without this understanding.

You may need to ask the person making the complaint what they want and involve them in deciding the form and content of the meaningful apology which should:

- be owned, active and unconditional (i.e. 'it was my fault' rather than 'if mistakes have been made')
- use plain, simple and direct language which sounds natural and sincere
- *not* question whether the aggrieved has been harmed (i.e. 'If you were offended') or minimise the offence (i.e. 'no-one else has complained')
- be clear that it is essential to apologise to the right person(s)
- understand that the timing of an apology can be crucial. Making an apology as soon as possible after realising you have done wrong offers the best chance of success. A delayed apology may be an opportunity lost

**Top tip** - Each complaint is unique and each apology needs to be tailored to the individual. There is no one size fits all

### Who should apologise?

As a general rule, if the person who committed the offence is willing and able to apologise, they should be allowed and supported in doing so. If a personal or official apology is being delivered by a third party, on behalf of a member, then it should be delivered by the boss i.e. the person considered the most accountable, to the person making the complaint.

