

Facilitator Guidance: Exchange of Letters

Face to face conferences aren't always possible or appropriate, so you may want to discuss with participants the possibility of communicating via letter.

Input from the Harmed Person

If agreed, discuss with the harmed person how much information about how they have been affected they would like shared with the wrongdoer before the first letter is written, and ask them if they have any particular questions they would like to be addressed. Examples may include:

- Why did you pick me?
- Will you do it again?
- Am I safe?
- What do you think you actually did?
- How do you feel about what you've done now?
- Do you have any idea how this has affected me and my family?
- I really want you to know
- What's happened to you as a consequence of this?
- How can I be sure that you mean what you say / will do what you say you're going to do?

Also discuss whether or not they think they may want to respond to the letter from the wrongdoer once they have received it, and let the wrongdoer know if they may get a response.

Content

Explain to the wrongdoer what the harmed person wants included in the letter. In addition, the following questions may help them to think about what they want to write:

- Are you sorry and willing to apologise?
- What are you apologising for? (the offence, the effect on harmed person, the effect on others etc)
- What emotions are you feeling? (guilt, shame, feeling stupid etc)
- What was going on for you when you committed the offence?
- What were your thoughts at the time, and since?
- What is your understanding of the harm you caused?
- Who has been harmed?
- How will you acknowledge the harm?
- What do you think you can write which will make things better for the harmed person?
- Can you offer reassurance to the harmed person of no further trouble?
- What have been the consequences been for you and your family?
- Can you offer reassurance that you have learnt from this offence?
- Are you motivated to address your offending behaviour? If so, what are you doing about it?

Additional things for the wrongdoer to consider before writing a letter

Will they need help with literacy difficulties? If so, who can help?

Hand written letters tend to be better received than those that have been typed on a computer. Content is far more important than spelling, grammar etc, though poor presentation can be interpreted by the harmed person as the wrongdoer not caring.

Content needs to be expressed in the wrongdoers own 'voice'. Help with spelling and grammar may be offered, but the language should be their own. Overall, the letter mustn't feel as though it has been written on behalf of the offender by somebody else.

After a first draft, encourage the wrongdoer to re-read as though he/she was the harmed person, or give to a partner or friend etc for feedback.

Before passing the letter to the Harmed Person

Evaluate the letter for 'risky' language that may re-victimise the harmed person (see below).

Always ask to deliver the letter in person. If the harmed person wants it posted, double-envelope.

Be aware of the potential for the letter to be misused by the harmed person (eg posted on social media, passed around in the pub). If in doubt, do not leave them with a copy.

Evaluation of a letter of apology

Ensure that the letter is balanced (i.e. not 75% about the consequences for the wrongdoer) and addresses the points that you know are important for the harmed person. Look out for any of the following:

- Control – the wrongdoer overtly or covertly attempts to control the harmed person (eg. "it's time for you to move on", "I hope you will say hello to me if I see you in town")
- Self as harmed person – the wrongdoer attempts to make the harmed person feel sorry for them (eg. "I've lost my job because of this", "I'm still upset about what I did")
- Denial of harm or effects – the wrongdoer's language implies that things are the same as they were before (eg. "I hope you're keeping well")
- Attitude to behavioural change – the wrongdoer's language can mean the difference between engaging meaningfully, or going through the motions (eg. "I will be doing ART as part of my order", or "I'm finding the ART course really helpful")
- Intellectualised re-abuse – (eg. "I know that you will live with this forever")
- Minimisation – (eg. "at least your nose was not broken")
- Not taking responsibility – (eg. "it was the drugs that made me do it", "I only joined in because I was worried about my mate being hurt")

(from Webster, S, Home Office Offending Behaviour Programmes Unit 1999)