Voluntary and Community Sector-Emergency Partnership (VCS-EP)

Donated Goods – Issues to consider in the event of an emergency

# Background

One of the key issues that arose during, and after, the Grenfell Fire was how to handle, manage and dispose of Donated Goods. As a consequence VCS-EP is seeking to offer guidance to VCS organisations.

This guidance is heavily reliant on the Scottish Resilience Voluntary sector document and they are thanked for sharing it with us.

The Guidance outlined below has been created following discussions with those engaged in major incidents since the inception of VCS-EP

The VCS-EP guidance should enable VCS organisations, at the outset of any disaster or critical event, to understand how to manage suggestions for appeals for donated goods, and to manage those goods properly. It also covers the situation where unplanned donated goods arrive.

Much of the work managing donations or cash or goods will be undertaken in conjunction with statutory partners and LRF/SCGs. VCS organisations should seek to work directly with LRFs/SCGs and Local Authorities, particularly to avoid duplication but more importantly to maximise shared resources including storage and to improve communications.

However this guidance is an opportune moment for VCS organisations to reflect prior to engaging on a Donated Goods strategy alone, or with partners. In most major incidents, however, cash donations managed properly are the preferred option for effective and swift assistance to beneficiaries

## Purpose

1. Disasters and emergencies can often inspire local people or further afield, to be generous and charitable. They may want to help those who have been affected, by donating goods, services, or funds.

An essential element of every emergency management plan is a clear donations management strategy. This strategy should be formulated wherever possible in conjunction with LRFs/SCGs and Local Authorities all of whom can assist in planning and management of delivery.

Before embarking on any Donating Goods strategy, the lead organisations within the VCS response to an incident, should seek to understand the following:

1. An immediate awareness of what MIGHT be required at a sufficiently strategic level to make a sound judgement with authority
2. An ability to articulate that need accurately and precisely without leaving much discretion for the donor
3. An effective method of collection and distribution through experienced and trustworthy organisations (eg VCS-EP members or partners)
4. An effective method of “turning off the tap” publicly and quickly as well as thanking people for their donations
5. An agreed method of disposal of surplus items that is sensitive and efficient
6. Transparency of the above
7. Whilst donating goods may seem generous and is a very human reaction, unsolicited, unorganised donations of goods, such as used clothing, miscellaneous household items, and mixed or perishable foodstuffs can create new challenges and be counter-productive.

Statutory agencies, VCS organisations and others will be forced to redirect valuable time and resources away from the important work of helping those affected, in order to deal with these goods.

As importantly, donated goods may be inappropriate or may perish, create health risks or difficult handling issues.

Sometimes large organisations, such as local companies may donate goods or services to assist the response operation, this should be encouraged where it helps VCS organisations to meet the needs of beneficiaries and those affected.

1. In general, the best way to help individuals and communities is to donate money. This allows organisers and individuals to buy exactly what they need and has the added benefit that, if the money can be spent, consciously, within the affected community, it also goes a long way towards helping the local area to recover.
2. Arrangements for the collection and distribution of public donation of funds, for significant national events, is now managed by many VCS organisations and the National Emergency Trust (NET)
3. Although donation of money rather than goods is widely believed to be the best approach, in particular emergencies the circumstances might dictate that appropriate donation of specific items may be needed and the response or recovery effort can decide to initiate an appeal for them.

## Requested Goods

1. When considering any communication to make a specific appeal for items, it is important that the nature and timing of the request is agreed between VCS organisations involved together with the relevant public body, LRF/CSG or Local Authority. Any request should clearly identify what is sought and why as well as what is not required. The more specific the request the better.
2. Before collecting, it is helpful for a VCS organisation to:-

* Collaborate with other VCS organisations working in the affected area and to identify the right items, in the correct amounts, at the right time, in particular:-
  + 1. What is needed,
    2. How much is needed, and
    3. When it is needed
    4. What is not needed
* Identify who, in terms of which organisation, will take possession of the items and how they will be used or distributed.
  + 1. Establish the goods collection point
    2. Arrange for volunteers to sort, store and distribute the goods
    3. Clearly identify what will happen to surplus goods
* Identify transportation for delivering donated goods, from where they are to where they are needed and, if possible, who will pay the fuel costs.
* Provide an easy to understand schematic flow of how goods will be managed form the donor to the beneficiary

1. This will require discussion, at an early stage, potentially at LRF or SCG to coordinate the response to any significant event. It will also avoid any confusion about what is needed and to reduce/prevent receipt of unwanted goods.

## Donated Goods

1. In circumstances where, despite best efforts, some people will still donate goods, prior planning about how those circumstances will be managed would be appropriate.

Some issues that may need to be considered by those making an appeal for Donated Goods:-

* Donated items may not meet the actual needs of those impacted.
* Responsibility for the quality and safety of donated goods should be managed.
* Donated items may need to be sorted, cleaned, packaged and transported.
* Donated goods may need to be disposed of if they do not meet certain criteria or standards.
* Communications networks (email/social media etc) can become swamped by Donated Goods related conversations.
* Valuable resources can be distracted by non-essential donation related tasks.
* The size of goods and the space needed to store them can be a considerable burden.
* Moving goods around incurs fuel costs, which drains money and time from other priorities.

1. The inappropriate donation of goods distracts from providing the services needed to assist those affected by the emergency, there are particular considerations around the following types of donations:-

* + **Used Clothing;** Used clothing is almost never needed in an emergency area. It is better to suggest that used clothing be donated locally to an organisation that has a year round ability to recycle used clothing.
  + **Electrical Goods;** All electrical goodsmust have passed a Portable Appliance Test (PAT) before they can be distributed to beneficiaries. Delays in the completion of these tests can lead to frustration, for volunteers, paid staff and recipients.
  + **Furniture; sofa/bed base/mattress;**
    1. British Safety Specification; only upholstered items with a label confirming UK safety standards can be accepted. Label/Batch numbers must be present.
    2. Fire safety labels; upholstered items must also have a fire label which legibly refers to BS7177, sewn in.
  + **Food**;
    1. Perishable foods are almost always described as ‘unwelcome’ not least of all owing to the cost of refrigeration or a significant level of care.
    2. The contents of Pre-packed food boxes could end up uneaten - people need food they know how to prepare and that their family will eat. Food donation and distribution must be culturally relevant so as not to cause waste or offence.
    3. Lack of care in distribution can create serious health risks. For example high-sodium soups going to people with high blood pressure, and nuts being donated to families with allergies.
    4. The need to inspect and sort food products can put strain on charities and food banks – and incur overhead costs.

## Benefits of Cash

1. Cash offers the flexibility necessary to procure the right things to address the immediate issues of those affected and also has the benefit of significantly stimulating the local economy at a time when it is most needed. For clarity it is worth reminding that the primary benefits of cash are as follows:-

* Cash can be used to buy what is needed for the recovery effort in particular circumstances;
* Cash can be used to support local shops and businesses which are often affected;
* Buying goods locally is normally quicker, more cost effective and can achieve best value for money.
* People could be encouraged to donate goods to local charity shops where they can be sold and the funds returned to the VCS for distribution

1. VCS Organisations will need sound financial control arrangements, to ensure funds are spent appropriately, receipts retained and good records kept to account for what is spent, as it is likely that press scrutiny or subsequent incident reviews will look at finance in some detail.
2. In the event of an emergency where the National Emergencies Trust has activated, VCS organisations are encouraged to direct donations to their appeal

## Communications

1. Appeals for cash or Donated Goods should be co-ordinated and agreed at the first opportunity, so that VCS organisations together with LRFs/CSGs and Local Authorties are all following the same strategy.

Having a common definitive source of information at an early stage minimises the risk of confusion especially from fast moving social media. Some simple lines for the media (and social media)

* Cash is best
  + Let the public know; *financial assistance is needed - grateful for public generosity*
  + Detail; *Members of the public wishing to donate should do so by* …(provide a/c details of defined org/charity/page)
* Rejecting Donated Goods
  + Recommended line; *Goods are not required for this emergency event and could divert resources from primary tasks…..*
  + Alternative; *Goods given to charity shops can be turned into funds that can be used to assist more directly….*
  + Additional; *Dry/ tinned foodstuffs may be better directed to local food banks - ask in advance what is needed*….
  + Waste; A clear strategy for disposing of superfluous donated goods is required. And that strategy should be publicly explained in advance
* Requesting goods
  + If absolutely needed; *The following goods are needed* (list) *and we are appealing to*…(shops/businesses/public)
  + Detail; *We need* (number) *which should be delivered to* (org/location) *between* (date/times)
  + Additional (if needed); *Please ensure goods are in good condition;*
  + *Electrical goods MUST be PAT tested and that will take time.*
  + *Soft furniture MUST meet British fire standards – please check before you donate.*
  + Alternative; *Please keep your goods to hand – we will let you know what is needed*
  + Affected individuals; *If possible please bring relevant ID/papers to confirm name & address* *(eg utilities bill) to claim items needed…*

1. Messages to the public should be kept simple and encourage local flexibility to suit the particular circumstances. Inter-agency co-operation and communication will remain essential to craft the appropriate final messages.

## Conclusion/Recommendation

1. VCS-EP has the following strategy
   * In almost all circumstances, donated goods are a distraction, divert resources and should be discouraged.
   * In almost all circumstances, cash donations offer the best chance of successful response/recovery outcomes.
   * In very limited circumstances where goods or equipment are needed from businesses, shops, or the public, very specific instructions should be issued.
   * VCS organisations should understand what facilities exist in their areas to handle goods which are donated without being requested.
   * Donations of goods issue should be discussed at the first opportunity, following emergency events
   * Consistent messages confirming the established lines should issue at an early stage. These should include openness about disposal after the event has concluded
   * All strategies should be discussed and agreed with appropriate public bodies such as LRFs/CSGs and Local Authorities