

Spontaneous Donations

A briefing by the British Red Cross
April 2024

Introduction

1. When an emergency strikes, members of the public are often motivated to offer support through physical or 'in-kind' donations of goods such as toiletries, clothes, and food. While this instinct to support those in crises is well intentioned, the organisations tasked with accepting donations can find the management of them complex at a time when capacity is already often stretched by the demands of emergency response.
2. There are a number of issues that arise from in-kind donations. These issues stem largely from misconceptions around the tangible utility of physical donations amongst donors.¹ In reality, both research and experience has shown that more than half of the goods donated in response to an emergency are inappropriate to distribute to survivors of disasters.²
3. In 2019, the UK government published guidance on coordinating spontaneous volunteers in emergencies.³ This was in recognition of the challenges posed by the coordination of these volunteers during emergency response. Like spontaneous donations, coordinating spontaneous volunteers can use valuable resources, such as time and capacity, that could be better purposed towards emergency response efforts. There is a need for this guidance to be updated to include the coordination of spontaneous donations, as the complexities of coordinating in-kind donations persist. The British Red Cross welcomes government's the proposal to produce guidance to effectively manage and efficiently use spontaneous donations. This guidance should establish the approach on and ownership of the issue to contribute to streamlined emergency response efforts.
4. The British Red Cross has supported those affected by emergencies since 1870. Through our own operational experience and the insight of our partners, we have had substantial exposure to spontaneous and in-kind donations in the aftermath of an emergency. As a result, we have explored effective approaches to coordinating and managing these donations, as well as mitigating the challenge they can present through stressing a cash-first approach in our communications work. Cash donations provide flexibility, choice, promote self-directed recovery and encourage local buying, therefore supporting local economies.⁴
5. The intention of this briefing is to set out thematic experiences, key guidance, case studies and recommendations of best practice for use in local response settings.

British Red Cross' experience with spontaneous and in-kind donations

¹ Attorney-General's Department, Australian Government (2011) National guidelines for managing donated goods. Available at: [national-guidelines-for-managing-donated-goods.pdf \(tafensw.edu.au\)](#)

² NPR (2013) Thanks, But No Thanks: When Post Disaster Donations Overwhelm. Available at: [Thanks, But No Thanks: When Post-Disaster Donations Overwhelm : NPR](#)

³ HM Government (2019) Planning the coordination of spontaneous volunteers in emergencies. Available at: [\[Insert title of report\] \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ Attorney-General's Department, Australian Government (2011) National guidelines for managing donated goods. Available at: [national-guidelines-for-managing-donated-goods.pdf \(tafensw.edu.au\)](#)

I. External communications

6. External communications, delivered in a specific and considered way, can contribute significantly to managing in-kind donations. Effective messaging to the public can convey the impracticality of in-kind donations and deliver transparent messaging as to why financial donations are preferred to physical.
7. Whilst it may seem that immediately following a disaster is the most engaging time to launch external communications regarding in-kind donations, consistent messaging throughout 'peacetime' can alleviate the amount of donations received when a crisis strikes. External communication can also be strategically timed to precede major floods or other seasonal extreme weather emergencies.⁵ The British Red Cross has done this by way of a Q&A website page focussing on donations during an emergency appeal, as well as assets on social media.
8. Effective messaging should not only be aimed at the public. It is also essential to ensure that all key emergency response stakeholders are communicating the same consistent message. Widely sharing a 'one-policy' approach to in-kind donations across local resilience forums (LRFs), local authorities, and other key stakeholders would help to ensure that a single, clear message is delivered to the public.⁶ Articulating this 'one-policy' approach by way of media releases, attached to emergency appeals and in other forms of media engagement (ie. social media, interviews etc.) could be a widespread, effective, and consistent means of communication to key stakeholders, including the public, in addition to a pre-agreed strategy amongst emergency response partners. It can also help to ensure that the wrong message is not shared as it ensures mutual understanding across those involved in emergency response.
9. Through our own experience responding to emergencies and witnessing lessons learned by local responders, effective external messaging strategies could include, but not be limited to, the following.
 - a. A clear plan should be publicly outlined for how cash is intended to be used. Public donations are distinctly linked to trust. When intent for financial donations is transparent, donors can understand the practical outcomes of a cash-first approach. This can be done by using compelling examples of effective implementation of a cash-first approach in emergency response.
 - b. Convey the logistical impracticalities of physical donations including cost, lack of storage and manpower, the need for re-distribution, paperwork etc.
 - c. Suggesting ways of converting physical donations to cash can enable donors to take action in ways they may not have previously considered.

A cash-first approach in external communications

Case study: BRC Hardship Fund during Covid-19

Over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, the British Red Cross, in partnership with Aviva and the Aviva foundation, facilitated the Hardship Fund to those financially impacted during the pandemic.⁷

⁵ Attorney-General's Department, Australian Government (2011) National guidelines for managing donated goods. Available at: [national-guidelines-for-managing-donated-goods.pdf \(tafensw.edu.au\)](https://www.tafensw.edu.au/national-guidelines-for-managing-donated-goods.pdf)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ British Red Cross (2022) Financial Hardship Policy Briefing: Learning from the British Red Cross Covid-19 Hardship Fund. Available at: [Research and publications | British Red Cross](#)

The fund provided short-term cash grants to individuals and families who were financially at risk, ultimately supporting 15,370 people from the beginning of the project to the end. A partner organisation would make direct referrals to the scheme, and those eligible would receive a one-off payment of £120 via a pre-loaded card or a grant of £120 for up to three months.⁸

Throughout the delivery of the fund, the British Red Cross engaged with recipients of the fund to learn and reflect on this experience of the project. Their stories and reflections bring to light the impact of financial hardship for people and communities during emergencies and help make the case for short-term cash-based support to be available in future emergencies to prevent people falling through the gaps.⁹

A significant learning and consistent theme of feedback was the effect of a cash-first approach allowing people to retain dignity and choice when it came to how they chose to respond to and recover from the emergency. 93 per cent of people who received support from the Hardship Fund felt that the cash-first approach made a positive impact in their lives and helped them to cope considerably, exemplifying the efficiency and effectiveness of financial donations.¹⁰

There were lessons that we learned from the facilitation process. When delivering cash-based assistance there is a need for clarity of expectations and control regarding use of the card.¹¹ Pre-loaded payment cards were received within seven days of referral acceptance, however we are aware that this can be an unmanageable amount of time to wait to prevent negative financial repercussions and aid recovery.

Learning can be taken from the Scottish Welfare Fund, where grants are generally processed in the same working day. This is done by way of PayPoint technology but should bear the caveat that there must be ways of facilitating grants that are digitally inclusive.¹²

10. As a leading emergency responder, the Red Cross has launched emergency appeals, from domestic crises such as the Grenfell Tower fire, to international emergencies such as the conflict in Ukraine. The positive response from the public and the desire to help is often overwhelming, with physical donations or requests for how to donate coming in through various points of contact. The Red Cross works to ensure that our responses to these requests call for the most practical and useful donations. This messaging takes the form of automatic response emails and voicemail responses, explaining that the British Red Cross coordination of donations for emergency response consists entirely of cash-based donations.

British Red Cross learnings from the Grenfell Tower fire

11. External messaging must also be considerate of motivations behind donating. The complexities of in-kind donations go further than the practical logistics of coordinating

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

in-kind goods, but also include managing the sensitive nature of the emotions behind donating in the first place.

12. The response to the Grenfell Tower fire is one example. There were significant emotions behind the decision to donate. The public need to be aware of how their generosity is being used, an explanation that must be linear from point of donation to the practical help for those affected by emergencies.
13. Trust is a fundamental component to a fundraising appeal and the approach to managing in-kind donations will likely dictate the level of support and collaboration shown by the public. Donors are keen for transparency around the substantive effects of their donations.¹³ A study has shown that ensuring a reasonable proportion of donations make it to the end cause is the most important factor for maintaining trust in charities for 41 per cent of people.¹⁴ Lack of transparency and communication in demonstrating donation use can lead to a negative narrative and unwillingness to support in future. The operational approach to managing spontaneous and in-kind donations should be appropriately communicated to ensure donors are aware of the reality of how donations can and cannot be used.¹⁵

Case study: In-kind donations and the Grenfell Tower fire

The response of the local community after the Grenfell Tower fire was unprecedented. From the first day following the emergency, local people were leaving in-kind donations along the street and outside of the nearby church. Vehicles from across the country were sent to drop off items. The sheer amount of donations was enough to fill three full-size football pitches.

Many of the survivors of the fire were being housed in hotels, unable to use many of the donations such as fresh food. As a result, many items went to waste. The Kensington and Chelsea Council took responsibility for the donations, ultimately storing 211 tonnes of donations in Kensington Town Hall. The British Red Cross was asked to assist in facilitating and sorting through the donations, working with community volunteers to sort and re-distribute 41 of the 211 tonnes donated. The remaining donations were then recycled in exchange for cash, which was then given to the London Fire Relief Fund.

Despite best efforts to ensure that all donations were used to maximum value, the public perception of the use of their phenomenal outpouring of generosity was that these goods were not appropriately utilised. The public were concerned that their donations were not being used in the capacity they had envisioned, and the seeming lack of transparency was a source of anxiety. This anxiety evolved into backlash, resulting in reactive messaging from the British Red Cross. Our approach to the management of the goods donated utilised appropriate measures to re-distribute donations wherever possible, however a key opportunity for learning was the reactive messaging towards the large influx of calls and emails received expressing public concern and the transparency of how donations were used.

II. Collaboration with local emergency response partners

¹³ CAF (2018) UK giving and trust: Can we lay our money on it? Available at: [What is the relationship between giving and trust | CAF's David Stead \(cafonline.org\)](#)

¹⁴ Charity Commission (2016) Public trust and confidence in charities. Available at: [Public trust and confidence in charities 2016.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁵ Cash donations are most conducive to reporting impact as they are most easily tracked.

14. Collaboration amongst local responders, VCS and relevant partners has the potential to be an effective approach, combining the experience, expertise and understanding of best practice to appropriately address the challenges posed by in-kind donations. There is opportunity for partnership collaboration in several stages of the resilience cycle¹⁶ – prevention, response, and recovery. When collaboration is developed during ‘peacetime’, it can be drawn on during response.
15. By collaborating with key partners, to widely engage and share the impracticalities and unsuitable nature of gifts-in-kind in the aftermath of an emergency, there is substantial opportunity to prevent incidents of mass donation. In terms of response, it is an opportunity to combine volunteers and resources to coordinate response in circumstances that often lack adequate peoplepower. Lastly, the opportunity for recovery from experiences that result in large amounts of in-kind donations can be amplified by an organised discussion of key learnings amongst partners. The issue however remains, that cross-sector organisations are not adequately prepared to work together in this capacity.
16. Overcoming practical obstacles such as obtaining spaces large enough to sort and distribute donations, finding volunteers to conduct this work and ensuring appropriate legalities and risk management are in place are difficult when there isn’t capacity to coordinate. Managing in-kind donations is a problem without a responsible owner.¹⁷ There must be sufficient recognition of the need for resources to manage the scale of the problem, to realise the full potential of partnership collaboration.
17. Lessons learned from the emergency response to the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) with the Donated Goods Pilot Project illustrate actions that can be taken towards coordinated teamwork amongst the partners.

Case study: Donated Goods Pilot Project

In August 2021, 20,000 Afghan people were evacuated to the UK under Operation ARAP, as a result of the United States-led military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban rule.

These people had left behind everything and were in need of significant support – both practical and emotional. This evacuation was heavily covered in British media, as a result inspiring an incredible outpouring of generosity from the public, donating physical donations in such large amounts that collection centres and community centres (mosques, village halls etc.) were struggling to operate.¹⁸

The need for coordination and management was imperative. The Donated Goods Pilot Project involved collaboration of more than 44 organisations from the public, private and voluntary sector.¹⁹

The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP)²⁰ was made aware of the growing issue and asked for support from its partners to resolve the issue efficiently.²¹

¹⁶ Cabinet Office (2022) The UK Government Resilience Framework. Available at: [The UK Government Resilience Framework \(HTML\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103111/UK-Government-Resilience-Framework-HTML.pdf)

¹⁷ VCSEP (2023) VCSEP Surplus Donated Goods: Lessons and Recommendations.

¹⁸ VCSEP (2022) Donated Goods Pilot: After Action Report.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The VCSEP is a network of local, regional and national organisations, co-chaired by the British Red Cross and NAVCA, intended to deliver a more coordinated response to emergencies.

²¹ VCSEP (2022) Donated Goods Pilot: After Action Report.

A call was put out by RE:ACT to its members to achieve two tasks; the first, to identify a person to take responsibility for the issue, later known as the National Aid Volunteer, and the second, to come up with an effective cross-sector approach to manage the immense amount of donations and ensure they were used to meet the needs of the Afghan families.²² In a very short time span, a volunteer was identified to lead the approach and a plan was formulated to tackle the issue.²³

Coordinated by the National Aid Volunteer, physical donations were given to local collection points, generally a community hall, church, local charity or location of a similar nature, to then be sent on to collection centres. These collection centres fed into a single national distribution hub, an existing Amazon warehouse, where sorting of the donations took place. Any new or fit for purpose items were added to an inventory which was then distributed to Afghan families. Items that were considered not suitable were either recycled at the Salvation Army recycling centre or sent to an e-commerce facility and converted into cash. This cash was then used to support Afghan families to resettle in the UK.

Despite the organised and linear flow of donations, there were significant barriers to learn from. These challenges included funding to organise the project, obtaining a warehouse from which to sort and store items, transport for distribution, lack of volunteers and the navigation of legalities and contractual logistics. The Donated Goods Pilot Project is no doubt considered a success, and a fast-paced and agile response set precedent for ways in which members of the public, private and voluntary sectors can collaborate in emergencies that evoke in-kind donations on a mass scale.

III. International best practice

18. As is the case with many components of emergency response, international comparisons can serve as effective examples of best practice.
19. The government of South Australia has published national guidance for the management of physical donations. This publication echoes the messages that local responders and charities in the UK have been promoting as a result of first-hand response to in-kind donations. It reiterates cash-first messaging and includes the perspectives of those with lived experience and how in-kind donations affected their recovery.²⁴
20. The National Guidelines for Managing Donated Goods²⁵, produced by the Australian government in 2011, include written guidance of best practice that has only been piloted in the UK and is not yet included in an established plan.
21. An example of this is a designated donated goods program coordinator.²⁶ This approach was used in the VCS response to the immense amount of donations as a result of operation ARAP, as set out in the previous case study, but has not been adopted as a regular practice. This guidance includes key principles to be applied when considering the prevention and effective management of in-kind donations and

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Attorney-General's Department, Australian Government (2011) National guidelines for managing donated goods. Available at: [national-guidelines-for-managing-donated-goods.pdf \(tafensw.edu.au\)](https://www.tafensw.edu.au/national-guidelines-for-managing-donated-goods.pdf)

²⁵ Attorney-General's Department, Australian Government (2011) National guidelines for managing donated goods. Available at: [national-guidelines-for-managing-donated-goods.pdf \(tafensw.edu.au\)](https://www.tafensw.edu.au/national-guidelines-for-managing-donated-goods.pdf)

²⁶ Ibid.

sets out a comprehensive course of action to take before, during and after crisis response.

22. These principles include understanding the context, recognising the complex nature of emergencies, using community-led approaches, ensuring coordination of all activities, employing effective communication and acknowledging and building capacity. These components have all been identified in part by local and first responders, as well as charities in the UK, but lack the centralisation and ownership needed to be implemented in a coordinated manner.
23. The United States federal government has also published a National Donations Management Strategy²⁷ on which regional and local response teams should base their approaches to in-kind donations management.
24. This strategy sets out a comprehensive list of recommendations, including:
 - a. Donation management activities can begin prior to a disaster being declared in order to mitigate potential issues with coordination.²⁸
 - b. Regional donation management should plan for spontaneous donations whilst employing mitigation efforts.²⁹
 - c. The strategy identifies the lead in donations operations, including in-kind donation management. In the United States context, this is local government. The strategy also suggests that the donations operations lead should establish, and draw on, a close working relationship with the voluntary sector and that there should be full use of VCS capabilities and expertise.³⁰
 - d. The approach to spontaneous donation management must be flexible; the response to donations will differ according to the nature of the emergency.³¹
 - e. Donation management requires a united team approach from all relevant stakeholders.³²
 - f. Information management is a critical component of successful donations management. This includes external messaging to the public to clarify expectations and minimise confusion.³³
 - g. Above all, the United States federal government promotes a cash-first approach to donations to disaster response VCS organisations.³⁴
25. The National Donations Management Strategy also provides guidance on appropriate timing to activate donation management plans and to what extent. The strategy notes that emergencies that are highly covered by the media will result in a greater response from the public, including a large influx of in-kind donations. It also identifies anticipated events as indicators to monitor when preparing to manage in-kind donations.³⁵
26. Initial response activities are highlighted in this strategy, including a prepared donations coordination team, identifying, and establishing donations facilities (i.e. warehouses, distribution sites) and establishing public information operations.³⁶

²⁷ Federal Emergency Management Agency (2005) Volunteer and Donations Management: Plans and Strategies. Available at: <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=765480>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Federal Emergency Management Agency (2005) Volunteer and Donations Management: Plans and Strategies. Available at: <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=765480>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

27. Both the American and Australian guidance collate lessons that emergency responders have learned first-hand here in the UK and present them in a clear, achievable, and practical way forward.

Recommendations for local responders

Recommendation 1: Local emergency response teams should establish a detailed strategy to preparing for and managing in-kind donations, drawing on lessons learned and international examples of best practice. These plans should build capacity into emergency response plans and identify distinct roles and ownership of in-kind donations management, for example a donated goods coordinator, amongst emergency response partners.

Recommendation 2: A 'one-policy' approach to in-kind donations should be widely shared across LRFs and other key stakeholders to ensure that a single, clear message is delivered to the public, during both 'peacetime' and during emergencies. Media outlets that cover high-profile emergency events should be utilised to further disseminate this 'one-policy' approach.

Recommendation 3: Regular and consistent external messaging should address and inform the public about the impracticalities and complex nature of in-kind donations. This messaging should aim to foster an understanding as to why money is the preferred form of donation as a means of preventing and mitigating mass influxes of in-kind donations in response to an emergency.

If you have any questions about any of the information contained in this document, please contact Simone Currie, Policy Coordinator, simonecurrie@redcross.org.uk

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