

## Guidance on Charity Doorstep Collections

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### Introduction

We’re often asked to donate cash or goods on the doorstep – from answering the door to someone with a collecting tin, receiving envelopes for cash, to having plastic bags posted through the letterbox asking for donations of goods such as clothes or bed linen for later collection.

Whether you decide to give is entirely up to you, but it’s important to know that not all of the organisations who solicit donations are charities. Some may be collecting **on behalf of** a charity and some may be **businesses** who sell your donations for private profit.

This guidance is aimed at supporting the public to make a confident and informed decision when donating, enabling them to distinguish charity collections from commercial ones and identify where a collection

might be bogus or misleading. It will also be useful for charities keen to legitimately utilise this method of fundraising.

An organisation doesn't have to be a charity to carry out a public collection. Some collect on behalf of a charity, while others will sell your items for a profit – some may give an amount of the proceeds to charity and others may keep it all.

Regulated charities in most of the UK must supply details, including their most recent accounts, to their respective regulator, who monitor this information. In Northern Ireland, charities are not yet required to supply accounts for inspection, though the proceeds of collections must be accounted for to the body authorising the collection, usually the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Where a **business** collects goods to sell, it's up to them to decide how much, if anything, will actually go to the charity or any charitable beneficiaries.

**Bogus collections** are generally characterised by misleading or misrepresentative information implying either:

- that the organisation collecting clothing is a charity when it is not; or
- that the proceeds of the collection will go to charity when in fact they benefit a private enterprise or individual.

Bogus collections cost the charity sector money, erode public trust and confidence in charities generally, and potentially lead donors and charities away from using this fundraising method.

Nevertheless, most collections whether by or for charities, are genuine and provide them with an important source of income. Doorstep collections are convenient to donors and may carry economic and environmental benefits. People should not be discouraged from donating to collections carried out by either charities or on their behalf by genuine organisations to raise funds for a legitimate charitable purpose.

The accountability of charities to donors, beneficiaries and the public, and the increase of public trust and confidence in charities are key objectives for the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland in order to realise our vision of:

[“A dynamic and well governed charities sector in which the public has confidence, underpinned by the Commission’s effective delivery of its regulatory and advisory role.”](#)

## Guidance for the general public

If it matters to you that your donation goes to charity, the following guidance will help you to make your donation confidently.

### Legitimate charitable doorstep collections

There are three main ways in which legitimate charitable door to door clothing collections take place. They are as follows:

1. Charities that undertake collections in partnership with commercial door to door collection businesses;
2. Charities that undertake their own door to door clothing collections without the use of a commercial collection partner and do not sell the items through a charity shop;
3. Charities that undertake their own door to door clothing collections and go on to sell some of the collected items through their charity shops.

### Charitable status

An organisation should not call itself a charity if it isn't one. The Commission has certain powers over organisations that have charitable tax status and our website provides a [list of these organisations](#) in Northern Ireland.

However, it is important to emphasise that under the current system not all charities operating legitimately in Northern Ireland will have registered for charitable tax status and will not, therefore, necessarily have an HMRC number.

This situation will change once the Charities Act (2008) NI has been amended to allow the Commission to begin the registration process for all charities operating within Northern Ireland. This is expected to happen early in the next Assembly term.

Once the registration cycle commences **ALL** charities will be required to register and, when their registration is complete, will be given a unique registration number. Following registration, if an organisation does not have this number then it is **NOT** a charity.

Currently however, the advice is that where an organisation states clearly that it is a charity, you can look for a charity number which indicates that it is registered as a charity in England and Wales or Scotland. In Northern Ireland, if the charity is registered with HMRC for charitable tax relief then their **HM Revenue**

**and Customs charitable tax reference number** should be shown. You can check this number against the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland's list of deemed charities which is [published on our website](#).

Where a collection is taken by a commercial door to door collection business for 'charitable purposes' or 'on behalf of a charity', good practice would be for any documentation to state specifically which charity will benefit and how much of each donation will reach them directly.

The collector should have a formal agreement with the charity. If in doubt, contact the charity to confirm if they're aware of the collection and to ensure that it is a legitimate collection. Charities will be happy to provide contact details and confirm whether a collection is being conducted on their behalf or not.

If a house to house clothing collection will benefit a charity, it is required in Northern Ireland to have a licence obtained from the Police Service of Northern Ireland. To check whether a collection has a licence before donating any item you can contact your local PSNI station.

### **Collectors' credentials**

All materials distributed in aid of a collection must show the name and address of the charity, name and address of the collector, the place of the collection and bear the signature of the collector and the chief promoter of the collection.

Any badges worn by collectors must meet the specifications set out in the House-to-House Charitable Collections Act (NI) 1952 and the Regulations made thereunder and should:

- indicate the purpose of the collection;
- bear the name of the charity and the HMRC reference number;
- be signed by the collector.

Be wary of ID that looks photocopied or home-made, or leaflets with no address or land line telephone number. Where a leaflet or envelope appears to be from a charity, check the contact details – it's been known for a charity's name to be falsely used with different addresses or telephone numbers. Some organisations make a small donation to charity and use the subsequent 'thank you' letter as proof of an agreement with the charity – it's not. If the organisation is reluctant to answer your questions or give you information, you may want to think twice about giving.

## Bogus Collections

Unfortunately there have been circumstances where goods and clothing collectors have given the impression that they are collecting for a charitable purpose, but all monies are for private benefit.

Some collectors will put out leaflets suggesting or indeed stating that it is a legitimate charitable collection, or will simply take bags that were intended for legitimate charity collections.

There are a few simple things that you can do to check whether the collection leaflet or bag that you have received is for a genuine charitable collection.

You can:

- Check to see if the collection purports to support a genuine UK registered charity (with the registration number given). This should not be confused with other numbers like ‘company numbers’ or ‘export numbers’. In Northern Ireland, the list of organisations registered with HMRC can be checked on our website. [Remember however that this list is not exhaustive, and not being on the list does not automatically mean that an organisation is not a charity].
- Check that there are genuine contact details for the charity on the bag.
- See if the collection organiser (be it the charity itself or a commercial door to door collection business) bears accepted ‘kitemarks’ such as the Fundraising Standards Board (FRSB) tick, the Charity Retail Association (CRA) logo or Institute of Fundraising (IOF) membership logo.
- Check with your local PSNI station that the collection is licensed.
- Contact the charity that the collection purportedly benefits, as they can tell you if a genuine collection is being done in your area or not.

## Checking if an organisation is a charity

All charities registered in England and Wales can be checked on the Charity Commission’s online register at <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk> and all charities registered in Scotland can be checked on the online Scottish Charity Register published by The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator at [www.oscr.org.uk](http://www.oscr.org.uk)

As previously discussed the list of charities that the powers of the Commission apply to is provided on the [CCNI website](#). Again it is important to remember that if a charity does not appear on that list, it does not necessarily mean that it is not a charity. The CCNI website provides additional overall guidance this issue, and as the requisite legislative amendments are affected the website will be updated accordingly.

Charitable house to house collections are regulated by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and if you have concerns you can contact them directly or the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland which has regulatory powers to investigate the charities which are published on our deemed list.

## Raising a concern

In the first instance, you should feel free to contact the charity benefiting from the collection, and your local PSNI station will be able to confirm that a licence has been issued for a particular collection.

To complain about a misleading leaflet appealing for clothing donations, contact your local Trading Standards Agency. If you receive a leaflet that you believe falsely uses the details of a genuine charity, the collection may be unlawful and you should report this to the police.

In either case please also notify the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland so that we can gather information on potential offenders and work with other agencies to ensure Northern Ireland has a dynamic and well governed charities sector, in which the public can have confidence. Our website offers guidance on the nature of concerns we may pursue.

## It's your choice

If you're concerned or suspicious, consider giving your donation directly to the charity or taking your goods to a charity shop. Some charities have reception points for goods and most offer ways for you to give money that allow the charity to claim tax relief on your donation.

Above all, don't feel pressured to give on the doorstep – it's your choice. All genuine charities will be happy to receive your donation by other means.

## Guidance for charities

### Relevant legislation

- House-to-House Charitable Collections Act (NI) 1952 and associated regulations
- Charities Act (NI) 2008

## Good practice procedure

If a charity wishes to collect money or other property door-to-door (regardless of whether it is collected on the spot or envelopes or “black bags” are used) it must obtain permission in one of two ways (in either case, as much notice as possible should be given):

If the collection is to cover only a limited area a licence must be obtained from the PSNI. Application should be made to the PSNI Station in whose area the collection is to be made.

If regular province wide collections are to be carried out, an Exemption Order may be obtained from the Department for Social Development to avoid the inconvenience of multiple applications to the Police Service NI. Application should initially be made to the Policy and Innovation Team at the Department for Social Development who will liaise with the PSNI. The full name, home address and date of birth of the charity's chief promoter of collections must be supplied.

An Exemption Order in Northern Ireland will not cover street collections; it will only cover house to house collections. It exempts the holder from the need to obtain a separate licence from the PSNI for house to house collections in an area. There is guidance available from the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland (DSD) “Notes for Holders of Exemption Orders” (revised April 2010) which can be obtained on request from the Policy and Innovation Team of the Voluntary & Community Unit of the DSD.

Exemption Order holders in Northern Ireland must provide annual accounts to the DSD duly certified by the chief promoter of collections and also certified by an independent responsible person as auditor.

## Where can I find further information?

- The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland [www.charitycommissionni.org.uk](http://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk)
- Fundraising Standards Board <http://www.frsb.org.uk/>
- Institute of Fundraising: <http://www.institute-of-fundraising.org.uk/>
- Trading Standards: <http://www.detini.gov.uk/deti-consumer-index.htm>
- Charity Retail Association: <http://www.charityretail.org.uk/code.html>
- Good practice: <http://clothesaid.co.uk/collection-protection/>
- Department for Social Development:  
[http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/voluntary and community.htm](http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/voluntary_and_community.htm)
- Police Service of Northern Ireland: <http://www.psnipolice.uk/>

