

- 1. Share your experiences collaborating with the council on the development of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Strategy and the revamped grants programme**

About Hackney Playbus

Hackney Playbus is a small charity supporting families with children under five. Using a converted double-decker bus, we bring play and support directly into the community. We create welcoming spaces where families can play, connect, and access information about other support services. Through our Outreach and Referrals Programme, we focus on reaching families who may face barriers to accessing other services and who would benefit most from the opportunities and support available within the Hackney Playbus community.

Our Involvement in Developing the VCS Strategy

Our involvement in the development of the VCS Strategy was primarily as a grantee of Hackney's Community Infrastructure Grant Programme (2022–2025). For us, the programme was a welcome move away from project-based funding, recognising the importance of trusting community organisations to use funds flexibly to meet the needs of the community. It also created a valuable opportunity for CI organisations to come together, share insights, and raise concerns with council colleagues about failures in the system. From our point of view, the new VCS Strategy reflects many of the themes that emerged throughout the Community Infrastructure Programme, particularly the need for ongoing cross-sector collaboration that embraces Fairer Ways of Working (Appendix 1).

The Value of the System Convenor Role

One of the key ways we were able to share our feedback was through Hackney's System Convenors. They played an essential role in bringing the CI organisations together for discussions, while also making efforts to ensure that those unable to attend meetings could still contribute through other means, such as one-to-one phone calls or written feedback. This approach worked well for our organisation, as we had some capacity within our team structure to take up these opportunities.

We found the System Convenor role valuable in fostering collaboration between community organisations, as well as with the Council. The System Convenors were proactive in facilitating introductions, spotting opportunities for organisations to work together on shared challenges, and helping to demystify how different council departments and functions operate. Before this role existed, we often felt frustrated and powerless, having no clear way to raise concerns about the systemic issues affecting the families we support. The introduction of the System Convenor role changed this by creating an effective channel to

share feedback directly with the Council. While this function could arguably sit within HCVS, in our experience the System Convenor model allowed for direct engagement with council colleagues and led to direct improvements in outcomes for the families we support.

Reflections on Co-Production

We are pleased to see a continued commitment to cross-sector collaboration reflected in the VCS Strategy and we are keen to see how the Council and HCVS will build on this through the new grants programme, ensuring that all VCS organisations—whether or not they receive Council funding—have the opportunity to engage meaningfully and contribute to shared learning and problem-solving.

The Collaboration and Co-Production Fund is a good step towards this, but it needs to be proactively promoted and have easier processes for claiming funds, with support available for those applying. We also feel it is important to note that lack of funding is not the only barrier to taking part in co-production. Many organisations working closest to communities may be unable to take up paid opportunities to participate in workshops without creating a strain on their service or a gap in provision. Exploring additional ways to build capacity for these organisations would therefore be welcome, taking a flexible and inclusive approach that recognises the diversity of organisations within Hackney's VCS and the inequities that exist across it.

Reflections on the New Grants Programme

Our first understanding of the redesigned grants programme came from extensive information circulated about the Project Innovation Fund. It was widely featured in newsletters with several invitations to attend information sessions about the fund and how to apply. Seeing so much focus on this fund initially caused us a moment of dismay, as it seemed to signal a return to project-based funding and a step back from the learning and progress made in recent years about the value of long-term, core funding. For a moment, we couldn't quite believe it—until, thankfully, we came across information elsewhere that a Core Grant is also available as part of the new grants programme. It felt as though information about the Core Grant had been introduced rather quietly compared to the Project Innovation Fund, and we couldn't help but speculate whether this was deliberate—to prevent oversubscription given the significantly reduced level of funding available—or whether we had simply missed the memo.

Having now seen the full breadth of the new grants programme, we can appreciate that it aims to strike a balance between long-term stability and innovation, and makes efforts to address systemic racism within how grants are designed and distributed. The overall reduction in available funding is of course a concern to everyone. The ambition to transform systems and strengthen capacity may be challenging with limited resources, but

we remain optimistic that through genuine cross-sector collaboration, we can build on the progress already made and continue to improve outcomes for Hackney's residents.

Reflections on the Core Grant

We welcome the recognition of the trusted and vital role that VCS organisations play within communities. The VSC Strategy and grants programme both acknowledge that our organisations often have the closest relationships with residents and a deep understanding of their needs. It recognises the part we play in breaking down barriers to services, walking alongside residents, and helping them navigate support, as well as the ways we often step in to fill the gaps where the system falls short.

Many within the VCS have been longing for this type of recognition and to see it backed by funding. At the same time, seeing this level of responsibility set out in the Core Grant guidance feels somewhat daunting. It makes clear that organisations are now expected to support residents whose needs may go well beyond the original remit of their organisation (Appendix 2). While this reflects the way many of us already work, it effectively turns mission drift into an expectation, which could place some organisations in a difficult position with other funders.

We also have concerns about the expectations placed on organisations around advice and guidance. While the distinction between accredited and non-accredited advice is clear in theory, in practice the line between giving general information, offering support, and providing advice can easily become blurred. This can create anxiety for smaller organisations that want to help residents but worry about crossing into areas of regulated advice, such as housing, benefits, or immigration, without the necessary expertise and accreditation.

Advice services across Hackney are already under immense strain, and we are seeing a trend where they are unable to take on new cases directly, instead passing advice to share with residents or providing training such as Advice First Aid. While this approach has value, it can leave community organisations—who are not experts in housing, benefits, or debt—feeling out of their depth. We want to play our part, but we also need to stay focused on our core missions and operate in a way that feels safe.

The expectations outlined in the Core Grant programme also raise concerns about risk being formally placed with the VCS, rather than shared across the system. While the VCS already plays a vital role in holding residents and filling gaps, we cannot—and should not—be expected to absorb the risks that come with taking on roles that sit close to statutory duties. We can and want to do this work, but it must be done in genuine partnership with the Council, built on shared learning, mutual accountability, and a collective drive toward systemic change that improves outcomes for residents.

2. Describe your organisation's support requirements from the VCS sector and how the council or Hackney CVS (HCVS) can assist in meeting those needs

Sustaining Our Core Work

As ever, long-term financial support for core costs remains essential to sustaining our work. In addition, in-kind support—such as access to council venues for training, meetings, or community activities—would make a meaningful difference by helping us stretch limited resources further and continue delivering high-quality support to residents.

Maintaining Cross-Sector Collaboration and Communication

One of our key support needs is the continuation of the kind of coordination and communication previously provided through the System Convenor role. It offered a clear and trusted channel for dialogue between the VCS and the Council, helping to share learning, raise concerns, and strengthen collaboration across sectors. Without it, there is a risk that these valuable connections and opportunities for joint problem-solving could be lost. We would welcome the Council and HCVS exploring ways to maintain this function—through dedicated capacity or another mechanism that keeps communication open and collaboration active.

Embedding Fairer Ways of Working

Another key factor that would support us in our work is for all council teams to fully adopt and embed the Fairer Ways of Working into their daily practice. This continued shift in culture is essential to ensure that services work flexibly and responsively, supporting residents in a person-centred, anti-racist, and trauma-informed way. One of the principles of the Fairer Ways of Working—“Be visible and accessible in the community”—is particularly important to us. It reflects our own approach and values, and we believe that greater visibility and connection between council teams and communities would make a real difference to how residents experience support. It would also help council staff to experience the work of giving support in a more meaningful and human way, helping them to build stronger relationships with residents, gain a deeper understanding of the challenges people face, and experience their own work as connected and rewarding.

Trusting and Empowering Residents

We would also like to see the Council continue to place trust in residents and believe in their experiences. Too often, people have to rely on support workers to be heard or taken seriously. Encouraging a culture where residents are trusted to speak for themselves, and where their voices are valued directly, would help to build confidence and autonomy while also reducing dependency on already overstretched support services.

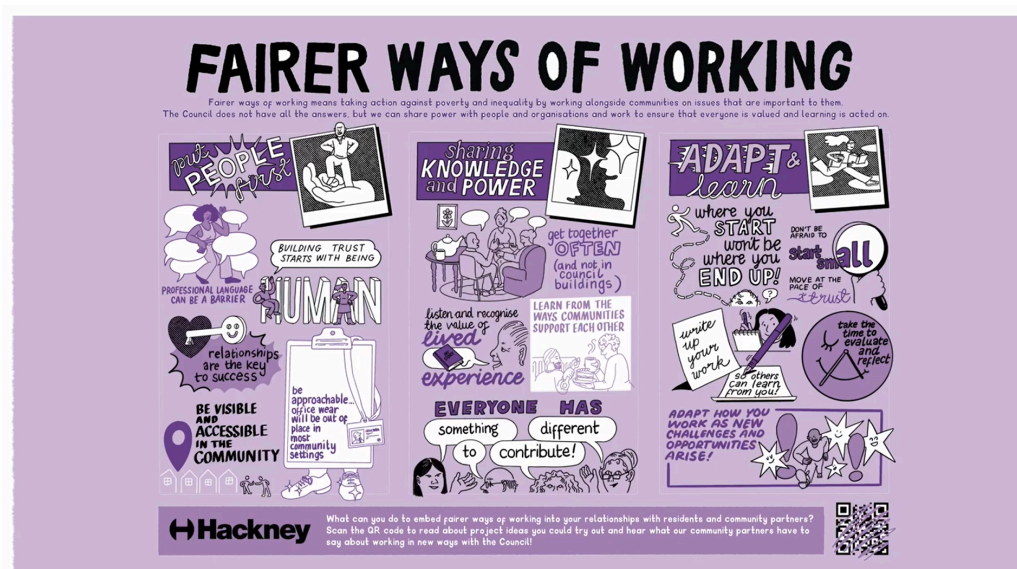
Improving Access to Translation and Interpretation

One of the key challenges we face is the lack of access to interpretation and translated materials. Many of the families we support do not speak English as their first language, which makes it difficult for them to access council services or understand important information. In practice, we rely on other community members to help translate or muddle through using Google Translate—approaches that are rarely appropriate when dealing with complex issues. It would also be helpful for community organisations like ours to have support in translating our own materials, so that we can communicate more effectively with the residents we serve.

Designing Park Spaces with Hackney Playbus in Mind

And lastly, a request for support that may be unique to our quirky little charity: we ask that the Council consider Hackney Playbus a valued community asset (one we hope will continue to serve the borough for years to come in one way or another!) when planning and redeveloping park spaces. Aspects of our work depend on being able to access Hackney's green spaces, and we ask that future park designs take this into account so the Playbus can continue to bring play and support to families across the borough. We're always happy to collaborate on improving access to play!

Appendix 1: Fairer Ways of Working



Appendix 2: Excerpt from Core Grant Guidance

“Organisations serving residents who are disadvantaged and experiencing higher levels of poverty and inequality must recognise that residents come through their door with a complex set of issues that may go beyond what the needs their organisation has been established to resolve.”