

## **Appendix 2: feedback from the Voluntary and Community Sector**

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### **HSF Review & CRF Planning Sessions**

In September 2025, three review meetings were held with third party organisations in receipt of Household Support Fund (HSF) funding, with the aim of discussing the impact of HSF delivery over the previous 12 months, and starting to plan for the Crisis & Resilience Fund (CRF), albeit without access to DWP guidance at the time.

Across the three review meetings, one of which was in person and two were online, organisations consistently praised the flexibility, speed, and light-touch administration of HSF6 and HSF7, which allowed frontline partners to respond rapidly to crisis needs without bureaucratic delay. Year-long allocations in HSF7 markedly improved planning, enabled quarterly reviews, and gave services the stability needed to build relationships, deliver outreach, and invest in more resilient models of support.

Community-embedded delivery remained a major strength: trusted organisations - food projects, youth groups, domestic abuse specialists, refugee support services, carers' organisations, and advice providers - were able to reach residents who would not engage with statutory systems. Many highlighted innovations such as integrated Family Hub models, social supermarkets, mobile/outreach advice sessions, multicultural community engagement, same-day emergency food provision, co-location with health or social care teams, and joint working between organisations such as SPIN, Pelican Parcels, YAC, Possability People, and BHESCO. The Hugg voucher platform was widely valued for speed, ease, and dignified distribution. Case studies shared across the sessions demonstrated how short-term financial interventions helped prevent job loss, stabilise housing, keep young people engaged in education or work, build confidence, and reduce longer-term crisis demand.

However, participants also identified structural weaknesses and emerging pressures. Many worried about duplication of support due to the absence of a shared data system and the reliance on unstructured email-based referral routes. Several reported supporting the same families repeatedly and called for more coordinated sequencing between agencies. Core costs and staffing were not covered under HSF, placing pressure on organisations delivering high-volume crisis support; this was particularly acute for smaller volunteer-run projects. Demand continued to rise - both in volume and complexity - driven by factors such as precarious work, high housing costs, and energy price increases. Refugee support was flagged as fragmented, with unclear pathways and overlapping referrals from Voices in Exile, Care for Calais, and statutory services; similarly, refuge and domestic abuse support needed more coordinated routes into financial and legal help. Temporary Accommodation (TA) remained a major issue, with families placed in unfurnished properties lacking essentials such as beds and carpets. Equity themes emerged throughout: ethnically diverse communities faced cultural stigma and language barriers; LGBTQ+ residents experienced intersectional challenges and often relied on informal networks; older adults benefited greatly from food and social contact in preventing isolation and hospital admission; and outreach remained essential for people in unstable housing or TA who could not access centralised hubs.

Looking ahead to the CRF, organisations strongly supported multi-year funding with built-in flexibility, enabling both continuity and the ability for new projects to join mid-cycle. Participants emphasised that resilience must include funded advice services, income maximisation, and early intervention; many noted the success of outreach PIP/DLA advice, social prescribing partnerships, and integrated housing-plus-welfare models. A cash-first approach was broadly endorsed for dignity and autonomy. Across the meetings there was consensus on the need for simple,

proportionate grant processes, should that become a feature of CRF. Also, recognition of core-cost pressures, improved data-sharing to reduce duplication, and intentional partnership-building rather than competitive siloed models. Participants also discussed the merits and limitations of hub-and-spoke approaches: they can be effective for coordinated delivery, but may be inaccessible or stigmatising for some marginalised communities, underscoring the need for trusted, hyper-local and bottom-up engagement. Organisations also emphasised system gaps—particularly in affordable food pathways, primary mental health, housing advice at community level, and better alignment with DWP processes, social workers, health teams, and safeguarding partners. Overall, the meetings demonstrated strong appetite for co-designing CRF; a recognition that HSF functioned as both crisis support and a gateway into wider services; and a shared commitment to building a future model that strengthens resilience, prevents crisis escalation, and ensures coordinated, equitable access to support across the city.

In March 2026, a CRF Review meeting was held with 40+ representatives from VCS organisations, food projects, advice agencies, family hubs, domestic abuse services, community hubs, DWP, and others. The purpose of the meeting was to engage with partners on CRF Year 1 proposals to inform the report to Cabinet and explore how the CRF criteria, outcomes and reporting requirements will work.

It was set out that Year 1 of the CRF focuses on distributing essential funding and standing up required strands (crisis payments, housing payments, resilience, community coordination). Years 2–3 will involve deeper engagement, redesign, and co-production.

Overall, there was:

- Broad agreement that Year 1 proposals are a **sensible stabilising transition**.
- A strong shared commitment to moving toward **resilience and prevention**, not just crisis response.
- Significant appetite for **co-design** and deeper partnership working.
- Acknowledgement that **capacity constraints** (both council and VCS) are real and must shape implementation.
- Appreciation for the expanded attendance and inclusive approach.

Key points from the discussion were:

### Key Financial Pressures

- CRF includes the former DHP budget → increased pressure inside a single pot.
- Staffing cost inflation, combined with slightly reducing CRF, squeezes later years.

### Major Policy Issues Raised in Discussion

- **Free School Meals (FSM) in Holidays**
  - National CRF rules: blanket FSM holiday vouchers not allowed under the guidance, must be **needs-based**, hardship-assessed, and not blanket.
  - **Financially impossible** for BHCC to replace via non-CRF funding.
  - Mitigations in Year 1:
    - Expand **Family Hubs** support in holidays.
    - Increase contribution to **HAF**, enabling **half-term** provision as well.
    - Run **cost-of-living events** again as a hub of support during holidays.
- **Crisis Payments (new LDSF)**
  - DWP target is a 48 hour turnaround

- Organisations noted this is workable **only if strong signposting alternatives exist** (e.g., Energyworks for fuel vouchers).
- **Housing Payments (formerly DHP)**
  - Demand traditionally outstrips funding.
  - Likely no room to expand eligibility (e.g., deposits) without cutting core rent-shortfall support.
  - Year 3 sees a **drop in DHP allocation**, creating risk.

### VCS Sector Questions, Risks & Themes

Below is a summary of themes raised by the sector (from transcript + chat).

- How resilience will be defined and measured
- Are food-only or essentials-only organisations still eligible?
  - Yes — pure food provision reduces material deprivation (one of the formal CRF outcomes).
  - Future years likely require a gradual pivot toward more holistic / sustainable models (e.g. social supermarkets, wraparound support) — but not elimination of crisis food help.
- Onward referrals and partnership working
  - Strong appetite for **increased partnership working**, co-location, shared delivery, joint teams.
  - A desire for **resilience pathways that don't overload food projects**:
- Good practice examples:
  - **Wave** exploring credit-union + affordable food links.
  - **Tarner, HKP, Old Boat, Family Hubs** all cited as models of smart partnership working.

### Data, Needs, and New Organisations

- Several orgs emphasised risk that:
  - Organisations **outside existing funding networks** may miss out.
  - Allocation based on “who is already funded” could entrench inequity.
- Calls for:
  - Use of **data and needs assessments**.
  - Space for new/emerging orgs to apply or demonstrate need.
  - Exploration of **thematic partnership bids** in future years (programme-based approaches).

### Advice, Income Maximisation & Financial Inclusion

- Many want **greater weighting toward advice & income maximisation** in Years 2–3.
- Organisations want to see:
  - Advice Partnership playing a stronger role in shaping the resilience offer.
  - Possible VCS-led **Community Coordination** strand.
  - Better integration of council services (housing officers, social workers) with VCS frontline delivery.

### Future Process, Engagement & Co-design (post-March)

- Not formal “consultation” — but **structured engagement**.
- Likely approach:
  - Topic-specific workshops.
  - Smaller design groups.
  - VCS-led proposals feeding back into the Poverty Reduction Steering Group.

- Strong appetite from VCS for co-design of resilience provision, community coordination, and transition to CRF maturity model.

## **Key Risks Identified**

### **Year 1**

- Managing transition from LDSF to Crisis Fund.
- Ensuring VCS projects can cope with demand spikes.
- Communicating major system changes clearly.
- Balancing low admin burden with increased MI reporting.

### **Year 2–3**

- Funding squeeze due to staffing inflation & reduced DHP funding.
- Potential shift away from “many doors” model if budgets tighten.
- Risk that the most fragile organisations fall out of the ecosystem.
- Need for robust pathways between crisis help and resilience services.