

Report to: Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

Date of meeting: 23 February 2026

By: Director of Children's Services

Title: Crisis and Resilience Fund: Funding for Free School Meal eligible children in the Easter and May 2026 school holidays

Purpose: To approve the use of funding from the Crisis and Resilience Fund to provide food vouchers to Free School Meal eligible children for Easter and May 2026 school holidays

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lead Member is recommended to:

- 1) Approve the proposed plan for the use of funding from the Crisis and Resilience Fund to provide food vouchers to eligible Free School Meal pupils for the Easter and May 2026 school holidays; and
 - 2) Note that a further report on the use of the Crisis and Resilience Fund will be brought to the March meeting.
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1 Background

1.1 In the June 2025 Spending Review the Government announced plans for a new Crisis Resilience Fund (CRF) which replaces the current Household Support Fund (HSF) and incorporates funding for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) and introduces a consolidated grant distributed via the Local Government Finance Settlement.

1.2 On 13 January 2026 the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) released CRF guidance for local authorities and the allocations. The grant period runs from 1 April 2026 until 31 March 2029, and the total funding allocation for East Sussex is £21.1 million; £6.7 million in both 2026/27 and 2027/28 and £7.7 million in 2028/9.

1.3 The stated primary objective of the CRF is 'to both provide a safety net for those on low incomes who encounter a financial shock and to invest in building local financial resilience to enable individuals and communities to better deal with crises in the long-term, reducing crisis need'. The fund objectives are to:

- **Outcome 1:** Deliver effective crisis support to prevent escalation of hardship.
- **Outcome 2:** Improve individuals' financial resilience (income maximisation, debt reduction, savings).
- **Outcome 3:** Strengthen local support networks through coordination and referral pathways.

2 Supporting information.

2.1 Since October 2021 the Government has provided local authorities with the Household Support Fund to help households struggling with the cost of living. Local delivery of HSF in East Sussex has been through multiple partners, including directly through Children's Services, District &

Borough Councils, Voluntary Community and Social Enterprises, Food Partnerships and Food Banks. Within the Council the fund has been jointly overseen by Children's Services and Adult Social Care and Health.

2.2 Whilst our delivery of HSF has been successful and has reached over 36,000 households each year, HSF did have some limitations which are recognised locally and by the DWP. These included the short notice of HSF allocations and extensions, different funding streams for crisis support, variation of support provided, a lack of evidence of the impact of support provided and of what worked well for HSF and limited sharing of best practice. The CRF hopes to address some of these learning points and create a Fund that can help residents cope with the impact of financial shocks whilst investing in the infrastructure and resilience-building interventions that can reduce the impact of financial insecurity in the longer term.

2.3 CRF, as a multi-year fund with an increased focus on prevention and resilience, presents a significant opportunity to invest in interventions that are better targeted at the root causes of financial insecurity than the support that has been delivered through HSF. Discussions are taking place with key delivery partners and stakeholders to agree how to use the CRF to best meet the needs of residents in East Sussex and to deliver the objectives of the fund.

2.4 Full proposals for the use of the CRF in East Sussex over the three year period will be brought to the Lead Member for Adult Social Care and Health and the Lead Member for Children's and Families at the March 2026 meetings for approval.

2.5 In previous years the Household Support Fund has been used in East Sussex to provide Hugg food vouchers to eligible free school meal children from 2-19 years old for the school holidays. If approved by the Lead Member, East Sussex County Council aim to distribute free school meal vouchers for eligible children for the Easter and May 2026 school holidays at a value of:

- Easter holiday – 2 weeks at £15 per week per eligible family (£30)
- May half-term – 1 week at £15 per week per eligible family

2.6 There are approximately 20,000 eligible free school meal children in East Sussex and allocating vouchers with a 94% take up represents a total expenditure of approximately £850,000.

2.7 Providing vouchers for these two holiday periods will ensure continuity of the previous support provided to families whilst the proposals for the use of the full CRF in East Sussex are developed.

3 Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 The announcement of the CRF provides an opportunity to support residents, including families, cope with the impact of financial shocks whilst investing in the infrastructure and resilience-building interventions that can reduce the impact of financial insecurity in the longer term. Continuing the provision of Hugg food vouchers for free school meal eligible children in the Easter and May 2026 school holidays will provide continuity of support to these families.

3.2 The Lead Member is therefore recommended to approve the proposed plan for the use of funding from the CRF to provide food vouchers to eligible free school meal children in East Sussex for the Easter and May 2026 school holidays.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None