

Transition risks during phased mobilisation of the Crisis and Resilience Fund

1. Purpose

- 1.1 To brief the Board on the overall risk to households in East Sussex as the Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF) is mobilised in phases during 2026/27.
- 1.2 Highlight the specific risk arising from the cessation of Free School Meal (FSM) holiday food vouchers after May half-term 2026, within this wider context.

2. Recommendations

- i. **Note** the overall risk to low-income households in East Sussex as CRF moves from design into phased delivery between April and September 2026.
- ii. **Note** the specific risk from the cessation of FSM holiday food vouchers after May half-term, particularly during the summer holiday period.
- iii. **Endorse** the mitigations already in place.
- iv. **Agree** the further mitigations proposed in this paper.

3. Background

- 3.1 The CRF is intended to move local support away from broad short-term crisis mitigation which characterized the Household Support Fund (HSF) to a more targeted model that combines crisis response with prevention, resilience and strengthened local support.
- 3.2 This includes a general move away from *“blanket provision of vouchers to those on free-school meals, as we recognise that some Free School Meal eligible families may not routinely need crisis support during every school holiday”*
- 3.3 The Delivery Plan is being mobilised in phases between April and September 2026. This reflects the scale and complexity of the programme, the need to commission new services, and the requirement to establish appropriate governance, eligibility, monitoring and referral arrangements.
- 3.4 Initial support arrangements are already live, however other significant elements are either in planning, procurement or early mobilisation, resulting in risks during transition and mobilisation, including to FSM eligible families.

4. Transition Risk description

- 4.1 The overall risk is that households experiencing financial hardship may face uncertainty, gaps in access or reduced visibility of support during the transition from HSF to CRF, particularly while the programme is mobilising.

- 4.2 This is not limited to one group of residents. The risk applies across the range of low-income households.
- 4.3 However, within this, the cessation of holiday food vouchers for FSM eligible families is a particularly visible and time-sensitive risk.
- 4.4 In previous years, FSM eligible families received holiday vouchers in all school holidays through the HSF. Under the CRF Delivery Plan, holiday vouchers were provided for Easter and May half-term 2026 only, with an allocation of £850,000 and an estimated 18,900 eligible children.
- 4.5 The risk is greatest during the summer holiday because:
- the summer break is the longest school holiday period;
 - families may have built the vouchers into household budgeting expectations;
 - not all families experiencing hardship will be open to Children's Services;
 - the full commissioned crisis payment service will not yet be live;
 - demand may increase for HAF, food banks, Family Hubs, schools, advice agencies and local VCSE support.

5. Existing Mitigations

A range of mitigations are already built into the CRF programme. These will partially mitigate the cessation of holiday vouchers and will collectively provide alternative forms of support for at least some of the families affected.

5.1 Live and interim crisis support

- The heating oil crisis payment service launched on 1 April 2026 and is targeting households in areas with higher reliance on heating oil.
- Funding for Children's Services is available, with £505,000 allocated to support low-income families experiencing crisis through practitioner-supported routes, and a further £485,130 for practitioner-led resilience programmes.
- Interim crisis payments will be delivered through local Citizens Advice services, with £50,000 initially allocated.
- £325,000 is allocated to expand Holiday Activity and Food provision in summer 2026 and to create a new offer for October half-term.
- £300,000 is allocated for food partnerships and community food organisations.
- £825,000 is invested in an enhanced Advice Offer, including Citizens Advice, Welfare Benefits Service and specialist advice partners. This will increase generalist advice capacity, support benefits maximisation, provide specialist money advice and strengthen co-located advice provision across the county.
- £275,000 is allocated to tenancy sustainment support, including homelessness prevention and co-located support with local housing teams.
- The East Sussex Cost of Living webpages already signpost residents to support with money advice, benefits and grants, housing, food, employment, health, transport and mental health. The food pages include information on food banks, community food hubs, local food partnerships, Healthy Start and Holiday clubs.

- Significant communications and engagement activity with partners across the system has achieved an understanding of the changes and a commitment to work in partnership to support residents through the transition.
- 5.2 Despite the mitigations in place, a residual risk during the mobilisation period remains and could result in households including FSM eligible families struggling to access the support they feel is needed.
- 5.3 The risk should reduce significantly from September 2026 onwards as the full commissioned crisis payment service becomes operational and as resilience services, food partnerships, advice provision, HAF expansion, tenancy sustainment and communications activity become embedded.

6. Proposed Further Mitigations

The following additional mitigations are recommended to manage the transition risk, and to specifically further address the risk to FSM eligible families.

6.1 Strengthen overall summer communications

Implement a focused June-to-September communications plan explaining what has changed and what support is available. This will include communications to:

- Residents: ([web-based information](#) & [physical leaflets](#) on how to access support)
- Members: (general information about CRF and how to access support)
- Wider services and professional stakeholders: (how to access support)
- Services supporting people directly with financial hardship: (specific service information to support joined up working and professional referrals)

6.2 Aligned FSM holiday voucher communications

Communications to Free School Meal families will explain that holiday vouchers are ending after May half-term, but also clearly signpost to:

- ESCC Cost of Living webpages and relevant sources of information and advice;
- VCSE services and specifically advice services;
- Food partnerships and community food provision;
- HAF provision;
- Children's Services crisis/other support where appropriate.

This will help position the change as part of a wider transition to alternative support, rather than simply a withdrawal of assistance and signpost to where help is available.

6.3 Clarify pathway to Crisis Payments through the Consultation Advice Line and Family Hubs

Within the CRF services provided through Children's Services, most support will be provided to families receiving a statutory service. Clarifying the route to support for other families will help provide an access point for other families.

6.4 Monitor demand more frequently during the transition period

For July to September 2026, the Board will receive information, as available, on demand and insight from:

- Children's Services
- VCSE Partners including advice services
- Community Food organisations

6.5 Enact contingency actions if required

The CRF Programme Board should consider contingency actions where there are;

- Significant increases in demand on Children's Services or other statutory services
- Significant increased demands on VCSE partners
- Significant increased demand on Food Banks

If concerns are significant, the Board should consider whether flexible CRF resources, underspends or profiling changes can be used to increase interim support capacity.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 The transition from the HSF to the CRF represents a significant change in the local support landscape. The new model offers substantial opportunities to build financial resilience, reduce repeat crisis, strengthen advice and community support, and provide more targeted help to households most in need.
- 7.2 However, because CRF is being mobilised in phases, there is a short-term transition risk for households in East Sussex between June and September 2026. The most visible risk arises from the cessation of Free School Meal holiday vouchers after May half-term.
- 7.3 Existing mitigations are significant but do not eliminate the risk in full.
- 7.4 The Board is asked to endorse a strengthened transition mitigation plan focused on clear communications, demand monitoring and contingency planning.

Mark Hendriks, Head of Partnerships

2nd June 2026