

Changes to the national school holiday food voucher scheme

May 2026

Overview

As of 31 March 2026, the Household Support Fund (HSF) which funded the national school holiday food voucher scheme (sometimes referred to as Hugg vouchers), among other support, has ended.

In East Sussex, a limited extension has been in place to continue providing school holiday food vouchers until after the May 2026 half term break.

From June onwards, families needing assistance for food during the holidays should:

- access the [Holiday Activities and Food \(HAF\) programme](#) offer
- once available, apply for support via the new Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF)

The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme

The HAF programme provides free, school-holiday club places for children aged 5–16 who receive benefits-related free school meals. Holiday club places provided via HAF offer nutritious meals and enriching activities like sports, arts, and nature education during Easter, summer, and Christmas breaks.

With the national school holiday food vouchers coming to an end, additional places for children and young people who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals will be funded via the new Crisis and Resilience Fund.

The Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF)

The CRF was introduced by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) from 1 April 2026. It provides councils with three-year, ring-fenced funding to deliver financial resilience services and crisis support for residents.

Funding is aimed at anyone who's vulnerable or cannot pay for essentials. Help for residents could include one-off payments when they experience a financial shock such as redundancy or bereavement. It could also fund practical advice and support such as debt and budgeting advice, or support to access food or employment.

East Sussex will receive £6.7m per year in 2026/27 and 2027/28, increasing in 2028/29 when housing-related payments transfer into the main fund.

CRF-funded services will become available in stages – the first being between April and September 2026, allowing time for services to be designed and set up.

District and Borough Councils will be responsible for delivering Housing Payments. The majority of other services will be provided by the local VCSE (voluntary, community and social enterprise) sector.

In line with national Government guidance, families who had previously received school holiday food vouchers will be able to apply for crisis support via a need-based assessment – this will look at what they have vs what they need and determine the level of support they are eligible for.

What CRF will fund

The CRF is focused on helping families to find long-term stability by shifting investment into services that support financial resilience and capability rather than direct financial support payments. It will cover:

1. Crisis Payments: There will be financial help for residents facing financial shocks, and access to these funds will be provided through voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations and ESCC Children's Services.

2. Resilience Services: This will include advice, income maximisation, budgeting support, debt support, food sustainability, employability and tenancy support.

3. Community Coordination: Strengthening how local services and advice networks work together more effectively.

Next steps

A full Delivery Plan for support available via the CRF will be submitted to the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) by 1 July 2026.

Further details of the services available will be provided to members as the scheme is finalised.

Families that need immediate financial support

If residents have immediate concerns about money, they can find financial support here:

- [Cost of living support | East Sussex County Council](#)
- [Welcome to Holiday food and fun | East Sussex County Council](#) – for families eligible for free school meals
- Check if you are receiving all the financial support that you are entitled to - [Benefits calculators - GOV.UK](#)
- Advice on debt or benefits - phone the [welfare benefits helpline](#) for free, confidential advice on 0333 344 0681 (calls cost no more than the national rate).

Additional resources for Members:

- Our dedicated Intranet pages on Financial Inclusion: [Financial Inclusion Programme – ESCC Intranet](#)
- Sign up for the free Money Guiders training here: [Course: East Sussex Money Guiders Training](#)
- Access and promote our [Cost of Living webpages](#) to residents and partners
- Find more resources and reports you can download and share with residents here [Resources – ESCC Intranet](#)

We have collated some potential FAQs with some draft answers for members' reference below. Please note these are not exhaustive but provide a starting point for responses to enquiries from residents.

Q1: Why is the Household Support Fund (HSF) ending?
A: Central Government has made the decision to end the HSF from 31 March. This is not a result of ESCC policy change or budget cuts locally.
Q2: What is the Crisis and Resilience Fund?
A: The Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF) offers Government funding to help people on low incomes and in financial crisis move to a more stable financial position. There are four elements to the fund: 1. Crisis Payments: There will be financial help for residents facing financial shocks, and access to these funds will be provided through voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations and ESCC Children's Services. 2. Resilience Services: This will include advice, income maximisation, budgeting support, debt support, food sustainability, employability and tenancy support. 3. Community Coordination: Strengthening partnership working so that local services and advice networks work together more effectively. 4. Housing payments: these will be delivered through District and Borough Councils in Years 1 and 2
Q3: What are holiday food vouchers, and why are they ending?
A: Until 31 March 2026, East Sussex County Council has funded food vouchers during school holidays for all families with children eligible for benefits-related free school meals. The new Crisis and Resilience Fund national guidance emphasises a move away from providing universal food vouchers and instead providing crisis support on a need-based assessment. To receive crisis support, residents will need to evidence a change in their financial circumstances when they apply for a payment.

It is understood that this could cause financial pressure and anxiety for some families in East Sussex. Therefore, to support families to plan for this change ESCC will continue to fund school holiday food vouchers for all families with children eligible for benefits-related free school meals until the end of the May 2026 half term school holiday.

Support for families who need it will continue through other services, such as the [Holiday Activities and Food programme](#) and [advice services](#).

Q4: When are holiday food vouchers ending in East Sussex?

A: ESCC will continue to fund holiday food vouchers during the current school year for all families with children eligible for benefits-related free school meals until the end of May half term 2026. This is to allow time to communicate the changes to the families directly affected, ensure that these families do not face a sudden reduction in support, and signpost them to alternative forms of support.

Q5: How are CRF crisis payments different to HSF (Household Support Fund) payments?

A: With the CRF, you will need to evidence that circumstances are having a severe impact on financial wellbeing e.g. redundancy, bereavement, domestic abuse, damage to property through flood or fire etc.

You may also need to evidence low income.

Recipients will be referred to support services to help them move to a more stable financial position, reducing the need for future payments.

Q6: How can I apply for a CRF crisis payment?

A: ESCC is commissioning a new service to process applications, which will be available online, by phone or in person. ESCC will not be accepting applications directly – these will be made through a delivery partner, which will also process the payment where an application is successful. More details will follow.

Q7: When will I be able to apply for a CRF crisis payment?

A: ESCC must follow procurement regulations and procedures for awarding the contract for a new CRF crisis payments service in East Sussex. ESCC is working on this now, but the process can take several months. We aim to have a VCSE crisis payment scheme operational by September. We will issue updates as this progresses. In the meantime, East Sussex residents can access local money advice services already in place to access information, advice and support.

Q8: Where can I get updates on progress with the new CRF crisis payments system?

A: All updates will be made available on our Crisis and Resilience Fund webpage: [Crisis and Resilience Fund | East Sussex County Council](#)

Q9: Why are crisis payment schemes available in other areas before they are in East Sussex?

A: Different councils have different systems in place to deliver crisis payments. In East Sussex, we previously delivered Household Support Fund payments mainly through external providers, which means that we need to re-contract this work before the new scheme can operate. In other areas, councils may have delivered crisis payments internally, which means they may be able to update and operate a new crisis payments system more quickly. Working with external voluntary, community and social enterprise partners is preferable in East Sussex as they are well established local organisations that deliver services that are already known to and trusted by East Sussex residents.

Q10: Are housing payments available?

A: Eligible households who currently receive Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), will be able to make applications for CRF housing payments via their district or borough council, and there will be no break in service delivery in this transition. Please contact your local district or borough council for further details.

Q11: I'm worried about money. Where can I get help?

A: Please see the links below to access further financial support.

- [Cost of living support | East Sussex County Council](#)
- [Welcome to Holiday food and fun | East Sussex County Council](#) – families eligible for free school meals
- Have you checked that you are receiving all the financial support that you are entitled to? [Benefits calculators - GOV.UK](#)
- Need advice on debt or benefits? Phone the [welfare benefits helpline](#) for free, confidential advice on 0333 344 0681 (calls cost no more than the national rate)