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Written Statement: Eligibility for ongoing provision for children who are vulnerable, or whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Eligibility for ongoing provision for children who are vulnerable, or whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response

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Earlier this week, in response to the escalating COVID-19 outbreak we advised schools in Wales should close for children and young people, with the exception of making provision for children who are vulnerable, or whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response, so they can continue to work, where alternative childcare arrangements cannot be made.

The most recent scientific advice on how to further limit the spread of COVID-19 is clear. It is imperative that, as far as possible, we minimise social contact. This means if children can stay safely in their home, they should, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

Childcare and play settings, schools, colleges and other educational establishments are safe places for children. However, to reduce mixing between different groups or settings we need to minimise the number of children making the journey to school or a childcare setting, and keep to the minimum possible the number of children in educational or childcare and play settings.

The smaller the numbers, the more we can lower the risk that the virus can spread and infect vulnerable people across our communities.

Quite simply the fewer people having social contact, the more effective the overall impact of the current measures will be.

This means parents need to keep their children at home, wherever possible and schools and childcare and play settings should be open only for those children who absolutely need to attend. Residential special schools, boarding schools and special settings should continue to care for children wherever possible.

For schools this means, they should continue to provide care for as small a number of children as possible – children who are vulnerable and children whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response and cannot be safely cared for at home.

We will **continue to provide for all pupils who are entitled to free school meals**. Further details will be available shortly.

Vulnerable children include those with safeguarding needs and supported by social care, which include children with care and support or support plans, children on the child protection register and looked after children, young carers, disabled children and those with Statements of special educational needs. The most vulnerable of these should be prioritised.

Further details about parents whose work is critical to the COVID-19 response are outlined below. Every child who can be safely cared for at home should be and only where there is no safe alternative should provision be made in schools or other settings.

For childcare and play settings, including Flying Start settings, this means that, where a child cannot be kept at home in line with the guidance set out in the statement and needs to be in some form of childcare provision, this should be in settings where numbers are kept low.

- For all childcare and child-minding services (nurseries, creches etc) this means limiting access to the children of critical workers or vulnerable children;
- We would ask them to work in coordination with local authorities in their areas, to maximise efficiency.

Local authorities will maximise the use of private and third sector childcare providers for continued critical provision ensuring financial support for that sector and to make use of existing expertise and resources.

Teachers and practitioners in schools and childcare and play settings are playing a critical role in the response to the virus and we want to thank them for the continued work and contribution to their national effort. They require the support of parents and carers and the understanding of the wider community to fulfil this role.

In summary, from Monday March 23:

- If it is at all possible for children to be at home, they should be
- If a child needs specialist support, is vulnerable or has a parent who is critical to the COVID-19 response, then provision in an educational or childcare setting should be available for them
- Parents should not rely anyone who has been advised to be following social distancing guidance, such as grandparents, friends, or family members with underlying conditions, for childcare
- Parents should do everything they can to ensure children are not mixing socially in ways, which could contribute to spreading coronavirus. Children should observe the same social distancing guidance as adults
- Residential special schools and special settings should continue to care for children wherever possible.

If your work is critical to the COVID-19 response, or if you work in one of the critical sectors listed below, you should make arrangements for your child to be safely cared for at home. If there is no safe alternative, provision should be made in schools or other settings.

Health and social care – this includes but is not limited to doctors, nurses, midwives, paramedics, social workers, care workers, the support and specialist staff required to maintain the UK’s health and social care sector; those working as part of the health and social care supply chain, including producers and distributors of medicines and medical and personal protective equipment.

Education and childcare – this includes nursery and teaching staff, social workers and those specialist education professionals who must remain active during the COVID-19 response to deliver this approach.

Key public services - this includes those essential to the running of the justice system, religious staff, charities and workers delivering key frontline services, those responsible for the management of the deceased, and journalists and broadcasters who are providing public service broadcasting.

Local and national government - this only includes those administrative occupations essential to the effective delivery of the COVID-19 response or delivering essential public services such as the payment of benefits, including in government agencies and arms length bodies.

Food and other necessary goods - this includes those involved in food production, processing, distribution, sale and delivery as well as those essential to the provision of other key goods (for example hygienic and veterinary medicines).

Public safety and national security - this includes police and support staff, Ministry of Defence civilians, contractor and armed forces personnel (those critical to the delivery of key defence and national security outputs and essential to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic), fire and rescue service employees (including support staff), National Crime Agency staff, those maintaining border security, prison and probation staff and other national security roles, including those overseas.

Transport - this includes those who will keep the air, water, road and rail passenger and freight transport modes operating during the COVID-19 response, including those working on transport systems through which supply chains pass.

Utilities, communication and financial services - this includes staff needed for essential financial services provision (including but not limited to workers in banks, building societies and financial market infrastructure), the oil, gas, electricity and water sectors (including sewerage), information technology and data infrastructure sector and primary industry supplies to continue during the COVID-19 response, as well as key staff working in the civil nuclear, chemicals, telecommunications (including but not limited to network operations, field engineering, call centre staff, IT and data infrastructure, 999 and 111 critical services), postal services and delivery, payments providers and waste disposal sectors.

If workers think they fall within the critical categories above they should confirm their specific role is necessary for the continuation of this essential public service.

We recognise this will represent a challenge to families across Wales and for education settings and childcare settings. Like so many people in many sectors, teachers and practitioners in schools and childcare settings, have a crucial role in enabling Wales to respond to the virus outbreak.

We recognise there are particular challenges for childcare settings in the private and third sector.

Funding for the childcare offer will continue to be paid to relevant childcare settings who close or reduce their services as a result of coronavirus. We are also working with local authorities regarding payments for childcare under Flying Start and early education under Foundation Phase Nursery.

The UK Government has confirmed employers can reclaim Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) for employees who need to self-isolate for 14 days. Businesses can defer payments to HMRC and a new helpline will be set up. A number of temporary changes have also been introduced to support people under the Employment Support Allowance.

Since April 2019, we have committed to provide 100% business rate relief to support the sustainability of childcare settings here in Wales. Details of our wider support for businesses in Wales affected by Coronavirus were announced by the Minister Economy and Transport and the Minister for Finance and Trefnydd on 19 March - <https://gov.wales/written-statement-additional-support-businesses-dealing-covid-19>

We are publishing frequently asked questions at <https://gov.wales/education-coronavirus> which will be updated regularly. Please refer to these for the latest guidance.

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