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Written Statement: Childcare Offer for Wales – Supporting Critical Workers during the Coronavirus Pandemic

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Childcare Offer for Wales – Supporting Critical Workers during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Julie Morgan AM, Deputy Minister for Health & Social Services

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Over the past two weeks, our response to coronavirus (COVID-19) has intensified as the virus has progressed and the expert advice has evolved.

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On 20 March, we closed schools for children and young people, with the exception of making provision for those children who are vulnerable, or whose parents are critical to the coronavirus response, to enable them to work if alternative care arrangements were not available. Wherever possible, children should be cared for at home.

Childcare settings and schools were told to prioritise care for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children.

It is of paramount importance that those people who are critical to Wales' response to coronavirus, including frontline health and social care staff, do not face any barriers in going to work if they are fit and well.

Schools have remained open for these children, if no alternative care arrangements are available at home, at no additional cost to parents. But there is currently no funded provision in registered childcare for pre-school age children.

I have agreed we will suspend the current childcare offer for Wales for three months from 1 April 2020 to focus our resources on supporting the childcare needs of critical workers.

The childcare offer currently provides 30 hours of combined early education and childcare to the working parents of three and four-year-olds throughout Wales for 48 weeks of the year. It has provided much needed support to thousands of families across Wales since its launch in 2017, and we know that 56% of parents accessing it felt they had more opportunities to increase their earnings.

Over the next three months local authorities will be able to use their funding under the offer to support the provision of registered childcare for children aged under five of critical workers and vulnerable children. This will ensure families have the childcare they need and childcare providers have the security they need.

To ensure this can happen quickly, and to release local authority staff to support these families, we will be:

- Closing the childcare offer to all new applications with immediate effect; and
- Delaying entry of the cohort of children due to begin accessing the offer from the start of the summer term until after this suspension, even where applications had been approved.

This is a temporary measure for three months. We will keep the situation under review.

We know that although this announcement will bring relief to many parents, it will create challenges for others. We expect most children to continue to be cared for at home.

I want to pay tribute to our childcare providers, including our Flying Start settings, who have stayed open to care for these children. This has helped support our response to coronavirus and provide safe care for those who need it at a particularly challenging time.

We will continue to honour our commitment of 18 March to continue to pay childcare providers for the hours of childcare booked under the offer for a period of three months. We will do this, ensuring that where they were providing care to children accessing the offer at that time, they remain funded appropriately. Since that commitment was made on 18 March, business support measures have been announced that will help childcare providers in these difficult times.

We will continue to work closely with our delivery partners – local authorities, education and childcare providers, and representative and regulatory bodies – to deliver these important changes. Guidance about these new arrangements will be published shortly.

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