

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: The Childcare Offer and Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme

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First published: 9 June 2020

Last updated: 9 June 2020

In mid-March, as the impacts of the coronavirus outbreak began to be felt across Wales, we made a number of commitments regarding the provision of funded childcare. These included:

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- A commitment to continue payments for hours of childcare booked under the Childcare Offer for Wales for a period of 3 months from 18 March;
- The suspension of the Childcare Offer for Wales to new entrants for a period of three months from 1 April; and
- The establishment of the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme, utilising the budget for the Offer to fund childcare for the pre-school children of critical workers and vulnerable children for a period of three months from 1 April.

At the time these commitments were made, the scientific advice was clear. We needed to reduce the number of interactions between people to both manage transmission of the virus and reduce infection levels. Wherever possible children were to be cared for at home, and the numbers of children in schools and childcare settings were to remain low. Childcare settings were asked to prioritise the care of the children of critical worker and vulnerable children.

We believe the position across Wales is improving, but we still need to be cautious in the approach that we are taking and work together to keep Wales safe. We are asking people to stay local, protecting public health and helping manage the risks. But we also continue to take cautious steps towards reducing the restrictions, supported by our contact tracing system.

Now, some three months on, it is time to review those commitments and the wider position on the provision of childcare.

We will be maintaining the suspension of new applications for the Childcare Offer for Wales for a further two months, that is, until at least the end of August. During this period our local authority delivery partners will not accept or process new applications, and no children will start their entitlement under the Offer.

I know that this will be disappointing for many families who had hoped to access the Offer during the school summer term. We will be conducting a further review of the position in August, with a view to reintroducing the Offer in September if it is viable to do so.

During this period we will continue to provide funded childcare for the pre-school age children of critical workers and vulnerable children under the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme. This scheme, which is administered by local authorities, is an important part of ensuring our critical workers face no additional barriers in their response to the virus. Provision of safe childcare is key to enabling them to support us all during this period.

Wales is also the only nation in the UK providing funded childcare to those children who are more vulnerable and who are facing particular challenges at this time, supporting them and their families. Continuing this provision over the summer period is important in ensuring they remain supported as we move towards the next stage of our response.

This has been, and continues to be, a difficult time for the childcare sector. Over this period we have seen a significant number of settings close, and very few children in attendance. Many settings have furloughed staff, and sought support from the various grant and loan schemes that are available. They, and we, want to see a strong sector emerge from this period, and to see provision restart when it is safe to do so.

On 18 March we said we would continue payments for hours of childcare booked under the Offer for a period of three months, even where the child was unable to attend, or where the setting was required to close as a consequence of the virus. That commitment was time limited, recognising that for many settings that certainty of funding would be key to them remaining viable.

On 3 June we confirmed that we are aiming to enable childcare settings to increase their operations from 29 June, alongside our schools. While a final decision on this will be taken on 18 June as part of our next review of restrictions, childcare settings can start planning to restart their provision. In this phase, other forms of support will be necessary.

For that reason, we will not be renewing the commitment made on 18 March in respect of payments for childcare booked under the Offer.

Going forwards, we will only make these payments where the setting is open and the child is in regular attendance.

While the Offer remains suspended to new entrants, those children who were eligible for and accessing childcare under the Offer prior to 31 March can still do so if they remain eligible. Where those children are in regular attendance at childcare, we will pay the costs for the hours provided under the Offer.

However, where a setting is closed, or a child is no longer in regular attendance, we will not meet those costs.

We will be working with our partners in the coming weeks and months to support the childcare sector to recover. Guidance to support settings to reopen and to operate safely will be published this week and we will continue to update that as new evidence emerges. The guidance has been developed with childcare umbrella bodies and other key stakeholders and includes detailed information areas such as infection prevention and control, applying the Test, Trace Protect Strategy in childcare settings, and social mixing.

Finally we want to extend our thanks to those settings which have remained open, and continued to care for our children over this period, and to all those working in childcare and play services for the work they do to support our children.

First published

9 June 2020

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