

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Continued Operation of Childcare and Play Provision in Wales

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The start of a new year is usually a time for reflection on what has happened before, and hope for what is to come in the weeks and months ahead. This year, more than ever, there is much to reflect on and much to hope for.

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The position with regards to Covid-19 remains serious with case rates higher across Wales and the UK than we would like them to be. Our NHS remains under significant pressure, with concerns about case rates within the community, hospital admissions and capacity within critical and intensive care. It is important that we do all we can to support the NHS.

In this context, it is important that our childcare (including Flying Start) and playwork providers have clarity on both whether or not their settings can open, and what measures they can take to reduce the risks to their staff and the children they care for.

Across Wales all childcare and playwork settings are able to remain open, providing care, support, early education and rich play opportunities for all children. This includes all of our non-maintained settings such as childminders and day care providers, along with playwork settings and Flying Start provision.

Where our non-maintained settings run from mixed use buildings such as community centres, places of worship or leisure centres they can continue to operate where there is a clear need for childcare within their local area. Non-maintained settings based on school sites are also able to operate. However, there may be local restrictions on access to some of these premises, and settings will need to work with those responsible for the buildings to take account of them. As childcare settings remain open those settings delivering foundation phase nursery can continue to do so.

Maintained settings, or school nurseries, which generally only provide early education, are operating on the same basis as schools and will only be open for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children.

I know that for many settings there are concerns about payments stopping where children are unable to attend and the impacts this will have for them and their ability to remain open. Funding can continue to be provided for childcare under Flying Start which is funded through the Welsh Government's Children and Communities Grant. Childcare Offer funding will continue to be paid based on booked hours in some circumstances where Covid-19 is causing disruption to childcare services or where children are unable to attend. Settings should speak with their local authority about their circumstances. Local authorities may also be able to provide some funding to help with additional costs or loss in income as a result of Covid-19.

It is also important to clarify for parents that informal childcare such as that provided by wider family members can continue where there are no other alternatives available.

Access to high quality childcare and play opportunities, particularly in the early years, supports child cognitive, social and emotional development. This is critical in supporting children's longer term development, school readiness and life chances. We want to ensure as many children as possible can continue to access that provision and support. We are also mindful of the importance of accessing this support for parents and families.

However, it is important to always remember that childcare and playwork provision can only run where staff are able to work in those settings. Our childcare and playwork providers have continued to provide first class care for our children and young people throughout what have been, and continue to be, incredibly challenging times. I am immensely grateful for all that they have done, and all that they continue to do, to support children and their families.

Understandably many of our settings and the staff that work within them have expressed concerns about how they can continue to remain open in light of the current rates of Covid-19 across Wales. In particular, concerns have been raised about the risks regarding the new variant of Covid-19.

Our Technical Advisory Group published a summary of the evidence regarding this and the position with regards to education on 8 January^[1]. While this is largely aimed at education settings, many of the findings are relevant to childcare.

It is not yet clear whether the faster spread observed with this variant is consistent across age groups, or if there is a greater increase in transmission relative to other variants in some age groups. However, the data shows that cases do remain lower in children and young people than in adults, and incidence among children less than 5 years old and those aged 5 to 11 are relatively low. Overall only relatively low numbers of positive cases among staff and children have been reported to Care Inspectorate Wales. It is also important that we understand there is no evidence that the new variant increases the likelihood of worse health outcomes for individual children or adults, although remaining fully conscious of the wish to ensure all workers are protected from avoidable harm.

The new variant does, however, remain very concerning, and to keep R at or below 1 we will all need to do more to ensure we follow the advice and guidance on the actions we should be taking collectively and individually. Our existing non-pharmaceutical interventions remain the most effective means of reducing the risk of transmission, including those already in place within childcare and playwork settings. These include scrupulous adherence to prompt isolation and testing in the event of symptoms, cooperation with test and trace, hand washing, surface hygiene, room ventilation, distancing from other staff and appropriate use of face coverings by parents and carers. Where settings are able to they can and should look to make as much use of their outdoor space as possible.

Settings should also be ensuring children remain in their contact groups, with consistency in children and staff. Where possible, smaller contact groups are better as they further reduce the levels of social mixing; their scale means that childcare and playwork settings have been very good at managing contact group size to date.

We have provided guidance on the Protective Measures^[2] that childcare settings can put in place to support them in mitigating risks and a survey of registered non-maintained settings last year suggests they are able and willing to implement these types of measures.

Looking beyond general measures, workplace risk assessments are available for individual members of staff and we would encourage everyone to undertake these. Those staff members who have been advised to stay at home or shield should do so. Children who have been advised to shield should also remain at home.

Childcare and playwork settings have already made significant adaptations to the way in which they operate and ensure they can continue their important work in caring for our children and young people. Working together and following the rules, we can continue to keep Wales safe.

^[1] <https://gov.wales/technical-advisory-group-variant-concern-and-education-wales>

^[2] <https://gov.wales/protective-measures-childcare-settings-keep-childcare-safe>

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