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Office of the Children's Commissioner

By email

6th April 2020

Dear Commissioner,

Firstly, I hope you are all well and coping in these unprecedented times. I can reassure you that other Ministers, States Members, officials from across Government, partners and I are working hard to ensure that our business continuity plans are effective with support offered to those most at need in our community. At the forefront of all this is our pledge to put children first and this pandemic is highlighting more than ever the importance of protecting children at this difficult time.

Please accept my apologies for the delay in responding to your letter dated the 17 March. As you can imagine both my officials and I have had very little breathing room to provide you with a response before now.

In addition to addressing your points, I wanted to highlight the accelerated launch of the Children and Families Hub on the 23 March. The Hub has been some time in the planning as part of the wider development of services that can provide support at an early stage, ensuring the children young people and families get the right help at the right time. This will enable children and families to access timely information, advice and guidance at the earliest opportunity, as well as supporting families to step down from statutory and specialist services. The hub provides our new front door for children with emerging and additional needs and provides a point of triage to ensure that support is proportionate. This also means that safeguarding concerns will be routed through the Hub and be dealt with accordingly. Central to the Right Help Right Time approach is that children and families who need support from more than one agency will have a lead worker. This lead worker works alongside the family, getting to know their circumstances and making sure that the support they need is co-ordinated through the team around the child approach.

The Hub is a critical part of our practice framework and aims to streamline some of the current processes, to reduce bureaucracy and bring the right support to children and families at the right time. By launching this initiative early, it is hoped that it will alleviate some of the burdens on families during this stressful time.

I now respond to each of your points below. I hope you find the content beneficial and reassuring.

Young Islanders pursuing their education in the UK and further afield may not be able to return or, in some cases, have contact with their families. The same thing applies to those children and young people who have been placed in care in the UK and who may not be able to see their families or siblings.

Very early on in the planning, the Education Minister asked officials to devise a set of arrangements to support students wishing or needing to return from off-Island Universities. An early and key output of this work was the designation of students as 'essential travellers' to ensure no hindrance was encountered in returning home. For those remaining off-Island, extensive

advice has been produced, and discretionary financial support is being considered where grants and/or family support is insufficient. Skills Jersey has been proactive in ensuring there is a comprehensive database capturing where our students are, as well as offering telephone advice and support both to students and parents and carers. Work is continuing on the development of longer-term measures relation to the summer term and the new academic year and, as with all Government advice, this will be posted on gov.je when approved.

Children and young people who remain in their respective off-Island care placements are being cared for by staff or foster carers in accordance with UK safety and medical advice. The department has an off-island team which is continuing to be in contact, the frequency and nature of which based on needs. Social Workers and other social care staff are, of course, using technology to keep in contact remotely – for example using calls, use of facetime, skype etc where deemed appropriate. All 20 children looked after off-island have access to the app, Mind Of My Own (MOMO), which also helps young people communicate their views in a way that suits them. Young people create their own account, which can be used on any device at any time. This means that young people can use the app to say how they are feeling, what support they need and tell their social worker about things that are important to them. They have also all been reminded about the independent advocacy provided by Jersey Cares, as well as the support available through the Children's Rights Service and your own Office.

Children and young people on child protection plans, children in need or with early help plans are also especially vulnerable at this time, when there is an increasingly real prospect of prolonged school closures. For these children, attending school and youth centres may well be an important part of their care planning, as well as a necessary element of structure in their lives.

We appreciate the increased vulnerabilities that are likely to develop for some children and families at this time, hence the acceleration of the Hub as described above, along with the provision of school, nursery and childminding options to those who require that support. Along with critical workers with children, places in schools and early year settings have been prioritised for those children considered most vulnerable in the Island and the total number of places available in each nursery or school is being kept low, to ensure that children and staff can practice safe social distancing. Wherever possible, children are attending their regular childminder, setting or school.

For older children and young people, the Youth Service has extended the opening hours for the YES helpline and is also extending eligibility so that any young person or young adult under 25 years old can call, email, text, WhatsApp or contact through the YES website to talk to one of the Youth Workers who can provide relevant information, advice and support. The Jersey Youth Service is also providing and giving further consideration to a wider range of virtual 'youth club' options that priority or interested young people will benefit from.

An increasing number of families in Jersey are struggling to manage financially. There is particular concern around cases in which parents and carers on zero-hour contracts are being laid off, with no access to public funds because of residential qualifications.

With further action in response to Covid-19 now being taken, there is an imminent prospect of people losing out on work opportunities and, therefore, seeing a reduction in their income. This will include the most vulnerable members of our community, but also those who aren't otherwise known to services who may struggle to pay their rent. I recognise the important social role that housing trusts, letting agents and landlords play in the community, and I am working closely with

them to ensure that they will be looking sympathetically upon those tenants who might now struggle to pay their rent owing to the impact of coronavirus. As you will know, courts have already agreed not to process evictions. I will also be bringing measures to the Assembly shortly to protect tenants during this trying period and I am keeping these protections under review to ensure that all is being done to protect the vulnerable.

Utility companies have also recently announced that they will be as flexible as possible with payment terms for all customers.

An announcement was also made last week made by the Minister for Social Security about benefits for those who have not been resident for 5 years are entitled too whilst this unprecedented situation continues for and this offer has now gone live. The Government has also made related announcements about preferential business loans and co-payroll funding for employed staff across a wide range of defined business sectors. Information about all these schemes is being heavily promoted and the details are all available via gov.je.

The Government, with key partners in the private, voluntary and community sectors, has a workstream to consider vulnerable people looking at how best to support our fellow islanders. This includes considering the most effective forms of practical assistance, along with a campaign to promote the important of local communities being the eyes and ears of society for ensuring the vulnerable aren't forgotten about

Children and young people have the right to an education. We must make certain that their rights are not being compromised, nor their futures jeopardised, if they are not able to attend public examinations or if they miss the critical few weeks of preparation before exams.

Schools have already been sharing home learning resources for children with much active participation already taking place. In addition, the Children, Young People, Education and Skills Department is implementing a new "Learning at Home" project to provide parents with more practical advice and resources to help with home learning while schools are closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The main aim of this project is to provide the parents of primary and secondary school pupils with the necessary tools to support them in home schooling their child or young person.

With the announcement that examinations in May and June will be cancelled and that grades this year will be done on a predicted basis. The aim is to provide these calculated grades to students before the end of July 2020.

Pupils will also have an option to sit an exam early in the next academic year (2021) all being well with the COVID-19 developments. If students do not believe the correct process has been followed in their case, they will be able to appeal on that basis.

What are the arrangements for children attending our special school should the school struggle to stay open.

Detailed medical advice has been sought from both the Deputy Medical Director for Health and Paediatric Consultants regarding the specialist care some of our children require. They have advised that schools such as Mont A l'Abbe remain open. However, we are also carefully following advice that a small number of children who are considered to be very vulnerable should not attend school and should be 'shielded'. Those children for whom staying at home is the best option are all being supported by their teachers via telephone and online advice to their families.

Through a multi-agency initiative, the department has established a database with the details of all known vulnerable children in the island and the lead agency directly linked to them. The lead workers are working with families to ensure the child's and parents needs are being met.

The right to good-quality healthcare is obviously key at this particular time. I would be concerned that those who cannot afford to pay to see a doctor may be afraid to identify with symptoms of COVID-19. Many of those families are not currently registered with a GP and will therefore not automatically be receiving extra support and information from local surgeries.

Those that show symptoms of the virus are being encouraged to contact the local helpline for advice. Leaflets and posters are distributed in Polish, Portuguese and Romanian. People are being actively encouraged not to go to their GP's during this time but to seek medical advice through the corona virus helpline. Customer and Local Services leads on helpline support and is actively recruiting members of staff who can speak a range of languages to help all islanders access the support they need.

The Minister for External Relations has been liaising closely with Honorary Consuls based in the island, the majority of which have a good relationship with their nationals, to ensure that links to family and friends elsewhere are maintained and to deliver any resource available for foreign nationals and settled communities in the Island.

Under the current law, children under the age of 12 are protected from unregistered childcare. Any relaxation of this legislation in order to tackle the inevitable practical difficulties that will arise during this difficult time must not compromise children's safety and protection.

The communications and policy team have been working incredibly hard to ensure that parents and children have guidance notes which are easy to understand. The message is that parents and carers are primarily responsible for keeping their children safe, however you will have seen through my press conferences that I have asked for everyone to take on the role of 'Corporate Parent' to ensure are children of Jersey are safe. We have shared guidance with the public that children under 12 years old should not be left home alone. Provision has been made for this age group to attend school for these parents who are classed as Critical Workers.

I have attached the hyper link to the guidance for your information.
<https://www.gov.je/SiteCollectionDocuments/Health%20and%20wellbeing/ID%20Parents%20Leaflet%2020200320.pdf>

In respect of the recent emergency legislation recently passed by the Assembly, I think we are broadly in agreement that it will only ever be in extremis that consent is sought to move to any relaxation of standards. And, as you know, this matter has now been considered by Scrutiny.

Food poverty is, for some families in this Island, a real and frightening issue. I will be seeking reassurance that families relying on foodbanks will be able to access food as voluntary groups begin to stop providing services.

I can confirm that Malcolm Ferey from the Citizens Advice Bureau is assisting the Government with voluntary groups to ensure they are still able to assist those that need help. Voluntary and community sector staff and volunteers are considered 'essential' and are therefore not required to follow the Stay at Home policy while they are performing these duties. Food banks do not have to

close during 'lockdown' and social security are ensuring that those families facing financial hardship through this crisis are receiving financial support.

I would also add that the Government has announced a package of supports for islanders to help them through this difficult time.

Please contact me if you wish to discuss any matters that have been raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam Mézec', written in a cursive style.

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