

Dumfries and Galloway NHS Board

Chief Executive's Office

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Re Dentistry in Scotland

I am writing, on behalf of NHS Dumfries and Galloway, in response to your letter dated 20th November 2024 seeking views on the status of dental services in Scotland.

NHS Provision

- Access to NHS dental services in Dumfries and Galloway has decreased significantly in the last 3 years. Between September 2021 to September 2024, 45,432 patients have lost their access to an NHS dentist. We currently have 63% of our population registered with an NHS dentist and 57% of those registered have attended for a dental appointment in the last 2 years. There are currently no dental practices across our region routinely taking new NHS patients, leaving patients no alternative but paying privately for dental care or seeking NHS care out with the region.
- The main factor that has contributed to reduced provision is difficulty in recruitment and retention of dentists wishing to provide NHS general dental services.
- Since the COVID-19 pandemic, several dental practices have closed, largely due to their inability to recruit dentists.
- A number of general dental practitioners have also chosen to increase their private provision to the detriment of their NHS provision. Feedback suggests that this allows for: increased time with patients, improved work-life balance, time for more complex and satisfying treatment options for patients and increased remuneration.
- Many existing dental practices have made the decision to hold predominately private adult patient lists with some still seeing children as NHS patients. The Public Dental Service (PDS) is experiencing significant pressures but continues to provide emergency care for all unregistered patients and has recently commenced single courses of treatment for unregistered children under the care of Childsmile.
- There is no recent evidence of dentists setting up new practices and offering NHS services. Board officers have invested large amounts of time in relation to recruitment and retention of dental workforce. There are many ongoing initiatives that continue to be progressed to try to attract new dentists to the area including dental student outreach expansion, increased number of vocational training practices, wide promotion of Dumfries & Galloway dental opportunities at national

and international levels. However, amid ongoing national dental workforce shortages, these continue to have minimal impact locally.

- The Scottish Dental Access Initiative continues to be available in Dumfries and Galloway and has in recent times supported one training practice to extend existing premises. However, the allowance is available widely across many other areas of Scotland and therefore has reduced impact in Dumfries & Galloway. In addition, the value of the allowance has not increased since its introduction in 2006 whilst maintaining the 7 year post allowance commitment to NHS service provision this again has potentially reduced its impact.
- There are several other allowances which could be used to support increased recruitment and retention in rural area/those with lowest dental registration rates. These include the recruitment and retention allowance which is very restrictive in nature e.g. no previous dental listing in Scotland within the previous 5 years and is also now widely available across multiple Scottish health boards and has therefore significantly reduced impact in areas such as Dumfries and Galloway. The Remote Areas Allowance is based on population density, dependent on the postcode of the dental practice, there are examples of variations in eligibility across the region between neighbouring towns which again does not help with recruitment. Only 8/28 dental practices in Dumfries and Galloway are currently eligible/receive this allowance.

Payment reforms

- The payment reform, introduced in November 2023, was met with little comment from dental practices locally. It was interpreted that local practitioners were accepting and broadly supportive of it. However, NHS dental access in Dumfries and Galloway has continued to worsen since the payment reform was introduced.
- Dental practices like many businesses will experience the impact of increased costs of materials, utilities and staffing costs.
- There remains concern around the increased costs to patients during the current cost of living crisis.
- It is noted that the funding for General Dental Services is held at Scottish Government level and NHS Boards are not able to directly access funding resulting from decreases in activity in General Dental Services in their area, this limits access to funding to support local Public Dental Services who are now having to provide emergency dental care for all unregistered patients.

Staffing

- The recruitment and retention of dentists and dental therapists within general dental services remains the largest problem within dentistry in Dumfries and Galloway. The Public Dental Service had some success last year in recruiting part time staff but still has vacant posts that despite repeated advertisement have not been able to be recruited to.
- There is an urgent need to increase the dental workforce – it is recognised this is a UK wide challenge and requires multiple actions to address involving UK and Scottish Governments and the General Dental Council.

Prevention and improvement

- The new Determination I model of high trust, low bureaucracy is to be welcomed and presented an opportunity to go further than it did in terms of the utilisation of preventive interventions.
- The Oral Health Improvement Plan is still referenced but given this document was published in 2018 and much has changed since then, it might be helpful to have a refresh of the government's strategy in relation to provision of NHS dental services.

Budget

- The Scottish budget 2025-26 should acknowledge that there are significant differences in relation to access to NHS dental across Scotland – this is a key community based health service. The infrastructure to support and provide a NHS dental workforce needs to be in place across the country to enable all Health Boards to be able to offer the same level of access to NHS dental care to all patients regardless of where they live.
- In rural areas we are seeing an ageing demographic which is resulting in more complex care for many aspects of health services including dental services.
- NHS dental careers should be both rewarding and financially attractive with further investment required to align salaries within Public Dental Service to General Dental Service earnings and consideration to re-establishing Remote & Rural Dental Fellowship programmes.
- Investment in community-based prevention needs to continue such as the Childsmile programme.

I trust these reflections from NHS D&G are helpful.

Yours Sincerely



Julie White
Chief Executive

cc:
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Valerie White
Alison Milne