

## **NHS Fife Response to Health Social Care and Sport Committee re. Dentistry in Scotland**

From a Fife perspective our situation has been challenging due to recruitment and retention issues in the dental workforce. This has impacted on access to NHS dentistry. The majority of dentistry is provided by independent dental practices on the high streets, who are independent businesses, and have a mixed economy model of NHS and private dental care. We are very clear about what is in our control and what is outwith our control. Unlike General Medical Services, the NHS Boards are not tasked, via legislation, with ensuring every member of the public is able to register with a NHS dental practitioner. This therefore limits the powers available to boards to influence delivery of GDS.

Dental body corporates (DBC's) have become significant players in Fife with a number of DBC's owning multiple practices in Fife. Dental body corporates are corporations entitled to practice dentistry in the UK. The majority of their directors have to be registered dentists or registered dental care professionals.

The largest one in Fife is Real Good Dental who own 14 dental premises in Fife and are currently operating out of 8 practices, not necessarily on a full-time basis, due to the merger of some practices.

Six are now 'mothballed', meaning patients are having to travel further for urgent dental care. Closed practices include- Tayport, Lochgelly, Kinghorn, Breeze Kirkcaldy, Heritage House Glenrothes, Bayview Methil. Patients have little choice of moving practices as very few practices are currently taking on NHS adult patients.

The Scottish Government introduced a new contract in November 2023 and to date NHS Boards and Scottish Government have not had regular management information to understand the picture at practice level.

Please find below responses to your specific questions:

### **NHS provision**

**Have dentists increased NHS provision in the last 2 years? If not, could you describe any barriers which have prevented this from happening?**

- We have not received Management Information from NSS so cannot accurately say whether NHS provision has increased or decreased over the past 2 years. Our most recent figures show that 192 dentists are listed with Primary Care to provide NHS dentistry including Public Dental Service dentists, this figure has been stable since 2019 (range 176-192). This is a headcount and gives no detail on whole time equivalent nor the NHS/private split.
- Primary Care has processed 25,562 NHS patient de-registrations since 1 January 2024 and are aware of a further practice closure which will result in mass deregistering of NHS patients (approx 5,500). The majority of these de-registrations have been from dental body corporates 'mothballing' premises due to recruitment challenges. In 2024 we have seen the closure of 2 Clyde Munro practices and their other practice, an orthodontic practice, they have sold on.

**Is there evidence of new dentists setting up practices and offering NHS services? If not, why not?**

- A dental practice in Tayport has recently opened and is registering NHS patients under 26 year olds.

**Do you have any views on the [Scottish Dental Access Initiative](#) and whether it has been successful in facilitating the establishment or expansion of NHS dental provision?**

NHS Fife previously had 4 locations which did not result in SDAI grants being awarded. We have had expressions of interest following the PCA letter issued October 2024 with 3 new areas listed (Glenrothes, Dunfermline and Kirkcaldy) which we are taking forward to support dentists applying if they meet the criteria.

**Has there been any increase in registrations with the public dental service in your board area?**

The Public Dental Service is not actively registering patients. The PDS is predominately a referral service treating complex patients and trying to cope with the increase in demand for providing emergency care to the un/de-registered patients in Fife. The PDS still register children through Childsmile referral scheme with health visitors and for children up to the end of primary school age (12) if they can't find a dentist. For those children above this age (high school) we will provide a course of treatment. Fife Dental Advice Line gathers current information from practices on a monthly basis asking if they are providing NHS registration.

**Payment Reforms**

**To what extent do the new fee levels, introduced in the 2023 payment reforms, reflect increased costs for dental services?**

**How successful or otherwise is the new fee structure in facilitating the prioritisation of patient access? Please set out any examples within your answer.**

- Some practices who are more committed to NHS dentistry have seen improvements with the new fee levels but employment costs, lab and material costs have also increased. Due to workforce challenges we have not seen a huge increase in practices taking on NHS patients.
- Anecdotally we are aware that the increased NHS fees that patients pay has resulted in patients refusing an appointment or choosing a treatment that they can afford but not necessarily what they want.

## **Staffing**

**Are there ongoing challenges with the recruitment and retention of dental professionals in Scotland? If so, how might these be addressed?**

- Workforce recruitment and retention continues to be challenging and is the reason for practices being mothballed. We are aware of high level conversations between governments, the General Dental Council (dental regulatory body) to improve the situation while being cognisant of delivering safe and high quality patient care.

## **Prevention and Improvement**

**Is there evidence to suggest dentists are doing more to focus on prevention in NHS dentistry?**

**To what extent is the [Oral Health Improvement Plan, 2018](#), still driving reforms in dentistry?**

**What are your hopes and expectations of what the Scottish budget 2025-26 may deliver in relation to dentistry when it is published on 4 December 2024?**

We need management information to give us insight into the impact of the contract reform but the new fee structure has combined 'preventative' care so it will be hard to extrapolate accurate figures to evidence if more prevention is taking place. The most recent National Dental Inspection Programme report (October 2024) highlights the high levels of obvious dental caries in 5 years olds in Fife and inequalities still remain.

Scottish Government's Oral Health Improvement Plan (2018) would benefit from a re-visit with national priorities for dentistry defined and a meaningful outcomes framework for measurement developed. In relation to water fluoridation, we are aware of the North East England consultation and understand the British Dental Association in Scotland is wanting to look at water fluoridation.

The recent UK Government budget has put increased pressure on small businesses, including dentistry, with the increase in NIC and also minimum wages. We await the Scottish budget and hope that there is an appreciation for small businesses but also a realisation for the cost of delivering high quality NHS dental care.