

Dental

The Balfour
Foreland Road
Kirkwall
Orkney
KW15 1NZ
www.ohb.scot.nhs.uk



Date: 25 November 2024

Enquiries to: Steven Johnston
Email: steven.johnston2@nhs.scot

Clare Haughey MSP
Convener,
Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Re Dentistry in Scotland

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

NHS provision

- NHS dental provision in Orkney has reduced in recent year. This is a result of vacancies and recruitment challenges in both the independent sector and the Public Dental Service (PDS) in addition to sickness absence in the PDS.
- The existing dental practices are over stretched and although they try to maintain the registration of NHS patients, many patients still have trouble accessing care. No practice or service in Orkney is currently taking on new NHS or private patients and therefore registration figures for Orkney are expected to fall (through migration, deaths etc).
- The PDS, despite pressures, continue to provide emergency dental service and dental care to special patient groups or where there is a medical indication for dental health to be maintained. The PDS does not have capacity to carry out its core work and therefore further registration of patients to improve the access problem is not possible at present. This will not be remedied until there is some success with recruitment of dentists and dental therapists.
- Participation (contact with a dentist within the last 2 years) is a more informative measure of the dental situation (compared to registration) and this has recently been low in Orkney, relative to the rest of Scotland.
- The [Scottish Dental Access Initiative](#) has been continuously available in Orkney since pre-pandemic time however, no applications or expressions of interest have been received for several years. There is patient demand and therefore setting up a practice in the local area would be expected to be busy and profitable.
- Tourism places an additional pressure on dental services in Orkney over and above our resident population. This is year-round but particularly felt in the summer months.

Orkney NHS Board Headquarters:

The Balfour, Foreland Road
Kirkwall, Orkney KW15 1NZ

Chair: Meghan McEwen
Chief Executive: Laura Skaife-Knight



Thanking our staff #NHSScot75

Caring for the people of Orkney

Orkney NHS Board is the common name of Orkney Health Board

Payment reforms

- The payment reform, introduced in November 2023 was largely met with silence which was taken to be a marker of success – i.e. the profession were generally content. Unfortunately, this is yet to translate into an increase in NHS provision in Orkney.
- Concerns remain around the increased costs to patients (during a cost of living crisis) and the overall cost of the reform resulting in limited money remaining to adequately fund the PDS, particularly in areas where it has to provide additional services to address the access issue.

Staffing

- The recruitment of dentists and dental therapists in both the independent sector and PDS remains the largest problem within dentistry in Orkney. For example, a Dental Officer post in the PDS went out to advert repeatedly for over 18 months, with different approaches taken to advertising and using various networks. On several occasions, there were zero applications. Although pay itself has increased over time, the allowances have not increased for well over a decade and pay remains far short of earning potential in the independent sector. Island and rural boards have lost some of the competitive edge as some of the benefits have become more widely available across Scotland, including urban areas.
- Retention of dental nurses in independent practices has been raised as a concern, with competitive pay cited as a key factor.
- The cessation of the NES Remote & Rural Fellowship programme, which was used to upskill dentists, has had an adverse impact in Orkney. This programme was used to good effect in the past to provide treatment closer to home, safely and at reduced cost (primary care rather than secondary care). Being able to offer this programme was an important aspect of recruiting and retaining staff, as well as service delivery, in the past.
- We recognise the success across many disciplines if you can “grow your own”. We have invested time in supporting local secondary school pupil in their applications to dental school but a bursary scheme which ties in a period of service in a rural area would be useful.
- Other factors which impact the recruitment and retention of dental staff in Orkney include: housing availability, cost of travel, access to training or referral services (secondary care).

Prevention and improvement

- Feedback from the profession has suggested the new Determination I, Statement of Dental Remuneration was an opportunity to go further than it did in terms of the utilisation of preventative interventions in dentistry. There were undoubtedly some changes which encourage a more preventative approach but the system very much remains “fee per item” with treatment in response to the damage already done.
- Prevention is not just cost-effective but also better for the environment which might be a further lever in the future to drive change.
- The [Oral Health Improvement Plan, 2018](#) is still referenced but whether it is still “driving” progress is less clear. The Covid-19 Pandemic drew the focus away the Plan.

Budget

- The Scottish budget 2025-26 needs to acknowledge that our patients are becoming more complex (ageing, living with more comorbidity and additional support needs, more dentate etc) and the population (in Orkney) is growing. The workforce needs to be in place to cope with this, mindful of future projections. We need to be able to fund appropriately trained people to tend to the population. Post need to be rewarding and lucrative with some means of island or very rural boards offer further incentive. We need funded upstream, preventative community based services to be in place to reduce the number of interventions needed in the long-term (primary and secondary prevention).

Kind Regards,

Yours Sincerely,

Mr Steven Johnston
Director of Dentistry