From the Interim Permanent Secretary and HSC Chief Executive

Department of Health
An Roinn Sláinte
Männystrie O Poustie
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Dear Tristen

DENTAL PAYMENT REFORM

Thank you for your letter of 2 October 2026 regarding dental payment reform and the future sustainability of Health Service dentistry in Northern Ireland.

I fully recognise the strength of feeling within the profession and understand the concerns expressed by dental practitioners and the BDA regarding the financial viability of providing Health Service dental care, access to services for patients and the future sustainability of General Dental Services.

The publication of the Cost of Service Review on 16 September 2026 provided important and robust evidence regarding the costs associated with delivering Health Service dentistry. The findings of the review, including the significant gap identified between current remuneration arrangements and the estimated cost of providing care, have been accepted and Minister Butler has stated his commitment to doing whatever is possible to address those findings.

My comments to the Health Committee were in no way intended to dismiss the findings or the challenges that practices and practitioners are currently managing.

I appreciate the BDA's view that urgent action is required. However, the Department's ability to respond immediately to the extent requested is constrained by the current financial position facing both the Department and the wider Executive. This is the unfortunate reality under which the Health Service as a whole is operating under. It is necessary that we take a long term view so that as and when the budgetary position is confirmed we are in a position to make the necessary decisions for the future of General Dental Services.

Work is already underway to develop and appraise reform options aimed at improving access, supporting sustainability and addressing the issues highlighted by the review. This includes consideration of the funding gap identified, potential changes to remuneration arrangements and the future scope of General Dental Services.

While I understand the profession's desire for immediate implementation of the review's findings, it is important that any changes introduced are financially sustainable, deliverable and capable of supporting patients' long-term access to care. I have a responsibility to ensure that decisions are made based on robust analysis and available resources. The funding implications associated with fully implementing the hourly rate identified by the review are substantial and must be considered alongside competing pressures across the wider Health and Social Care system.

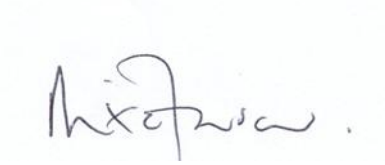
Departmental officials remain committed to engaging with the BDA and representatives of the dental profession as this work progresses. Constructive partnership is essential if we are to develop arrangements which are fair, evidence-based and capable of supporting sustainable access to dental services.

I believe that General Dental Services has the potential to serve as a cornerstone of neighbourhood health by combining prevention, population health improvement, community engagement and early intervention within a trusted, locally accessible primary care setting.

I appreciate the commitment shown by practitioners who continue to provide Health Service dentistry under challenging circumstances. I assure you that the issues identified by the Cost of Service Review are receiving careful consideration and that the Department remains committed to progressing reform as a priority.

Thank you for taking the time to write to me. Officials will continue to engage with you and BDA colleagues regarding the next stages of this work.

Yours sincerely



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