

08<sup>th</sup> September 2025

Mr Phil Rodgers  
Director of Workforce Policy  
Department of Health  
Room D 4.12  
Castle Buildings  
Belfast BT4 3SL

**Re. Hospital Dental Services -Workforce**

Dear Phil

I write on behalf of BDA NI Hospital Dental Services Forum which gives a voice to Resident, SAS and Consultant dentists employed in Hospital Dental Services (HDS).

In common with other salaried dental services, the absence of strategic workforce planning over recent years is manifesting itself at this present time, particularly in terms of critical Specialist shortages, a staff retention crisis and gaps in service delivery.

We want to open up a dialogue with you to explore how we can make much needed progress on addressing these issues in a deliberate and managed way.

Having recently consulted with HDS colleagues on their workforce priorities for Hospital Dental Services in Northern Ireland, the following key themes have emerged:

**1. Critical Specialist Shortages**

The most prominent theme is the urgent need for Specialist dental professionals:

- **Dental and Maxillofacial Radiologist (DMFR)** - Northern Ireland is the only UK region without direct access to a DMFR, creating clinical risks, professional liability issues, and educational disparities
- **Cleft Orthodontist** - Again, the only region in UK/Ireland without a dedicated cleft orthodontist, affecting specialised care delivery
- **Maxillofacial Consultants** - Severe shortages leading to 5+ year waiting lists for facial surgery and 3+ year waits for oral surgery requiring general anaesthesia

**2. A Staff Retention crisis**

A concerning pattern of senior staff exodus is documented:

- Loss of numerous consultants across specialties (OMFS, cleft surgeons, paediatric dentists, orthodontists, restorative consultants)
- Contributing factors include inadequate salaries compared to Republic of Ireland and "moral injury" from working in a broken system
- Staff feeling unable to provide desired patient care quality

**3. Service Delivery Gaps**

Specific patient care needs are going unmet:

- Head and neck oncology patients struggling to access dental care
- Need for specialist care pathways and managed clinical networks
- Requirement for regional paediatric and restorative consultants to reduce pressure on central services

**4. Training and Development Needs**

- Developing clinical academics and making Northern Ireland attractive for trainees
- Expanding training programmes, particularly in special care dentistry
- Encouraging all graduates to spend time working in HDS to build experience and career interest

Colleagues have also shared they want to see stronger professional unity and collaboration between the different branches of dentistry, recognising that weaknesses in one area can affect the entire system.

We are particularly concerned at the lack of strategic direction and workforce planning in relation to our dental workforce needs generally. For instance, the last review of consultant-led hospital dental services took place approximately 15 years ago and was never published; while there hasn't been a body in place to undertake HDS workforce planning and determine projected needs since the Hospital Services Sub-Committee of the Central Dental Advisory Committee (CDAC) was stood down around 2010/11.

Finally, I welcome in his reply of 3<sup>rd</sup> September to our letter re-entering into formal dispute on behalf of HDS Consultants, the Minister states: *"I will continue to make the case for prioritising investment in our HSC workforce, recognising the vital role they play in sustaining our health service"*.

The Minister adds: *"I remain committed to working with the BDA constructively to explore ways to improve the working lives and career pathways of our senior dental workforce in the interests of those dentists, patients and the wider health and social care system"*.

With these sentiments in mind, we wish to request to meet with you to explore how these workforce issues might be addressed.

Yours sincerely,



Darren Johnston

**Chair, NI Hospital Dental Services Forum**

**Cc:**

Mike Nesbitt, Minister of Health

Caroline Lappin, Chief Dental Officer

Michael Donaldson, Head of Dental Services, SPPG