BDA
Northern Ireland

Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Minister
Department of Health
Castle Buildings, Stormont
Belfast
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By email: Private.Office@health-ni.gov.uk

22nd October 2026

Re. **GDS**

Dear Minister

As you are aware, the Cost-of-Service Report commissioned by your department found a 60% funding gap between what your department is currently paying dentists for Health Service care carried out, and the true cost to provide care.

Unviable Health Service fees fixed by DoH are fuelling the collapse of Health Service dentistry which is manifesting right across Northern Ireland.

This is not a routine letter from BDA; it is a warning that practitioners are becoming disillusioned precisely because they see no evidence of an immediate rescue plan coming from the department some five weeks following Cost of Service publication.

The absence of clear steps being taken to implement Cost-of-Service findings, in particular carrying out fee rebasing informed by Cost of Service, as well as mixed signals coming from your department referencing wider Budgetary issues is causing deep concern among those remaining Health Service committed practitioners.

There is a growing concern that the additional finance which would close the funding gap is being blocked and ultimately may not be forthcoming.

Minister, now that the Cost-of-Service Report has been published and the evidence confirms the full extent to which your department has been underpaying dentists compared with the true cost to provide care has been clearly and unequivocally laid out, continued delay and inaction increasingly suggests the significant payment reform

needed at practice level will not be forthcoming this time either. The direct consequence of this is that dentists would be expected to continue to shoulder any financial shortfall through continuing to provide Health Service dentistry at a loss.

Minister, no practitioner is prepared or can afford to continue to provide Health Service dentistry on such a basis, nor is it fair to expect them to.

Earlier this week I felt compelled to relay to your Chief Dental Officer the growing depth of feeling from within the profession. Initial hopes among high Health Service committed practitioners that this report would finally act as a catalyst for substantive dental payment reform to be taken forward by DoH at pace are now being dashed.

I have heard from dentists who currently serve the most disadvantaged parts of Northern Ireland, and who have told me they will have no option but to go private imminently should the Cost-of-Service findings not be implemented at this time.

I am hearing from members who are considering withdrawing from the Dental Access Scheme despite that scheme keeping their high NHS committed practices afloat because without fee-rebasing they won't have a viable practice anyhow.

I am hearing from members expressing how discouraged they are at the future prospects for Health Service dentistry due to the absence of any immediate financial support forthcoming from DoH, despite the clear evidence base to act.

I am also hearing from salaried dentists who work in the Community and Hospital Dental Services and who are coming under immense and growing strain precisely because of the considerable dental access issues which are impacting directly on their services and crippling the entire dental system.

This is no longer a service in crisis, but one which only exists for just under half of our population and is set to get much smaller at pace. Dentists don't strike, they leave.

I am sounding the alarm because the onus is squarely on the Department to show the profession precisely what actions it is taking to put this service back on a financially viable and sustainable footing, starting with addressing practice finances.

There are a number of key steps which must be taken to start to begin to restore confidence among practitioners, as follows:

- DoH to decide the total financial envelope for the GDS Budget & ringfence accordingly
- Rebase all fees by 1.6 to implement the Cost-of-Service findings, correcting the 60% shortfall
- In the event of a GDS budget shortfall, DoH should prioritise the dental care it can afford to commission from independent contractors according to the recognised rate of £145/hour as per Cost-of-Service Report
- Introduce an Index of Dental Costs as recommended by DDRB to avoid practitioner earnings being eroded by inflation over time

Inability to access Health Service dental care is already a widespread problem right across Northern Ireland. The longer Health Service dentistry is financially unviable to deliver, the worse this crisis will become and the exodus away from NHS dentistry will continue.

If practitioner expectations for meaningful and urgent reform are dashed this time around, there is a very real risk that you will lose what is left of Health Service dentistry for good.

This is squarely a problem of your department's making over many years. However, the Cost-of-Service Report also points to the fix -we urge you to be the Health Minister who implements it.

Yours sincerely

Tristen Kelso

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BDA Northern Ireland Director

Cc: Mike Farrar, Permanent Secretary; Caroline Lappin, Chief Dental Officer

Tracey McCaig, Chief Operating Officer; Martina Moore, Director of Primary Care