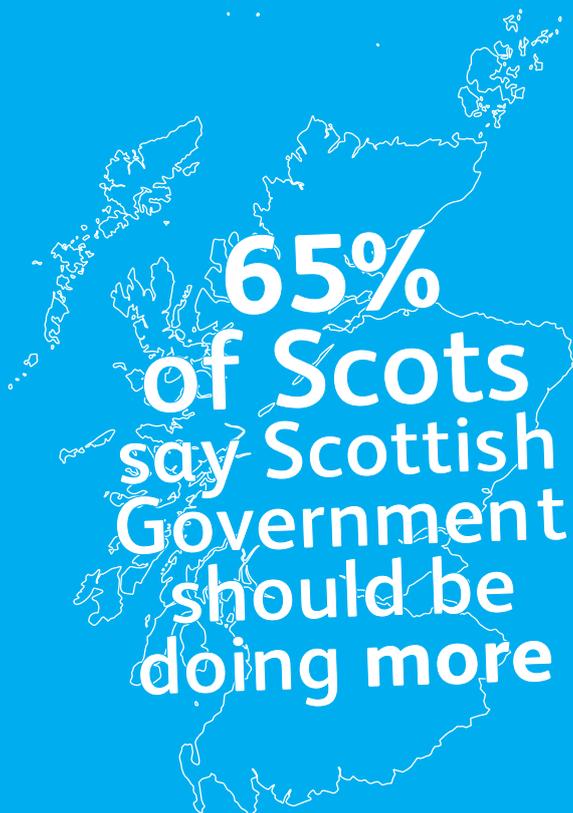
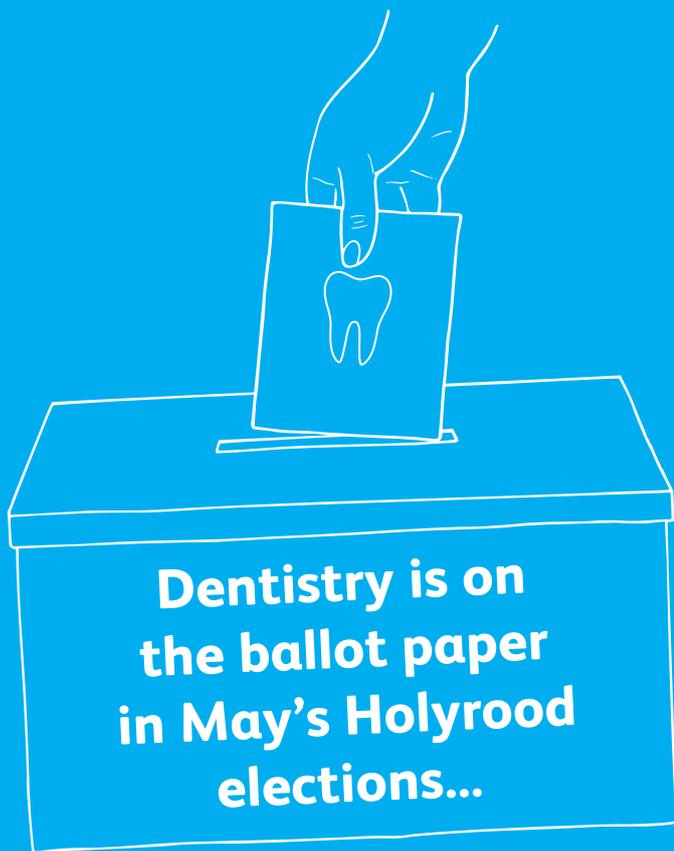


Future- proofed

How to make dentistry in Scotland sustainable



Introduction

As Scotland goes to the polls, dentistry remains on the ballot paper.

There can be no room for complacency from any party that seeks to form our next government. If we want NHS dentistry to remain a going concern in the 21st century, it will require a sustained plan of action.

It means closing an oral health gap between rich and poor that is already widening. To call time on postcode lotteries of care that remain the norm, whether it's chasing check-ups on the high street, or desperate children facing year-long delays for extractions in our hospitals.

It requires the next government to ensure we actually have the people in place on the frontline. Scotland cannot have NHS dentistry without NHS dentists. And we need a fully funded workforce plan that ensures we have all the dental team members in place we need.

It hinges on supporting practices at the coal face struggling to fill vacancies and to keep on top of ever mounting costs.

And it means doubling down on prevention. Scotland can take pride in the pioneering work of Childsmile, but this country must not rest on its laurels when decay remains the number one reason for hospital admissions among young children.

The public are clear the next Scottish Government needs to go further, and faster. We must future-proof dentistry in Scotland, because failure to do so will come at a steep financial, human and ultimately a political cost.

We may be the only UK nation to have seen meaningful reform of NHS dentistry in this parliament. But this cannot be viewed as 'mission accomplished'.

Families across Scotland need a genuinely sustainable service, that will remain there for them, when they need it.

This is already an issue on the doorstep. It will remain one until voters see real change.

In 2026, we need a government that will:

- 1. Improve access & reduce inequalities**
- 2. Create the workforce Scotland needs**
- 3. Support NHS dental services**
- 4. Focus on prevention**

1. Improve access & reduce inequalities

Despite changes to primary care NHS dentistry via payment reform, which was introduced on 1 November 2023, too many people across Scotland continue to struggle to access care they need when they need it. While registration levels remain high, participation which is defined by Public Health Scotland as “contact with an NHS dentist in the past two years” – remains variable across the country.

The oral health gap between Scotland’s most and least deprived communities continues to grow, creating a postcode lottery in access and outcomes. Problems with access to NHS dentistry in many areas, particularly rural areas, have resulted in many desperate patients taking matters into their own hands and resorting to DIY dentistry, or heading overseas for care that should be available in their own communities.

Surgery to have decayed teeth removed under general anaesthetic (GA) remains the most common reason for young children to have an elective hospital admission in Scotland, with children from the most socio-economically deprived areas bearing the greatest burden.

Over 6,500 children a year undergo dental extraction under GA, costing our NHS around £8.4 million.

Children and adult patients with special care needs, who need treatment under GA face unacceptably long waits for such procedures, with hundreds waiting for over a year.

These delays cause avoidable pain, infection, missed school days, and distress for the affected patients and their families.

The next government must:

- **Launch a National Dental GA Recovery Plan**
Commit to restoring and expanding GA capacity through targeted funding, additional and protected theatre time, and workforce investment.
- **Measure access by attendance, not registration**
Due to the current ‘lifetime registration’ policy, registration rates with an NHS dentist are not a meaningful way to measure access to NHS dentistry. Focus must be on attendance rates to capture true patient contact, and target interventions in areas with poor access.
- **End the postcode lottery**
Improve recruitment and retention incentives, such as the Scottish Dental Access Initiative grant and relevant allowances within the Statement of Dental Remuneration and expand training opportunities to attract and retain dentists within the NHS throughout their career.
- **Guarantee dental care for the most vulnerable**
Ensure every care home has an assigned enhanced skills domiciliary care dentist responsible for residents’ dental care and treatment, which is supported by appropriate funding.
- **Expand the oral health improvement programmes**
Invest in Caring for Smiles oral health scheme and the four programmes for adults – ensuring coverage reaches those most at risk of poor oral health, such as dependent older people, people with additional care needs, those with experience of the justice system, or those experiencing homelessness.

2. Create the workforce Scotland needs

Any progress in addressing Scotland's oral care needs and tackling oral health inequalities will depend on having a stable workforce who can see their future careers in the NHS.

Currently, only 10% of dentists describe the NHS as an attractive place to build and maintain a career. More than 70% report feeling burnt out, and almost half of practices fear they may struggle to remain financially sustainable.

There are too few opportunities for professional development and career progression within the NHS, forcing many to move into the private sector.

While the number of Public Dental Service dentists – which treat a range of patients from vulnerable and priority groups, such as people experiencing homelessness, those in care homes or their own homes who require domiciliary care and people who may have complex medical and dental needs – has declined by 23% in the last 10 years.

The next government must:

- **Develop a fully costed and fully funded Scottish NHS Dental Workforce Plan**
Covering General Dental Services (high street dentists), the Public Dental Service, and the Hospital Dental Service, the plan should ensure Scotland has the right number of dentists and dental care professionals to meet population needs.
- **Expand training opportunities**
Increase the number of undergraduate dental training places, with a proportion reserved for Widening Access Intake. Monitoring of the distribution of Bachelor of Dental Surgery students by domicile should continue, with

consideration given to the required number of Scottish domicile students.

Guarantee a vocational training place for every Scottish graduate.

- **Improve career pathways in NHS dentistry**
Expand Enhanced Skills Practitioner training to include paediatric dentistry, oral surgery/oral medicine, sedation and complex restorative services, by introducing an accreditation framework for dentists developing advanced skills in these areas, with mentorship, quality assurance, and governance support.
- **Support dentistry in rural areas**
At undergraduate level, consider introducing student intake targets for students from rural backgrounds, to increase the likelihood of graduates working in areas where workforce challenges persist.

Establish postgraduate training programmes to support workforce development for example, a funded Master of Science programme for dentists in Rural Advanced Practice at the University of the Highlands and Islands, mirroring similar programmes available for doctors.

- **Deliver fair pay**
Ensure fair remuneration for all cohorts of dentists and funding for NHS dentistry, by committing to annual uplifts of item of service fees, capitation payment and allowances, that reflect the real cost of delivering NHS care. Pay awards must be applied to the full package of remuneration within the Statement of Dental Remuneration.

3. Support NHS dental services

While the Scottish Government has committed to an increase in funding for primary care dental services, rapidly rising costs of delivering care – particularly the hike in employer National Insurance contributions and the increase in the National Living Wage – have eroded the impact of this investment.

While payment reform made improvements to the funding of NHS General Dental Services, there is no room for complacency. Nearly half of practices report that their practices will struggle to remain financially sustainable, with many warning of an accelerated drift to private care.

The next government must:

- **Invest in primary care dentistry**
Ensure there is appropriate NHS funding to reflect the fact that most dental activity happens in primary care, therefore improving patient access and relieving secondary care pressures.
- **Keep the NHS primary care dental payment system under continuous review**
Involve the BDA in an ongoing review to make sure the system continues to reflect the growing cost of delivering NHS dental care and provides sustainable funding and fair remuneration for dentists.
- **Mitigate the impact of the National Insurance contribution increase**
Follow Northern Ireland's example by providing direct financial support and fully mitigate increased employer costs, protecting NHS access and practice viability.
- **Modernise with a Digital Dentistry Fund**
Introduce a fair and reasonable reimbursement scheme to help NHS dental practices invest in

digital technologies, including digital imaging, intraoral scanning, and digital record systems. Such technologies can improve clinical efficiency and outcomes for patients, as well as supporting workforce retention.



4. Focus on prevention

Improve the nation's oral health and reduce the burden of disease by investing in prevention.

Oral health inequalities remain a persistent challenge. Despite overall improvements in the prevalence of dental decay in children, the most recent National Dental Inspection Programme including a detailed inspection programme of Primary 1 children, shows a 24-percentage points gap between P1 children with no obvious tooth decay living in the most and least deprived areas.

Scotland also faces high incidence rates of oral cancer, with survival outcomes closely linked to deprivation and early detection. Head and neck cancers are the 6th most common cancer in Scotland and are more likely to be diagnosed at a more advanced stage among people living in more deprived areas.

The next government must:

- Expand the reach of Childsmile**
 Build on the success of Childsmile by expanding the supervised toothbrushing programme to include P3 and P4 pupils in high-need schools, to include an additional 25,000 children.
- Take action to encourage healthier choices**
 Introduce robust policies to prevent uptake of both smoking and vaping, and support those seeking to quit. There should be an increased focus on smokeless tobacco, with culturally sensitive messaging available in a range of languages. Other cessation programmes, such as those targeted at alcohol, can have a positive impact in supporting people to reduce their intake. Dentists and dental teams should be supported to provide prevention, and signpost patients to appropriate programmes.
- Create healthier environments**
 Ban the display of sugary products at children's eye level in shops and ensure the timely implementation of newly announced regulations to restrict the promotion and placement of food and drinks high in fat, sugar or salt. There should be tighter restrictions on the sale of energy drinks to safeguard the dental health of teenagers. Current evidence suggests energy drinks are mainly purchased by young people, and they can lead to an increased risk of tooth decay and erosion.
- Support water fluoridation**
 Provide NHS Boards with the funding and leadership needed to carry out water fluoridation feasibility studies, along with investment to help facilitate its introduction where applicable.

About us

The British Dental Association (BDA) is the voice of dentists and dental students in the UK.

Dentists are critical to the health of the nation and we want to see better oral health for all. We stand up for dentists, so they can deliver the very best care for their patients.

Our mission is to support a profession of valued dentists to deliver the highest quality dental services and improve the nation's oral health.

We work to:

- Promote the interests of our members
- Advance the art, science and ethics of dentistry
- Improve the nation's oral health.

For more information about this manifesto and the wider work of the BDA contact

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