FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH

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Dear Tristen

Thank you for your letter of 22 October 2026 regarding the sustainability of Health Service dentistry and the findings of the General Dental Services Cost of Service Review.

I recognise the strength of feeling within the dental profession and the significant concerns raised regarding the future viability of Health Service dentistry and the challenges facing practitioners. I also wish to acknowledge the constructive engagement of the British Dental Association and dental practitioners throughout the Cost of Service Review process.

The findings of the Cost of Service Review represent the most comprehensive assessment undertaken of the costs associated with delivering Health Service dentistry in Northern Ireland and provide a valuable independent evidence base to inform future policy development. This evidence will be a key consideration as my Department examines potential options for the future of Health Service dentistry.

The Review has highlighted significant challenges facing the sustainability of Health Service dentistry and reinforces concerns which have been raised by the profession over a considerable period of time. My Department recognises the seriousness of these findings and the importance of securing a sustainable future for Health Service dentistry. The challenge is now to translate that evidence into practical, sustainable and affordable solutions.

I note the specific proposals outlined in your correspondence regarding the future funding and sustainability of General Dental Services. These issues are being considered as part of my Department's ongoing work to assess the implications of the Review and the options available to support the long-term sustainability of Health Service dentistry.

My Department is actively progressing a detailed programme of work to identify, develop and assess options to address the challenges identified by the Review and support the long-term sustainability of Health Service dentistry. This work is considering a wide range of factors, including patient access, service sustainability, affordability, value for money and the wider strategic objectives of the HSC system. My Department's focus is on identifying measures that can support a sustainable and effective Health Service dental system for the longer-term.

Given the significance of the Review's findings, any response must be informed by a comprehensive assessment of the available options, including affordability and wider system impacts. While action is needed to address the challenges facing Health Service dentistry, all options must be carefully evaluated to understand both their benefits and potential unintended consequences across the wider HSC system.

As you will appreciate, consideration of any proposals which require additional investment must take place within an exceptionally challenging financial environment. The HSC system continues to face significant demand and resource pressures across a range of services. Furthermore, in the absence of an agreed Executive Budget, there remains significant uncertainty regarding the level of resources that will ultimately be available to my Department. This inevitably limits my Department's ability to take final decisions on options with significant financial implications, pending greater certainty regarding the funding available.

My Department will, however, continue to progress the necessary policy development work and explore the full range of options available to support the sustainability of Health Service dentistry, including opportunities to maximise the impact of available resources and support improved outcomes for patients and practitioners.

Notwithstanding these constraints, I fully recognise the significance and urgency of the issues highlighted by the Review. I also fully recognise the vital role that dentists play in delivering care, particularly within communities where need is greatest, and I appreciate the continued commitment of practitioners who provide Health Service dentistry despite

the challenges facing the sector. I welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further with representatives of the British Dental Association at our meeting on 17 November.

Please be assured that I remain committed to working with the profession and other stakeholders to identify sustainable solutions which support access to Health Service dental care for the population of Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely



Robbie Butler MLA
Minister of Health