



8<sup>th</sup> January 2024

Gearóid Cassidy  
Director of Primary Care  
Department of Health NI  
By email: [gearoid.cassidy@health-ni.gov.uk](mailto:gearoid.cassidy@health-ni.gov.uk)

**Re. DoH Proposals for General Dental Services and GDS Underspend**

Dear Gearóid

Your email of 21<sup>st</sup> December advised that the Department was developing investment options for GDS, and that given the current projected financial challenges and political situation, any measures being considered and subsequent decisions would need to be made by an incoming Minister. Should no Minister be appointed in the coming weeks, then the Department would consider again in the new year.

As there is no sign of any imminent political progress, I am seriously concerned that without immediate intervention by the Department, the dire situation facing general dental services will accelerate. The failing of dental services is already being referenced publicly in the context that GP services could soon go the same way as the difficulties being experienced accessing NHS dentistry.

Clearly, headroom exists to retain at least the 19/20 spend on GDS in this financial year, and beyond as an attempt to stabilise services, and provide extra incentive to meet demand.

By way of illustration, I have attached to this letter the BSO's own data for IOS (Item of Service) year on year from 2018-2023 and 2023/4 (incomplete). These official figures indicate the significant underspend – graphically depicting 22/23 IoS figures down 25% compared to the pre-COVID 19/20 baseline year. Net spending on GDS IoS has dwindled from circa £50m in 19/20 to £38m in 22/23 (23/24 extrapolated to year end looks is a similar value). Clearly, current fees pose a major disincentive to activity to present such a reduction in IoS spend on a demand-led budget.

It is our clear ask that such funding comparable with the pre-pandemic spend, should be directed specifically and in full to our deteriorating and ailing GDS rather than being diverted or side lined into any other service. Clearly, the headroom exists to proceed in this way.

The Revenue Grant Scheme's 24 month commitment ends on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 and significant levels of deregistration are anticipated, something that the BSO have even prepared for by devising a spreadsheet to enable block registrations.

General Dental Services is a vital component of the Northern Ireland health service. In order to secure continuation of this service we need immediate emergency support. This stabilisation package should utilise the significantly underspent funds compared with the 19/20 baseline year, in

the region of 30%; a reasonable ask given that dental payment reform in Scotland with a scaled back revised SDR, delivers on average a 30% enhancement on fees since 1<sup>st</sup> November 2023.

GDS colleagues in Scotland have also been in receipt of the 6% uplift as recommended by the DDRB for 23/24. Compare this with Northern Ireland where even the DDRB recommendation for 23/24 has still not been implemented.

I note from your email communication to BDA on 21<sup>st</sup> December, that work was underway to develop investment options. It would be helpful to have sight of the business case and an outline of what these proposals consist of, so these plans can be discussed at our next NIDPC meeting on Friday 19<sup>th</sup> January. At a time of such instability, the profession requires maximum and urgent transparency around the prospects of any immediate assistance, so informed business decisions can be taken.

As the BDA's NI Director Tristen Kelso said in his reply to your correspondence before Christmas, *'if nothing significant and transformative comes out of the anticipated forthcoming financial package for GDS - both in terms of the pay uplift component - but also the stabilisation/transformation element, Health Service dentistry is finished'*.

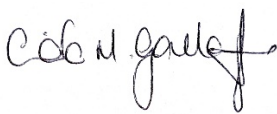
Nothing short of a significant and urgent recalibration of fees, in a similar vein to the Scottish approach at the very least will sustain the service. It is clear from GDS spend last year and projected spend this year, the headroom is there to recycle significantly underspent monies into incentivising and shoring up this vital service. I trust this reality is fully appreciated by the Department in its dealings with finance colleagues, ahead of key decisions being taken.

This issue goes to the heart of whether the Department is able to maintain a General Dental Service in Northern Ireland that is financially sustainable.

We would respectfully request an urgent reply and maximum transparency to be able to share with the profession's elected representatives at the forthcoming NI Dental Practice Committee meeting on Friday week (19<sup>th</sup> January 2024).

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Ciara Gallagher  
Chair, NIDPC

Cc: Peter May, Permanent Secretary  
Caroline Lappin, Chief Dental Officer  
Michael O'Neill, Head of General Dental & Ophthalmic Services