

12 May 2023

An open letter

Mr Peter May
Permanent Secretary, Department of Health
Sent by email

Dear Peter

On behalf of our members who provide dental services within Hospitals, General Practice and Community settings we write to share our grave concerns in respect of the budgetary outlook for 2023/24, and the implications any further cuts could have on the dental system, on patient care and on the dental profession.

Firstly, we acknowledge the difficult position you, as Chief Accounting Officer for the Department of Health have been put in receiving a budget allocation with a considerable shortfall that is in well of excess of the funding required to match a pay settlement with England.

We understand from Michael O'Neill's letter to General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) of 3 May that work is ongoing to secure savings and raise revenue across health budgets.

If the axe falls on dentistry - indeed if there is a failure to provide needed investment - this service faces collapse. The price will be paid by patients across Northern Ireland.

Dental services in Northern Ireland are hanging by a thread. A demoralised workforce is still struggling to recover services from the hammer-blow of the pandemic. General Dental Practitioners operating under a contract which was already unfit for purpose, now face the very same inflationary pressures which are impacting on the Department's budget.

A snapshot of existing pressures in dentistry:

- **Oral cancers:** Red flag referrals for suspected oral cancers from high street & community dentists into secondary care, set as 2 weeks currently running at 8.5 weeks in some areas
- **An access crisis in primary care:** Last year the BBC found 90% of practices were not accepting new adult patients and 88% were not accepting child patients. Activity levels have only recovered to approximately 80% of pre-COVID levels. A workforce crisis is fuelling this access crisis, combined with unviable fees to dentists for providing NHS care. 60% of dentists intend to increase their amount of private work. 41% of practice owners intend to decrease their health service work¹ This picture is set to worsen.
- **Multi-year waiting times:** We have 5-6 year waiting times for routine assessment for Oral & Maxillo-facial services; 219-312 weeks Hospital Orthodontic waiting times for patients with facial deformities; currently reliant on a surgeon from Wales to come over every two months to treat children with cleft lip and palate. Cuts could mean waiting times increasing further, and some treatments being no longer available in Northern Ireland.
- **Widening Health inequalities:** NI residents are twice as likely to have filled teeth as their counterparts in England, and children are three times as likely to have multiple teeth extracted under General Anaesthetic. Children in our most deprived communities are least likely to be even registered with a dentist (63% registered in most deprived areas vs 80% least deprived). Health inequalities will widen further if, as a result of reduced funding, access to the full range of dental services is reduced.
- **Plummeting Morale:** COVID has had an enormous impact on the dental profession. 63.6% of community dentists – treating the most vulnerable in society - say their morale is 'low/very low', with a key factor being the ongoing patient backlog². Existing difficulties accessing theatre space is having an impact on the vulnerable groups these dentists serve.
- **A growing pay gap:** Additional in-year funding will in effect not be available for pay uplifts here, rather it will be prioritised to settle the £297m debt. Northern Ireland has a shameful track record of delivering

¹ BDA GDP Survey 2022

² BDA CDS DDRB Survey 2022

late pay uplifts. The possibility of no uplift would have a devastating impact on recruitment and retention, and the financial sustainability of practices. In hospitals, Dental Core Trainees (DCT) have a pay gap of up to 25% compared to other UK nations. This is having a huge impact on recruitment with 9 of 22 DCT posts currently unfilled.

Disconnect

The prospect of fresh cuts being imposed would have a disastrous impact on access. High street dentists are independent contractors who are having to run their privately owned businesses while contending with inflationary pressures. Already there is a complete disconnect between Health Service fees to dentists, and the costs to provide treatment -and now the added prospect of an end to the temporary 10% enhancement to dental fees.

To properly support General Dental Services, we urgently need to proceed to a Cost-of-Service Review -an approach both you and former Minister Swann accepted -to inform a recalibration of fees in line with actual time and costs associated with delivering care. It is irrational and unreasonable to continue to expect practitioners to stay with the programme if they are left delivering NHS care at a loss.

Now more than ever, we need action to make NHS dentistry in Northern Ireland sustainable, not further propel moves to a three-tier system -where those who can't get registered for NHS care, and who can't afford to pay privately are left with no routine access, short of accessing emergency services.

BDA strongly resists any further moves to cutting the dental budget in Northern Ireland.

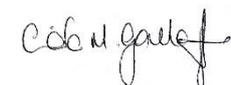
We would request a meeting with you to discuss these issues further.

Co-signed:

Peter Crooks
Chair Review Body Evidence Committee
BDA Vice-Chair



Ciara Gallagher
Chair BDA NI Dental Practice Committee



Darren Johnston
Chair designate, BDA NI Hospital Dental Services Forum



Roz McMullan
Chair BDA Northern Ireland Council



Ann McAreavey,
Chair BDA NI Community Dentists Committee



Cc: Health Spokespersons, Northern Ireland Political Parties & Secretary of State for Northern Ireland