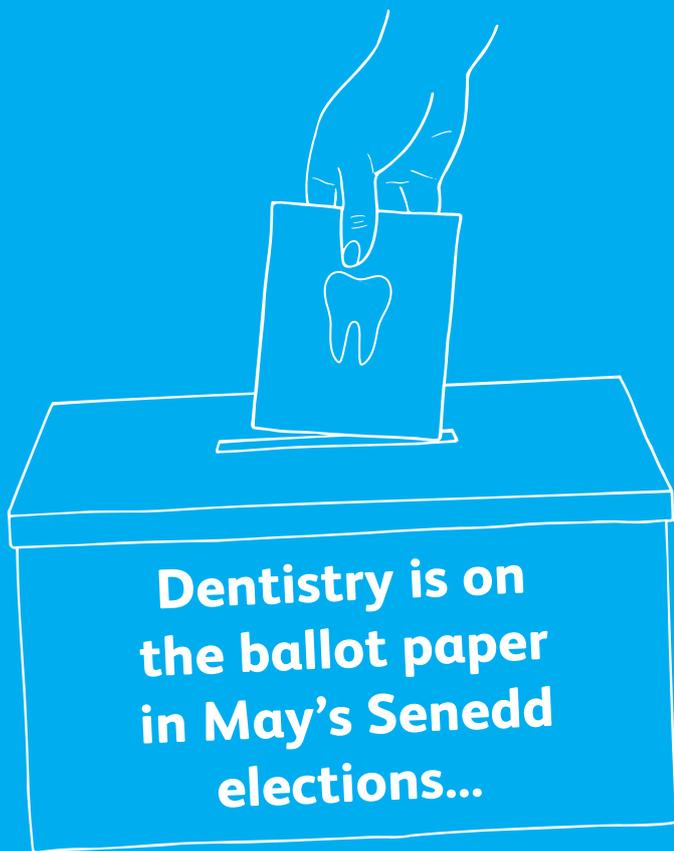


Make or break

Securing the future of dentistry in Wales



Introduction

The next Welsh Government will form barely a month after some of the biggest ever changes to NHS dentistry in Wales take force.

Untested policies have already seen many dentists walk away from the NHS. Whoever forms the next government needs a plan to guarantee the future of this service.

It is make or break for dental care in Wales. As we approach the 2026 Senedd election, we urge all political parties to commit to a long-term, sustainable vision for dentistry, one that places oral health at the heart of a healthier Wales.

For voters facing access and cost of living crises dentistry matters.

Political choices mean it is now a real concern on the doorstep - polling ahead of crime, education and even jobs as a top-flight issue facing Wales.

Our message to all candidates and all parties is very clear: dentistry is on the ballot paper in this election. And the public will measure how you choose to respond.

This is a service millions of voters depend on.

Meaningful action will be rewarded.

Complacency will be punished.

In 2026, Wales needs a government that will offer:

- 1. A safety net for NHS dentistry**
- 2. Sustainable investment**
- 3. Protection for the most vulnerable**
- 4. A step change on the workforce**
- 5. A change in tone**

1. A safety net for NHS dentistry

Dentistry in Wales is in uncharted territory. A new system has already destabilised care across Wales, but simple, achievable policies can take the hard edges off and provide foundations the next Welsh Government can build on.

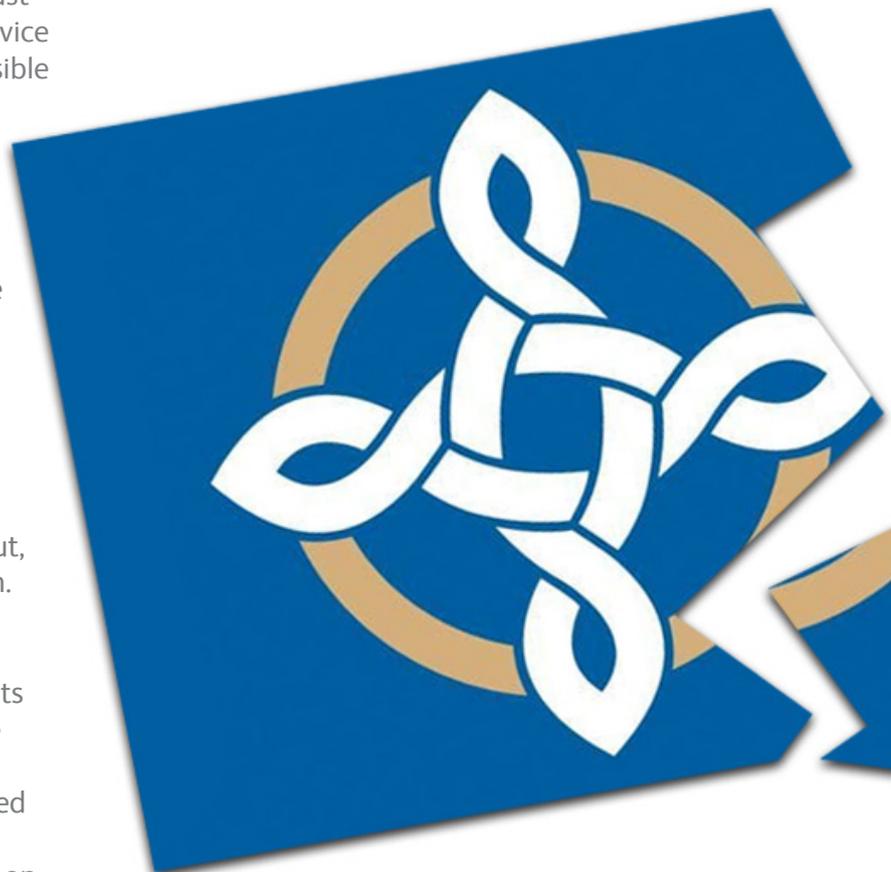
Since the pandemic, the high street NHS dentists who make up the General Dental Service (GDS) in Wales have faced an unprecedented period of instability and challenge: ongoing uncertainty due to contract variation, and now a new, untested contract. This reform is being introduced without piloting or sufficient consultation. The pressures of working within the NHS have intensified, with rising administrative burdens and a growing sense among dentists that their voices are not being heard. To truly put patients first, the next government must commit to keep practices viable and build a service that supports the workforce and ensures accessible and high-quality care.

The next Welsh Government must:

- **Protect struggling practices**
Establish a pilot or mitigation period for the introduction of the 2026 dental contract to ensure practices can adapt without potentially crippling levels of clawback. An annual review mechanism should also be established to allow fair, transparent adjustments. An overwhelming majority of dentists want the start delayed by a year but, Welsh Government have refused this option.
- **Make effective Use of the DAP**
The Dental Access Portal (DAP) is for patients without a dentist. They can register for care and wait their turn on a Local Health Board central database. Once a patient is allocated to a dental practice they can remain under their care. The Government made a U-turn on

their ill-considered policy of sending healthy patients back to the DAP. By ensuring patients are receiving ongoing care, the system can better manage demand, improve continuity and support long-term oral health for those most in need.

- **Offer continuity and choice**
The patients' right to remain with their chosen practice must be protected to preserve the long-term relationships that patients have built with their family dentist. Protecting continuity of care builds trust, improves health outcomes and ensures patient need is met effectively from a personalised approach.



2. Sustainable investment

We've seen attempts to make a new model of care work on a flat budget. The next Welsh Government must offer sustainable investment to build a service fit for the future. This means providing fair, evidence-based funding that keeps pace with costs, modernising facilities and digital systems, and strengthening clinical pathways to ensure patients receive the right care at the right time from the right professionals. Investing in prevention and clearly defining access to services will reduce demand pressures and improve outcomes.

The next Welsh Government must:

- **Expand the Fixed Financial Envelope**
Wales needs a broader and more adaptable funding framework to meet the growing and changing demands of dental care.
Expanding the

fixed financial envelope will support equitable access across all communities, strengthen long-term service resilience, and create the flexibility needed to plan for the future, including the integration of efficient models of care.

- **Provide fair and evidence-based funding**
The typical NHS practice has long delivered NHS dental care at a loss. Funding must reflect the true cost of delivering care, with annual inflation adjustments to ensure services remain viable. The next Welsh Government should engage in an open and honest conversation with the public about what can realistically be provided and how it will be funded, securing a fair and sustainable future for dentistry in Wales.
- **Double down on infrastructure and digital**
Investment is urgently needed to renew and modernise dental facilities and digital systems across both General Dental Services (GDS) and Community Dental Services (CDS). Upgrading infrastructure will improve efficiency, patient experience, and service sustainability across Wales.
- **Invest in Prevention**
Schemes like Designed2Smile have paid for themselves. Building on this, with expanded targeted funding for preventive oral health programmes, including community and school initiatives, is essential. Building on this success will help reduce the burden of dental disease and support healthier communities across Wales.



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3. Protection for the most vulnerable

The Community Dental Service (CDS) in Wales serves as a crucial lifeline for the most vulnerable groups in society. Sadly, a service that caters for children with complex needs, individuals with disabilities, the elderly, and those with chronic health conditions now risks becoming a dumping ground for those who can't be treated on the high street.

The CDS already struggled with inadequate funding, an aging workforce, and growing patient demand, resulting in a system buckling under strain. Now, new pressures generated by reform of high street care could prove the straw that breaks the camel's back. These pressures have led to long waiting lists, outdated equipment, and staff facing low morale, significantly impacting the quality of care available to patients. The next Welsh Government must protect this valuable service and the vulnerable patients they serve.

The next Welsh Government must:

- **Refocus the Mission**
The CDS must be supported to focus on its core mission: providing care for vulnerable patient groups with complex needs. It should not be used as a stopgap to cover shortfalls in the GDS reform. CDS patients often lack a strong voice in the system, and it is vital that the Welsh Government protects their access to dedicated specialised care by reinforcing the CDS's distinct and essential role.
- **Invest and modernise**
CDS funding must be increased to modernise clinical facilities and upgrade IT infrastructure to enhance service efficiency. The facilities in the CDS can be unsuitable for their patients, lacking bariatric access or even basic accessibility provisions. The next Welsh Government must prioritise these critical issues to ensure the service can continue to support some of the most vulnerable members of our population.
- **Deliver efficiency and transparency**
Regular audits must be conducted on capacity and performance to ensure optimal use of surgeries, as well as fair resource allocation. An increase in data transparency is also needed with staffing and whole-time equivalents, as well as waiting lists for patients. To improve the CDS, it is crucial that we have a clear picture of the service.
- **Collaborate and communicate**
The CDS is too often treated as an afterthought. Health Boards frequently fail to engage in meaningful consultation with CDS staff, merely informing them of major changes after decisions have been made. The next Welsh Government must strengthen collaboration between the CDS and Health Boards and improve communication within both the CDS and GDS to foster integrated care and deliver better patient outcomes.
- **Support patients with the highest-needs**
Develop dedicated Personal Dental Service (PDS) schemes to support very high-needs (blue) patients, rather than placing additional strain on already overstretched high street and community services. The PDS is a locally commissioned NHS dental contract that allows services to be designed flexibly around specific patient groups. This model is best suited to very high-needs patients because it can fund longer appointments, continuity of care, and bespoke pathways. It should do so, without overburdening the CDS to the detriment of the most vulnerable in the Welsh population, and without destabilising high street GDS practices, as the current and upcoming contract systems constrain and disincentivise treatment for these very high-needs patients.

4. A step change on the workforce

The next Welsh Government must prioritise workforce training and wellbeing within dentistry to build a skilled, motivated, and resilient dental team. Investing in flexible training pathways and continuous professional development ensures dentists and their teams can adapt to evolving patient needs and deliver the highest quality care. Equally important is embedding robust mental health and wellbeing support to reduce burnout and staff turnover. A healthy, well-supported workforce is essential to maintaining sustainable dental services that meet the needs of all communities across Wales.

The next Welsh Government must:

- **Support recruitment and retention**
The Welsh Government must improve recruitment and retention across all branches of dentistry by addressing pay disparities and establishing structured career progression pathways. Ensuring fair pay and clear advancement opportunities will help attract and retain talented dental professionals committed to serving communities throughout Wales.
- **Create flexible training pathways**
Access to flexible, high-quality training and continuing professional development should be expanded. This will enable dental professionals to update their skills and adapt to changing service demands, supporting a workforce that is both competent and motivated. For community dentists this must include automatic spine progression and structured pay bands that recognise experience and support career development. Trainee dentists should also be offered two study days within the CDS to gain valuable exposure to this vital area of practice.
- **Put wellbeing first**
The mental health and wellbeing of the entire dental team must be a priority. Our surveys have shown years of high stress and low morale among the entire dental team. Support structures and mentoring programmes should be embedded at all levels to create a positive working environment, reduce burnout, and foster a resilient workforce dedicated to delivering excellent patient care.
- **Collaborate in Education**
The Welsh Government must work with Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) to enhance professional education and leadership skills. By working together, these organisations can better equip the dental workforce to meet future challenges and lead service improvements.

5. A change in tone

There can be no repeat of the process that brought us recent reforms.

The next Welsh Government must commit to working in true partnership with the dental profession on any future reforms in a way that is fair, sustainable and rooted in evidence. Dentists on the frontline must be heard and supported to improve access and outcomes for patients.

It must lead with innovation, underpinned by transparency and accountability, to rebuild trust and drive meaningful change in dental services. Open communication between government, health boards, and the dental profession is essential to ensure that policies are informed by frontline experience

and patient needs. By embracing new ideas and being honest about challenges and solutions, the government can create a dental system that is more efficient and equitable.

The next Welsh Government must:

- **Be transparent and accountable**
The next Welsh Government must commit to regular, open communication between government, health boards, and the dental profession. Genuine collaboration and transparency are essential for restoring trust, ensuring that decisions reflect the realities of frontline care, and delivering dental services that are responsive, efficient, and aligned with patient needs.

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 campaigns@bda.org

www.bda.org