Ms Diane Dodds MLA  
Minister  
Department for the Economy  
Netherleigh House  
Massey Avenue  
Belfast  
BT4 2JP

Re. Dental Practices and access to regional/national business support grant schemes

Dear Minister,

I refer to your press release of Friday 10th April in which you acknowledge, ‘there are many businesses across Northern Ireland that are being adversely impacted at present and facing financial hardship, and which have not been able to access any of the existing national or regional grant schemes’. You added that your Department is working as quickly as you can on how best you might assist such businesses.

I want to bring to your attention the precarious position of dental practices operating in Northern Ireland who have lost access to virtually all of their Health Service -and Private -income sources overnight as routine dentistry has been halted in response to COVID-19.

While the Department of Health has acted to put in place a Financial Support Scheme to support General Dental Practitioners, DoH has been constrained to only offer support to the Health Service component of income.

In practice, the more private oriented a dental practice/GDP is, the more exposed those practices and practitioners continue to be in the absence of being able to access wider support measures. For practices whose business model is mainly or even almost entirely private dependant, they are in a very precarious financial situation indeed, and need to be factored into your Department’s considerations.

While some dental practices did receive the £10k grant under the Small Business Support Grant Scheme, many practices across Northern Ireland have been deemed ineligible because premises exceed the £15k NAV valuation, including many who have invested heavily in their premises. Moreover, those operating from multiple sites will only have received a single payment at best.

In presenting the circumstances dentists find themselves in, we would like to highlight stark findings of a UK-wide poll conducted by the BDA which captures the issues at hand, as follows:
• With all routine care now suspended, 75% of NI practices report they can only remain financially sustainable for 3 months or less. Nearly 1 in 5 (18.1%) estimate they can only survive the month;
• Less than a third (29.3%) estimate they will be placed to restore pre-pandemic levels of patient access.
• 17% of practices have already attempted to secure a government backed interruption loan, but 72% of applicants were unable to secure credit. Half (50%) of those who failed have already had to seek commercial loans to stay afloat, at reported rates of interest of over 20%;
• The vast majority of UK practices are mixed, delivering both NHS and private care in varying proportions. NI practices performing a greater share of private work appear most exposed, with 76% of those with low or no NHS commitment (0-25% NHS) stating they will face imminent difficulties in the next three months, falling to 70.7% among those with the highest NHS commitments (75% or more of NHS activity).

These findings are particularly stark: without rapid further action from central and devolved government, many dental practices will collapse. Health Service dentistry cannot weather this storm when nearly every surgery relies on private care to stay afloat. If these vital services go to the wall, the impact will be felt by patients in every community in Northern Ireland.

Our appeal to you is to ensure local dental practices are included within those support measures being brought forward by the NI Executive. In addition, at a UK-wide level, all self-employed dentists, particularly those working in private practice need access to the supports outlined by the Chancellor. Those earning anything above £50,000 are currently entirely excluded, which is grossly unfair.

I trust you will instruct officials to consider these issues further.

Yours sincerely

Richard Graham
Chair, NI Dental Practice Committee