



Department of Health & Social Care

Steve Brine MP
Chair, Health and Social Care Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

15 November 2022

Dear Steve,

In July 2022, we announced several planned improvements to NHS dentistry in England, which were set out in September through 'Our plan for patients'. Our Plan outlines how we will address dental patient needs and increase access to NHS dentistry. We are implementing elements of this plan, which was negotiated and successfully consulted on with the British Dental Association (BDA) and both patient and dental sector representative bodies, through the Statutory Instrument laid in Parliament on Friday 4th November. This Instrument makes two amendments to the NHS dental regulations.

These changes will improve both signposting and access to NHS dentistry, particularly amongst patients with higher or more complex oral health needs. The instrument will also make the NHS contract more attractive to dentists and their teams, who will be more fairly remunerated for delivering complex care.

Fairer remuneration and incentives for more complex treatments

We have worked with the dental sector to improve the remuneration system to incentivise complex preventative and restorative treatment by implementing changes to the way dentists are remunerated for treatments within the NHS 'Band 2'. Dentists will be paid more when they provide complex care or treat high needs patients, with no impact on the cost to patients.

Prior to this instrument, NHS dental treatments were arranged into four bands, with no further sub-bandings, each associated with a specified Unit of Dental Activity (UDA) tariff to reflect the complexity of treatment.

Treatments within band 2 will be further stratified under these changes into three sub-bands (2a, 2b and 2c) based on the complexity of the treatment, with correspondingly increasing UDA values that reflect the cost of delivering those treatments. This will more fairly remunerate and incentivise dentists to deliver more complex treatment, in turn improving access to these treatments for patients.

Improving the information available to patients

Patients have told us that they have difficulty finding an NHS dentist, due to information on the NHS website being out of date. Patient representative groups, including Healthwatch UK, have reported that this is an important issue for patients. To improve this, we are making the updating of the NHS website and Directory of Services a requirement in legislation for dental practices. This will make it easier for patients to find up to date information on NHS dentistry and for services such as NHS 111 and dental helplines to refer patients to practices with capacity.

Context and future work

The pandemic created challenges for patients seeking dental treatment, with NHS dentists operating at below 100% capacity for over 2 years. NHS dentists were asked to return to pre-pandemic levels of activity from July 2022, meaning many more people can access a dental professional. Improvements in dental access can be seen in published statistics, with 26.4m courses of treatment delivered for the 12-month period to 31 March 2022, an increase of 120% compared to the previous year. However, unmet demand for NHS dentistry continues to be a problem. We are taking action to address the challenges in accessing NHS dentistry in a way which is fair for patients, dentists and the taxpayer.

These initial changes are aimed at improving information for patients; improving the incentives in the contract to deliver more complex care; and enabling the NHS to better work with the sector to ensure that dental care is delivered.

The Department recognises that further work is needed. We are currently working with stakeholders including the BDA and the wider dental profession on further system and contractual changes. As part of this work, we are concentrating on access in areas that are sparsely served by NHS dentistry, availability of urgent dental services and access for new patients. We look forward to sharing future work on NHS dental system improvement with you in due course.

I'd be grateful if you could share this letter with other members of the committee.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neil O'Brien', with a stylized, flowing script.

NEIL O'BRIEN