

## **Written evidence submitted by the British Dental Association (EPW00052)**

1. The British Dental Association (BDA) is the professional association and trade union for dentists in the UK. Members engage in all aspects of dentistry: general practice, community dental services, the armed forces, hospitals, academia, research, and our membership also includes dental students.

### **Planning for the workforce**

2. NHS dentistry is experiencing profound workforce challenges, in particular the ability to retain dentists to work within NHS primary dental care. New figures show over 2,000 dentists left the NHS in England in the last year as of January 2022, down from 23,733 in 2020-21. This is on top of 951 dentists leaving the NHS between 2019/20 and 2020/21, showing the exodus of dentists from the NHS is gaining pace. The service now has the lowest headcount it has seen in over a decade.
3. The issue is not of a lack of supply of dentists, either those currently registered with the GDC or of the number of training places in dental school each year, but that the NHS dental contract is fundamentally not fit for purpose and has created a working environment in which many dentists no longer wish to work. Our research has found that 9 in 10 NHS practices seeking to recruit a dentist report that they have experienced difficulties doing so, with reluctance to work under current NHS contract cited as the main barrier to recruitment.
4. There is an urgent need to reform the dental contract so that dentists see the NHS as a viable and attractive service within which to build a career. The BDA is currently in negotiations with NHS England on marginal contractual changes, with the view on discuss more substantial reform. This needs to make much more rapid progress than has hitherto been the case.
5. Compounding this, NHS dentists have seen more than a decade of considerable pay cuts and real-terms cuts to the NHS dental budget. Dentists' take-home pay has fallen by 40 per cent in real terms in the decade from 2010/11. The most recent uplift to General Dental Services (GDS) contracts and to pay for dentists in employed roles falls below inflation for this financial year, and therefore amounts to a pay cut.
6. Over recent years, dental budgets have not kept pace with inflation and population growth. In real terms net government spend on general dental practice in England was cut by over a quarter between 2010 and 2020, and we estimate £879 million of additional funding per annum would be required simply to restore financial resources to 2010 levels. England also invests significantly less into dental services per head of population than other parts of the UK. In 2019/20 government spend on NHS dentistry per capita was £37 in England. That compared to £49 in Wales, £56 in NI, and £59 in Scotland.
7. This chronic underfunding and delays to reform of the dental contract are the key drivers behind the long-standing and growing problems with burnout, recruitment and retention in NHS dental services. Unlike some other healthcare professions, there is a significant private dental sector in which dentists are able to find more favourable working conditions, and our research has found that dentists are increasingly looking to increase the proportion of work they do privately. An immediate and long-term increase of financial investment into NHS dentistry and urgent and meaningful contract reform are necessary to avoid a further exodus of dentists from the NHS, and to ensure that

the next generation of dentists perceive NHS dentistry as a viable and desirable career prospect wherever they choose to work.

8. In addition to this, there is a lack of workforce data, and therefore planning, for NHS dentistry. There are no figures on the number of whole-time equivalent NHS dentists, only a headcount, making it impossible to gain a comprehensive understanding of workforce capacity.
9. BDA research clearly shows that most dentists opt to reduce the level of their NHS commitment before leaving the service altogether. This means the recent drop in the headcount of NHS dentists – dramatic as it is – is likely to still significantly underrepresent the actual loss of capacity in NHS dentistry in England.
10. Alongside the challenges recruiting dentists, our research has also found a parallel crisis in retaining and recruiting dental nurses, with 8 in 10 NHS practices finding it difficult to recruit a nurse when they've tried to. Dentists report to us that their dental nurses are leaving the profession for other roles that offer comparable pay with less stress and pressure. The squeeze on NHS dental practice funding has impacted on the pay that can be offered to dental nurses and this coupled with the additional stressors of working through the pandemic have led to a reconsideration of career plans.
11. Across the community dental services, a mainly referral salaried primary care service for vulnerable children and adults, the numbers of clinicians have been falling year on year. Since 2005/06 the headcount has fallen from just over 1,500 to 925 in 2019/20. In addition, vacancies are not being filled. In 2021, the BDA sent an FOIA request to all services who have a community dental service in England. The data showed that between April 2020 and 2021, only 60 posts were filled out of 78 posts which were advertised.

### **Building a skilled workforce**

12. For dental nurses, improvements to their training schemes that create more avenues for career progression is another way in which we might encourage individuals to become, or remain as, dental nurses, and there have been some moves into this direction through HEE's Advancing Dental Care project.
13. With regard to digital integration, access and skills, there has been a lack of progress on this from NHS England, NHSX and other bodies for a considerable period. Most notably, NHS dentists do not have any access to a patient's Summary Care Record at all. This raises fundamental patient safety issues and must be resolved promptly. Beyond this, there are further steps that could and should be taken towards greater digital integration, such as e-prescribing and patient charge exemption checking. These would bring efficiencies and benefits to both patients and practices.

### **Wellbeing at work**

14. In relation to occupational health, NHS dentists and dental teams are excluded from receiving free flu vaccines. This was introduced for one year during the pandemic, alongside access to the COVID vaccine. The cost of delivering this to NHS dentists and dental teams will be marginal, but would provide a tangible and strong demonstration that the NHS considers dental teams to be part of the NHS family.