

29 July 2024

Dear

NHS dentistry

Thank you for your recent letter in which you have raised your concerns regarding the national NHS dentistry crisis.

As you have noted in your letter, NHS dentistry is not an agenda item for discussion at the upcoming NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) board meeting, scheduled for 30 July. As such, I am writing to you outside of the meeting to ensure that I can provide a timely response to your concerns.

As commissioners, the ICB is very conscious of the serious challenges many of our residents face in accessing dental services. The situation in South Tyneside is reflective of a national dental crisis, with practices across England struggling to overcome the service backlogs that developed during Covid-19, manage difficulties with the recruitment and retention of dentists, and coping with increased running costs.

I would like to reassure you that the ICB's dental commissioning team are working closely with local dental providers to explore a range of options to increase capacity and improve access to local dental services.

As you have noted in your letter, the ICB is investing in dentistry services, and, following an additional investment of £3m in 2023/24, we have seen a limited but steady improvement in the number of people accessing dental treatment over the last year. The ICB is making a further £3.6m available in 2024-25 to extend the short-term measures and additional capacity that we commissioned in 2023-24. This will include the incentivised access scheme to provide additional appointments targeting patients in greatest clinical need and urgency, out of hours urgent dental treatment capacity, and additional dental clinical assessment workforce/triage capacity within the NHS 111 service.

Other steps taken to improve NHS dental care access include:

- Dental practices have been given the opportunity to be paid for additional units of dental activity (UDA), where they can overperform on contractual access targets, up to a maximum of 110%.
- Locally piloted urgent dental access centres (UDACs) are being commissioned on a short-term pilot basis, initially within Darlington (opened 11 June 2024) and Carlisle (due to open 01 September 2024). The UDAC model has been designed to provide an enhanced and more reliable local solution to the provision of in-hours directly accessible urgent dental care for patients across the North East and North Cumbria. If successful (and with national funding support), the ICB would look to commission UDAC services across the North East and North Cumbria.
- All practices will benefit from the new patient premium scheme 2024-25 which offers additional UDA credits where practices choose to see new patients.
- Local commissioning of lost UDAs will continue to be attempted with existing local NHS dental practices where they have the workforce, capacity and interest in expanding their current NHS general dental access provision.
- Where local commissioning fails, we continue to attempt formal, open market and competitive procurement processes under regulation. As such we have recently completed an active and open market exercise to re-commission eleven replacement NHS Dentistry general dental access contracts covering Darlington, North Cumbria, Durham, Sunderland and North Northumberland with the aim of these being operational by early January 2025. However, although these contracts were offered at up to £37 per UDA (£9 above the nationally set £28 minimum UDA rate), with an offer of mixed general access and incentivised urgent care provision to improve contract viability, this generated only limited market interest.
- Going forward, the ICB has recently agreed a Phase 3 'transformation and sustainability plan' to support local NHS dental practices. This includes a local minimum UDA rate uplift to £31.46 (£3.46 above the nationally set £28 minimum already implemented) and at a total increase of circa £2m funding annually, with this increase being backdated to 1 April 2024. The plan also includes an additional open and discretionary offer to practices to engage in an audit to assess the true cost of delivery of NHS dental care, prioritising 'at risk' practices in the most deprived parts of our region and/or where there are significant access challenges, with up to £7m of funding being made available.

In addition to the actions outlined above, a review into oral health and care across the North East and North Cumbria has also been commissioned by the ICB. This will be based on the views of our service-users and partners and will help us to evaluate the current provision of dental services in our region. This review has unfortunately taken longer than originally anticipated while we have been focused on addressing some of the immediate dentistry challenges in the region, but work on the review is

ongoing and further details are available on the ICB website at https://northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk/media/0dibny1n/item-7-1a-appendix_1_oral_health_and_care_review.pdf

As you may be aware, the previous government had announced extra funding as part of their national Dental Recovery Plan to provide additional NHS dental appointments. I know that rebuilding NHS dentistry was a priority in the Labour Party's recent manifesto, and we look forward to working with the new government on the delivery of their Dentistry Rescue Plan, which includes funding for additional dental appointments, reform of the national dental contract, and action to attract dentists to underserved areas.

Finally, with regards to our meeting with the MP Emma Lewell-Buck and the campaign group. I am awaiting some final information and would hope to be able to meet again over the coming months.

I hope that you have found this information useful and that I have been able to reassure you that the ICB is doing its utmost to improve access to NHS dental care for people across the region. However, should you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Claire Riley
Chief Corporate Services Officer
Executive Lead for Women's Health
Executive Lead for Research and Innovation