

Councillor Abigail Marshall-Katung
Chair, Scrutiny Board (Adults, Health and Active Lifestyles)
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Dear Councillor Abigail Marshall-Katung

Thank you for getting in contact about this important issue.

There are a number of steps we are taking in order to address the issues around dental care access, the availability of information to support patients in finding an appropriate service, and in starting to address workforce pressures which we know are affecting services across different parts of the country.

We announced a reform package in July 2022, after considered and extensive consultation with professional bodies and stakeholders, such as the British Dental Association. These initial reforms mark the first significant changes to NHS dentistry since 2006. Our hope is that these reforms will make a real and immediate difference to patients and dentists, improving access, especially for patients with higher needs, and enhancing our support to teams delivering NHS dental care services.

These changes do not address all the challenges that patients face, but they are intended to maximise the amount of treatment that can be provided within current funding and resources, by supporting practices to care for patients who have poor oral health; facilitating high-performing practices to take on more patients; and to make the best use of the whole dental team. This will contribute to our goal of helping more people to access NHS dental care especially those who have higher dental needs. Here's everything you need to know about the reforms.

From Autumn 2022, the NHS will be introducing the following:

Improving care to high needs patients

We are reforming the UDA system (Units of Dental Activity) to ensure that the right levels of funding are reaching NHS dental practices for complex and time-consuming treatments, such as

extractions of three or more teeth in a course of treatment and/or non-molar endodontic care to permanent teeth. This will support practices to provide care for patients with complex oral health needs on the NHS. We are working with the Department of Health and Social Care to secure regulations change during November to bring this new payment approach into effect and all necessary changes have already been made to the systems dental practices use to report activity.

Introducing a minimum indicative UDA value

Practices are paid to perform an agreed number of UDAs per year, at a price negotiated between the NHS and the contractor. Where a practice has a very low indicative UDA value, this can limit the payment that the practice could offer a dental associate or other members of the dental team, who they subcontract to. Therefore, it may be harder for the practice to recruit and retain staff. We have now implemented a minimum unit of dental activity (UDA) value of £23, which took effect for all relevant contractors from 1 October 2022. The new measures will help practices recruit and retain dental staff for NHS work.

Promoting a more effective use of skill mix

We are making it easier for dental teams to work together in an efficient way to deliver care. Dental therapists can currently carry out a wide range of treatments including fillings in adult and baby teeth and extractions of baby teeth. Although in the private sector therapists undertake check-ups, up until now this has not happened in the NHS. We are supporting dental teams to realise the potential of this wider role, and where it is clinically appropriate to do so, patients will be able to see other members of the wider NHS dental team, freeing up dentists to focus on patients who need more complex care.

Information about complaints processes

You raised the issue of ensuring there was adequate guidance made available to the public about how to raise a concern or make a complaint regarding dental services. I can reassure you that NHS England advertise our own complaints function via the NHS England website and additionally there is information about how to raise a concern or make a complaint within the main NHS.UK website. Dental practices are encouraged to present the option of complaining directly to them or to NHS England via their own promotional materials. We do encourage patients to feed back where they are concerned about the services they receive.

Local work to improve services in Leeds

We know that NHS teams local to your area are also hard at work to improve access to dentistry for your constituents. We have flagged your inquiry to the North East and Yorkshire NHS England regional team as they may also want to respond in kind.

Next steps

While the measures taking effect now will not resolve all issues in NHS dentistry, they do mark a vital first step on the improvement journey. These changes will go some way to help make NHS dentistry more attractive to dental practices and their teams and enable more patients to access NHS dental care.

Building on this announcement there is now more work to do to consider a wider range of reform options, including supporting Integrated Care Boards to address particular access issues in different parts of the country, and considering further measures to tackle recruitment and retention concerns. We have launched a series of engagement events with sector and patient representatives over October and November to consider and inform a next phase of reform.

Yours sincerely,

Ali Sparke
Director for Dentistry, Community Pharmacy and Optometry, NHS England

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ali Sparke', enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.