

Wednesday, 17 March 2021

To: Conor Murphy MLA  
Minister  
Department of Finance  
Clare House  
303 Airport Road  
Belfast  
Northern Ireland  
BT3 9ED

**Re: Eligibility criteria of business support grants/rates relief**

Dear Minister

I am writing on behalf of the Northern Ireland Dental Practice Committee to express our concern regarding the eligibility criteria of the recently announced business support grants.

We welcomed the announcement on Monday 15<sup>th</sup> March that dental practices that received the £10k Small Business Support Grant during the first lockdown would receive a further £5k of grant funding. This much needed boost of funding will go some way to compensate for lost private earnings over the past financial year and in turn support the financial sustainability of the practice as a whole.

However, larger dental practices with a NAV of over £15,000 face the same COVID operational restrictions as their smaller counterparts but find themselves excluded from this financial support from your Department.

COVID operational restrictions place significant limitations on the amount of activity – either Health Service or Private - a General Dental Practitioner (GDP) can undertake in a given day. Restrictions include a surgery fallow-time of 10-30 minutes after each Aerosol Generating Procedure (AGP) (such as a standard filling); additional time required for environmental cleaning measures; new enhanced Level 2 PPE requirements for dentists and nurses for carrying out AGPs; and practice social distancing measures such as limits on the number of people in practice waiting rooms. Added to these restrictions is the physical and mental exhaustion associated with wearing Level 2 PPE for an extended period of time which places a hard limit on the number of AGPs a GDP and accompanying nurse can carry out on a given day.

While these restrictions are primarily aimed at ensuring practitioner and patient safety, they have also served to seriously curtail the numbers of patients that can be seen on a daily basis – in turn significantly reducing GDP earnings. Disruption which is set to continue on for some time, if not indefinitely.

The Department of Health has prevented an outright financial collapse in the dental sector by contributing significant additional financial resources via the Financial Support Scheme. However,

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this scheme only compensates GDPs for lost Health Service earnings. There is no corresponding scheme compensating GDPs for lost private earnings. This matters as the majority of dental practices in Northern Ireland are mixed private/Health Service practices with circa 100k Health Service patients registered to dentists with less than 50% Health Service commitment.

Take a 60% Health Service, 40% private, dental practice as an example. With activity levels at circa 25%, practice private revenue falls from 40% to 10%. The Department of Health has covered the 60% - but dental practice revenue has still fallen by 30% as overall practice salaries/expenses have remained at 100%. It is therefore unsurprising that 82% of NI Practice Owners stated in an October BDA survey that they would be able to maintain the financial sustainability of their practice for less than 12 months.

Looking ahead, as dental operational restrictions are unlikely to be significantly reduced in the medium or short term, the ability of GDPs to generate sufficient earnings to keep their businesses afloat will continue to be heavily restricted.

To support the financial sustainability of dental practices during this challenging post-lockdown period, we request that the Department of Finance act immediately to:

- a) Expand the eligibility criteria of the £10k grant to allow dental practices with a NAV of above £15k to access much needed support funding, as being clearly in the public interest.
- b) Extend the eligibility criteria of the rates holiday to include dental practices

The sustainability of the GDS - which was already at risk pre-pandemic due to a decade of below-inflation pay uplifts and rising costs - remains very much in the balance as we look to navigate 2021/22. The proposed support arrangements above will go a long way to support both private and Health Service High Street dentistry as it struggles to rebuild.

I would be grateful if you could consider our requests and we look forward to engaging with relevant officials on these issues at their earliest convenience.

Kind regards,



Richard Graham  
Chair – NI Dental Practice Committee

Cc'd  
Michael Donaldson, acting Chief Dental Officer  
Michael O'Neill, General Healthcare Policy