



Rt Hon Victoria Atkins MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
*Sent by email*

19 December 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing following the publication of the Government's response to the Health and Social Care Committee inquiry into NHS dentistry.

You state in your forward that "*NHS dentistry should be accessible and available for all those who need it*". A laudable goal, but the plain facts are we are yet to see any evidence of the reforms or the resources to realise that ambition.

In our view the Committee offered an instruction manual to save NHS dentistry, and government cannot duck the first and most fundamental step. The access crisis is a workforce crisis, and without a decisive break from the failed contract which is fuelling the exodus from this service, any real progress will remain impossible.

When I gave oral evidence to the inquiry, I warned that Ministers were yet to move beyond rearranging the deckchairs. Sadly, we are back in live but glacial negotiations with NHS England on further 'tweaks', that cannot and will not deliver on your stated goal. Not only are the fundamentals of the contract not up for debate, but we face the logical impossibility of trying to rebuild a sustainable service and expand patient access on a standstill budget.

The Government has also rejected the model of care endorsed by the Committee. We continue to share the Committee's view that a system of capitation has the potential to deliver the prevention-based and person-centred care we need. The prototype model was well received by both patients and the profession, but we do not believe that its evaluation was fair and reasonable. There is still much learning from that system that could be utilised. The missing piece was always the resources to make it work.

We need a dental service that is fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and today, considered analysis from the Nuffield Trust shows just how far we are from that goal. It examines how the pandemic pushed a system already in dire straits into full blown crisis. It diagnoses the preference from successive governments for 'muddling through' over sound policy, and the absence of needed action from both the Treasury and the Department.

The report reads like the last rites for NHS dentistry, and both patients and this profession deserve some honesty here. Is the Government willing to meet its bold ambitions with tangible action? At present even a modest objective - keeping what remains of NHS dentistry afloat - feels out of reach.


Progress requires a 'recovery plan' worthy of the title. We have pressed for real commitment, but understand earlier versions were held up in the Treasury some six months ago. At bare minimum the final version must give colleagues thinking twice about their futures a reason to stay in the NHS.

If the Government is serious about "laying foundations of change" you must also ensure negotiations have a chance to even deliver meaningful reform. If the officials we are negotiating with have no latitude or desire to create a contract that is fit for purpose, this service will remain built on sand. And it risks being swept away.

The Government's response tried reaching for positive news, official figures that show that three quarters of people who tried to get an NHS appointment in the last two years were successful. However, what that data actually revealed is that millions of desperate people have simply given up trying to access care. That unmet need for NHS dentistry now amounts to one in four of England's adult population.

This service is at a tipping point, and our patients cannot afford any more "muddling through."

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shawn Charlwood', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Shawn Charlwood**  
Chair, General Dental Practice Committee