



26 February 2023

Via email: Russell.George@senedd.wales

Russell George MS
Chair, Health & Social Care Committee
The Senedd

Dear Mr George

General Dental Services (GDS) Reform

I trust this finds you well.

Further to our various recent communications, I wish to thank you for the committee's report on dentistry and to give you an update on developments.

The health committee's report has been broadly welcomed by the BDA and we are grateful for the work undertaken by the committee to understand the complexities surrounding NHS dentistry in Wales. The Welsh General Dental Practice Committee is due to meet soon and will be discussing your committee's recommendations in detail. I will write a full response subsequently.

Meanwhile, I wish to bring to your attention latest findings by BDA Cymru. (See **Appendix 1**) We undertook a rapid survey of high street dentists to gauge their views of the political climate regarding dentistry and their views of contract reform – particularly their plans for the forthcoming FY 2023-24. The responses are unequivocal. While we are mindful that sentiment, intention, and action are not always perfectly aligned, the strength of feelings and the scale of imminent actions make for sobering reading.

The picture is clear and one that we have been painting for many months, that NHS dentists are perilously close to **breakpoint**. It is highly regrettable that our warnings have been repeatedly disregarded by government officials, as we exposed in our [open letter to the CDO](#) last month. Unfortunately, this has been met with nothing other than disapproval by government officials and certainly with no sign of appetite to engage.

Our messages have also been deeply buried whenever government answers are given to questions in the Senedd Plenary debates. The tone of the government's replies has been growing noticeably colder towards dentists over the last year, but the recent declaration regarding clawback by the Health Minister was the final straw for many. Dentists were deeply offended by the tone and the lack of insight displayed. Moreover, they refute the

widely broadcast claims by Welsh Government that the reform programme is working – almost all responses were in disagreement, the vast majority strongly so.

As a result, this Monday there is likely to be media coverage of our findings, giving dentists the right of public reply and an opportunity to put the record straight. Your office has probably been approached by the BBC for comment.

Although this is an important moment in the public debate, our goal is to spark dialogue in a constructive manner with all parties. We have the same aim, which is to improve the NHS dental service, but we seem further away now than ever in finding mutually agreeable solutions. In fact, maintaining the provision that we have is looking increasingly in jeopardy.

You may be aware that the BDA has been invited to commence formal contract negotiations regarding the GDS contract. We are encouraged by this development, but have considerable reservations about the intended timescale, and the timing of the invitation. When I write again, I may be able to update you on progress.

While the legislation needs reform, we don't see that as the most pressing concern. The current experimental reform volumetrics and the unverified reconciliation mechanisms need an urgent overhaul and we have called for eleventh-hour talks with government officials. The prospect of clawback will be the breakpoint for many practices and the deciding factor to withdraw from NHS dentistry.

The immediate financial investment in NHS dentistry and dentists is a crucial issue. This is true across the UK. The aftermath of the pandemic, galloping inflation and an uplift to the contract of only 4.5% in this high inflation year are taking a heavy toll on practices.

It is dire news indeed, therefore, that the UK government has just announced a **cap of 3.5%** for the next round of DDRB negotiations. (See **Appendix 2**) This news will probably cause an even greater exodus from the GDS than is already indicated from our survey findings and the evidence in [our report to the DDRB](#). Certainly, where it is directly applicable in England this news has been met with deep dismay, and with the UK in recession it seems futile to imagine it could be a different outcome in Wales.

We have a meeting scheduled with Baroness Morgan in three weeks' time and will be making the same arguments then.

I look forward to an opportunity to discuss this with you.

Yours sincerely



Dr Russell Gidney
Chair, WGDPC

Appendix 1

250 General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) responded to our survey:

We asked for thoughts on the health minister's recent comments on clawback in the Senedd:

15:56:04 "... Of course, when you introduce something new, there is a little bit of difficulty and tension in the system. Obviously, if we're going to pay people to do a job, they need to deliver on that job, and if they don't deliver on that job, yes, we are going to claw back money. I'm not going to apologise for that, because we are the guardians of the taxpayers' money as well. That is the deal. You pay for a service, if you don't deliver the service, you're not going to get paid. So, they [dentists] may not like that, but I'm afraid that is the situation...
...So, I'm not going to apologise for the contract that we've put in place... We're trying to achieve this in the face of very severe financial constraints where we have to maximise the ability of the taxpayer to get as much as they can from the system. **Eluned Morgan MS, 31 January 2023**

and 96% disagreed:

- "I found this infuriating to read, and I am disgusted the minister has such little regard for the profession. Such belittling comments from someone who has absolutely no clue what it's like day to day doing NHS dentistry - it's insulting to read this."
- "... We are at saturation point now, which means dentists will simply leave if clawbacks are enforced without very good reason with the contract so heavily stretched as it is."
- "This is truly offensive to dentists who have worked tirelessly in the last 12 months to meet targets that are completely made up and have no relevance on the needs of the patients walking through the door."
- "My practice may not have a future. I am a young practice owner. The health minister should be encouraging people like me to stay in the system. She is doing the absolute opposite. Running costs have become extortionate. If claw back happens it will be catastrophic."

Minister Eluned Morgan told the BBC last month:

"The system has changed. It's working. Of course, there may be frustrations from some dentists who may not like the new system, but it's very, very much a minority." **Eluned Morgan MS**

And 96.8% disagreed:

- "... I have yet to meet a happy dentist under this contract. Of the 10 dentists I work with 4 are leaving due to this contract. I suspect this is what she wants. So that NHS dentistry no longer needs to be funded when there are no more dentists left willing to work for it."
- "Totally out of touch!! Every dentist I've spoken with who works in the NHS has expressed unhappiness of the current system."
- "Everyone working on NHS has had enough. I earn less than 15 years ago. Private work props up the NHS. The system has been ruined for years. UDAS were terrible. ACORNS add a new layer of nonsense to the profession. I struggle to fit in all my regular patients without now having a metric for new patients."

We asked whether dentists support the **current reform measures and volumetrics**. Responses were in overwhelming **disagreement (90%)**. Comments included too much pressure to see high volumes of patients which results in *poorer levels of care*, too many *metrics that are impossible to meet* and *mental wellbeing in the worst state* it has ever been in.

Looking at our options ahead for 2023-24 the picture is deeply troubling for the sustainability of NHS dentistry:

Over 70% of practice owners in the **reform programme** are expecting clawback this year. Not surprisingly only 39% intend to stay in the reform program in 2023-24. A further 15% intend to revert to the UDA-only default position. Nearly a third intend to reduce the contract value for 2023-24 and on current projections around 13% intend to hand back contracts at the end of this financial year.

The prospects viewed by practice owners on the **UDA-only contract** are hardly any better. Clawback is expected in over 63% of practices and a similar number (61%) expect to stay with UDAs next year. Over a quarter will reduce their contract value and approximately 18% will hand back contracts at the end of this year.

The figures are provided below:

Q. Please select all options below that are likely for your practice (Sub sample 203 GDPs identifying as practice owners working in contract reform).

- My practice will be subject to clawback for 2022-23 by the LHB **70.9% (144)**
- My practice will stay with the reform volumetrics in 2023-24 **39.4% (80)**
- My practice will revert to UDAs in 2023-24 **15.3% (31)**
- My practice will reduce the value of its GDS contract for 2023 **31.5% (64)**
- My practice will hand back its GDS contract by March 2023 **12.8% (26)**

Q. Please select all options below that are likely for your practice (Sub sample 33 GDPs identifying as practice owners working UDA only contracts).

- My practice will be subject to clawback for 2022-23 by the LHB **63.6% (21)**
- My practice will stay with UDAs in 2023-24 **60.6% (20)**
- My practice will take up the reform volumetrics in 2023-24 **12.1% (4)**
- My practice will reduce the value of its GDS contract for 2023 **27.2% (9)**
- My practice will hand back its GDS contract by March 2023 **18.2% (6)**

Appendix 2

The Department of Health and Social Care's [written evidence](#) to the Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration Body (DDRB) for the pay round 2023 to 2024 - Published 21 February 2023

Affordability

“Through the current financial settlement provided by HM Treasury to the department and reprioritisation decisions, funding is available for pay awards up to 3.5% for the relevant staff groups within DDRB remit this year. Pay awards above this level would require trade-offs for public service delivery or further government borrowing at a time when headroom against fiscal rules is historically low and sustainable public finances are vital in the fight against inflation.”