

# DENTAL TASK FORCE UPDATE

Office of the Director of Public Health



## 1. Background and context

Plymouth City Council's Dental Task Force (DTF) has now met on three occasions (July 2023, September 2023 and November 2023). The next meeting of the DTF will be in January 2024.

**It was established to address the following issues.....**

- The size of the waiting list for an NHS dentist. There are currently 21,874 Plymouth residents (17,693 adults and 4,181 children) on the waiting list for an NHS dentist (correct as of September 2023).
- More than one in five children in Plymouth has visible tooth decay by the age of five years old.
- Each year, more than 600 children in Plymouth have more than 4,000 teeth removed between them under general anaesthetic. This is entirely preventable and costs the health system approximately £1 million per year.
- Data from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities Health Intelligence Pack showed that, as of August 2023, 68.3 percent of adults and 57.4 percent of children in Plymouth had **not** accessed dental services in the preceding 24 months.

The DTF is chaired by the Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care and brings together, key stakeholders, local MPs and NHS leaders from across the city to discuss what can be done to improve dental provision in Plymouth.

Plymouth City Council's Corporate Plan contains six specific priorities. Priority five is.....

*Working with the NHS to provide better access to health, care and **dentistry**.*

**To address this priority, the DTF will seek to.....**

- Identify sources of funding that can be used address this priority
- Ensure existing planned developments are taken forward
- Identify service providers who have capacity to deliver additional dental services
- Ensure additional NHS dental capacity is made available to improve access to NHS Dental Services for Plymouth residents
- Enhance the oral health improvement (prevention) offer available in the city.

## 2. Update

### 2.1 The City Centre Dental Education Practice

The Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise (PDSE) C.I.C. is the teaching 'arm' of the Peninsula Dental School. PDSE is planning to establish a 14-chair multidisciplinary dental clinic in the City Centre. It will offer service, training and career opportunities. It will provide urgent

care (minimum 3,500 appointments per annum), routine access (two dentists, four days per week), minor oral surgery (five days per week), and dental foundation training (four days per week). As well as this, the facility will provide speciality training in minor oral surgery, training opportunities for local dental professionals, and dental nurse training (there is currently a national shortage). This facility will be open all year round, five days per week from 9:00AM to 5:00PM and is likely to open in Autumn 2024. PDSE has not sought any capital but will invest a minimum £4 million of its own cash into the project. NHS support for this initiative has been sought in the past but has not been forthcoming. The DTF is supporting this initiative and is encouraging NHS Devon ICB (the new commissioner of NHS dental services) to do likewise.

## **2.2 The Expression of Interest process**

In direct response to the challenges highlighted at the DTF meetings, NHS Devon ICB is putting in place a fast-paced expression of interest (Eoi) process. This follows a meeting of all Plymouth NHS dental providers at the start of September 2023. The ICB intends to offer a flexible commissioning scheme across Devon to enable access to patient groups who have not had the opportunity of regular attendance at NHS dental services. The ICB is also seeking to support more vulnerable patient groups where there are clear health inequalities. The ICB is seeking expressions of interest to provide stabilisation treatment to patients with an immediate dental problem, with the aim of stabilising patients' oral health and reducing their chances of requiring urgent treatment within the following 12 months. Oral health stabilisation may also support patients to secure an ongoing place at a dental practice. Interested parties (NHS dental providers) will be invited to respond to this process (in the coming weeks) confirming the amount of activity their practice may be able to deliver and evidence to support compliance with the eligibility criteria. Services will be expected to be able to mobilise very early in the New Year (of 2024).

## **2.3 The Schools' Offer**

NHS dental appointments are now being to children at Whitleigh Primary School and Laira Green Primary School. As part of a pilot, dental appointments are being offered by PDSE to all students in key stages one and two, with children remaining patients up until the age of 16. The scheme is now being expanded to include the following schools: High Street Primary, Victoria Road Primary, Mount Wise Primary, and Knowle Primary schools. Prioritisation of schools is based on measures of need, including proportion of free school meal eligibility and deprivation. It should be noted however that this is not new investment by PDSE, it is instead a re-focussing of their existing investment on a more targeted basis. Prior to this pilot being established, access was based on residents being aware of the service and referring their children into it. This did not always result in those patients in greatest need accessing the service. This new process benefits the dental students too as they will be exposed to more challenging dental work.

## **2.4 The Clawback, Underspend and Ringfence issue**

This issue was highlighted in the House of Commons, Health and Social Care Committee, NHS dentistry, Ninth Report of Session 2022–23 (July 2023). It highlighted the following....

*Under the terms of the current (dental) contract, if less than 96% of the contracted number of units of dental activity (UDAs) are delivered (by the provider), the NHS can and does initiate 'clawback' of funds. Dentists cannot currently exceed 110% (subject to local commissioner approval on a non-recurrent basis) of their contractual UDAs, even if there is increased demand and capacity to meet it. Currently, General Dental Services (GDS) contracts run in perpetuity meaning that rebasing is only possible with agreement of the provider.*

Historically, this underspend could be directed away from NHS dentistry by ICBs, to plug gaps in other budgets. The report goes on to say.....

*The trouble is, we do not know up front at the start of the year the size of the clawback that will be available, because we do not know the extent of under-delivery by dental providers. We have now introduced measures whereby we are actively reviewing and intervening on providers that are delivering less than 30% of their month-on-month contracted activity, so we can try to free up some of that funding earlier in the year and then commission locally to find alternative ways of providing dental activity.*

There was some very good news in the report with regard to the establishment of a ringfence.....

*We welcome the fact that to try and address the underspend, NHS England is applying a ringfence for 2023/24, to ensure that no ICB can divert funding away from NHS dentistry. We recommend that this ringfence applies permanently, and NHS England puts in place transparent scrutiny to ensure compliance.*

In Plymouth, the underspend equates to approximately £1.5 million (per year) that would be available to support initiatives to improve access to NHS dental services in the city. This was very good news.

**However, in November 2023 a letter was sent by NHSE to all NHS Trusts and ICBs which, amongst other things said the following.....**

***To cover the costs of industrial action to date we are taking the following actions which have been agreed with Government:***

- ***Allocating a total of £800 million to systems sourced from a combination of reprioritisation of national budgets and new funding.***

**This means that the ringfence for 2023/24 is likely to be been removed. It is currently unclear what the situation will be in 2024/25. However, as industrial action may no longer be taking place, it is hoped the ringfence (if removed) can be re-instated.**

## **2.5 The Letter to the Secretary of State**

One of the actions from the September DTF meeting was that a letter should be drafted and sent to the Health Secretary asking for (1) more flexibility in the rebasing of High Street NHS dental contracts and (2) permission to implement local initiatives 'at risk' in the current financial year in advance of local underspend being formally available (in Autumn 2024). This letter would be signed by the Chair of the Task Force and the local MPs.

With regards to point (1) More flexibility in the rebasing of High Street NHS dental contracts, the letter stated that.....Plymouth's Dental Task Force would like permission to pilot changes to these rules that would enable underspend to be made available to the local ICB in a more timely manner to support local initiatives to improve access to NHS dental services or oral health improvement initiatives.

With regards to point (2) Permission to implement local initiatives 'at risk' in the current financial year in advance of local underspend being formally available (in Autumn 2024) the letter stated that..... Working in partnership with the ICB, Plymouth's Dental Task Force would like to request that permission is given to utilise the anticipated underspend in the coming months, rather than waiting until Autumn 2024. This will involve contracts being placed with willing providers 'at risk.' We would like this minimal risk to be covered by NHS England centrally, rather than by the local ICB, safe in the knowledge however that the contract value of any new initiatives would be far less than the anticipated underspend that will be recouped.

It is yet to be determined what impact the removal of the ringfence mentioned in (4) above will have on these issues.

## **2.6 The Five Priorities (Dental Asks)**

At the November meeting it was suggested by Luke Pollard M.P. that the DTF agrees a set of five 'asks' that would form the basis of any public facing work that the DTF carries out. This was agreed by the other members of the DTF. One of the actions from that meeting was therefore to review the draft 'asks' suggested with a view to the final set being agreed by mid-December.

## **2.7 Partnership working between Providers**

One of the main benefits that has become apparent since the establishment of the DTF is improved partnership working. The DTF has enabled the biggest providers of NHS dental services in the city (Livewell Southwest and PDSE) to engage in discussion as to how they can work more closely together. For example, if the City Centre Dental Education Practice is established (see section 2.1), then some patients who might normally attend Livewell's Dental Access Centre (DAC) could be treated at the new PDSE facility freeing up capacity for further patients to be seen/treated at the DAC. In addition to this, it is hoped that, moving forward, it will be possible to include University Hospitals Plymouth (UHP) in the work of the DTF enabling further coordination to take place between these major providers.