

# Dental Access and Oral Health Improvement in Plymouth

## I. Plymouth City Council's Dental Task Force

Plymouth City Council's Dental Task Force (DTF) was established in July 2023. It was established to address the following issues:

- The size of the waiting list (unvalidated) for an NHS dentist. There are currently 22,936 Plymouth residents (18,706 adults and 4,230 children) on the waiting list for an NHS dentist (correct as of August 2024).

*Note: this list does not meet the required standard to be considered an NHS waiting so should more accurately be referred to as a 'register of patients seeking an NHS dentist', rather than a waiting list.*

- 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 local health system approximately £1 million per year.
- Data from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities Health Intelligence Pack showed that, as of March 2024, 73.3% of adults had **not** accessed dental services in the preceding 24 months and 52.1% percent of children in Plymouth had **not** accessed dental services in the preceding 12 months.

The DTF is chaired by the Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care and brings together, key stakeholders including representatives from Plymouth City Council, NHS Devon ICB, Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise, Livewell Southwest and University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust as well as the city's three MPs.

In February 2024, the DTF agreed the three key priorities that it will collectively work towards to improve NHS dental provision for Plymouth residents:

**(i) Deliver a new dental facility in the city centre run by the Peninsula Dental School which is aligned to the oral health needs in the city.**

Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise (PDSE) is making progress with this. The final site location will be announced soon. It is hoped that the new practice will be operational by September 2025.

This multidisciplinary practice will offer general, urgent care and oral surgery using a combination of undergraduate dentists and therapists, qualified dentists and therapists, dental foundation trainee, specialist trainee and specialist/consultants. There will also be a specialty trainee in oral surgery. The Practice will be active all year round, five days per week and will increase the number of employed dental nurses and trainees.

**(ii) Provide additional funding to Plymouth City Council to enable it to enhance the oral health improvement offer available in the city, to help prevent dental health issues.**

NHS Devon ICB has recently supported a proposal (from the three Public Health Teams in Devon) to expand and extend the reach of existing oral health improvement programmes in Devon schools to ensure every child has the best start in life. These proposals are:

- Expand the existing supervised toothbrushing scheme (STS) to cover all primary schools and nurseries (regardless of IMD category or whether the nursery is independent or not).
- Establish (or expand) fluoride varnish scheme (FVS) to all primary schools in IMD 1-6.
- Establish (or expand) Open Wide and Step Inside (OWSI) to all primary schools in IMD 1-6

- Funding of £900K (per year) has been agreed by the ICB to deliver these three programmes over the next three years.

**(iii) Use some of Plymouth’s annual NHS dental underspend to commission new services for high priority groups and those who don’t have access to an NHS dentist.**

NHS Devon ICB strategic commissioning priorities for 2024/25 include the following:

- Increase dental activity by improving units of dental activity (UDAs) towards pre-pandemic levels – implementing dental reform.
- Improve oral health.
- Improve patient access to routine dentistry, particularly for children and vulnerable groups
- Improve access to urgent dental care.

In recent months the DTF has also supported and/or led other developments that should enable children and young people to access dental services in Plymouth.

**(i) Primary Schools Offer**

PDSE now offers free dental treatment for children aged 1-11 years. If children are not registered with a dentist, they were invited to register with the Peninsula Dental School where they would receive appointment/treatments until age 16. The waiting list on the PDSE website opened at beginning of September 2024 and there were over 1,300 expressions of interest received. So far (November 2024), 369 children have been registered and 150 children have attended for an appointment. There are 120 patients in active care. Staff at PDSE are still working through the expressions of interest for the remaining

children, some of whom have siblings too. This initiative was publicised through the 'Fit and Fed' initiative held in Plymouth over the summer. Engagement with parents and in particular social media (Plymouth Gossip Girls) caused this to spread.

**(ii) Consent model pilot**

An issue that has proven problematic in the implementation of the above-mentioned primary schools offer is the current consent model. There is currently a need to obtain positive consent from a parent or legally appointed guardian for children to receive dental care or participate in community oral health programmes. The main requirements are from the General Dental Council which specifies the principles of obtaining consent. In summary, the person taking the child for treatment must have parental responsibility to sign off the treatment plan for the child. This requirement could be a reason why uptake of appointments offered has not been as high as originally anticipated (if parents need to have time off work to attend with their child/children). It is currently not possible for another family member (e.g. grandparent) to do this. Plymouth has offered to act as a pilot site to consider a different consent model as part of the primary schools offer. On behalf of the DTF, this issue has been raised with the Health Secretary by one of the Local M.P.s. As a result, conversations are now taking place between PDSE and the Government's Dental Policy Advisor to explore whether a pilot could be considered in Plymouth and if successful expanded to other areas of the country.

**2. Plymouth City Council's Child Poverty Action Plan**

In 2016, Plymouth City Council (PCC) agreed to the establishment of a Child Poverty Action plan (CPAP) for the three-year period 2016-19. This three-year action plan had four areas of focus. One of these was oral health improvement (OHI) in children aged 0-16 years. To enable the OHI element of the CPAP to be taken forward, a Strategic Group was formed. This group still meets on a quarterly basis and is attended by the strategic oral health leads from a number of partner organisations in the city (i.e.

Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise (PDSE), Livewell Southwest, and Plymouth City Council). A new CPAP was developed by PCC for the three-year period 2019-22. As before, there were four areas of focus. One of these areas was health and one of the priorities for this health component was to continue to deliver the OHI programme for children. More recently, a new three-year plan was agreed for the period 2022-25. Health and wellbeing remain one of the four themes and as before the focus on OHI remains as a key component of that theme. In other words, OHI remains a priority for Plymouth City Council's CPAP. There are several OHI initiatives currently being delivered in Plymouth which support the CPAP. These are outline in section 3.

### **3. Oral Health Improvement initiatives being delivered in Plymouth**

#### **3.1 First Dental Steps (formerly known as 'Dental Check by One')**

First Dental Steps is a national campaign launched in 2017 by the British Society of Paediatric Dentistry (BSPD) in partnership with the Office of the Chief Dental Officer for England. The aim is to ensure all children see a dentist and their parents receive preventive advice by their first birthday. Due to the challenges in access to NHS dentistry in the Southwest, this campaign has been developed into a multi-stranded oral health promotion initiative, embedded into the Healthy Child Programme. This involves maximising the role of health and social care professionals involved in early year's care in improving oral health. Health Visitors are trained as 'Oral Health Champions,' enhancing their ability and confidence in providing families with evidence based oral health advice on when to attend the dentist, diet, feeding regimes, oral hygiene practices and signposting to local dental services. In addition, they distribute toothbrushing packs to vulnerable families who receive Universal Plus or Universal Partnership Plus tiers of support. Training has been provided for around 88 Health Visitors in Plymouth who will have contact with around 9,000 children aged 0-2 years in Plymouth. The training for this project is provided by qualified Oral Health Educators from PDSE.

### **3.2 Supervised tooth brushing scheme (Big Brush Club)**

This involves the delivery of training and support to early year's settings (schools and nurseries) in the most deprived areas of the city to establish daily supervised toothbrushing sessions and routine. The programme is offered to children in pre-school (nurseries), reception and year one classes. The settings are also provided with resources to support the programme (e.g. toothbrushes, fluoride toothpaste, two-minute timers). From September 2019, this scheme was commissioned by NHS England to roll out across the most deprived 50% of areas of Devon. Many of the participating early year's settings are in Plymouth. This service is provided by At Home Dental. Funding has been secured (from the ICB) to expand this scheme to cover all schools and early years settings in the city.

### **3.3 Fluoride Varnish Scheme**

'Healthy Smiles for Plymouth' is a preventative project currently operating in 24 primary schools in the city. It is delivered by the Livewell Southwest's Community Dental service. Fluoride varnish application is offered to children in reception and year one and applied by specially trained Dental Health Educator Nurses twice each academic year. The children also receive a free goody bag containing a toothbrush, toothpaste and information on oral health as well as how to find a dentist. Alongside the fluoride varnish application an oral health prevention programme is delivered to the children in reception, year one, year three and year six as well as to the parents of the children having the fluoride varnish applied by the dental health educators. Funding has been secured (from the ICB) to expand this scheme to additional schools in the city.

### **3.4 Open Wide and Step Inside**

This is a 15-minute animated film which tells the story of Geoffrey the Giant and his visit to meet Daisy the Dentist. It delivers oral health education to year two pupils in primary schools in a different and creative way using a cartoon animation and a cast of fun characters to engage children about oral health prevention advice. An important

part of the programme is to support teachers to deliver key oral health messages throughout the year as part of the Key Stage 1 national curriculum using specially designed teacher resources from the animation. This underpins the information to ensure children get the best advice about looking after their own teeth for life as part of their early years' education. The programme is delivered in primary school settings and a range of resource materials are provided to support classroom teaching. Home packs and an OWSI story book is also supplied to each child to ensure messages are taken into the home environment. This project is supported and delivered by The Dental Outreach Team from PDSE. Funding has been secured (from the ICB) to deliver this programme in all primary schools in IMD 1-6 in the city.

### **3.5 Oral Health Champion training**

PDSE's Dental Outreach Team offers Oral Health Training to service providers in Plymouth. The sessions provide an overview of oral health, the importance of prevention and encourages participants to share key oral health messages with others. These sessions can be adapted to suit the audience and specific service needs.

### **3.6 Chatterboxes**

This is a box of oral health themed resources which can be loaned out to community organisations. The aim is to encourage and help organisations to deliver oral health themed activities using resources and materials which encourage conversation, play and storytelling. PDSE's Dental Outreach Team provide this resource.

### **3.7 Inter Professional Engagement projects - Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) and Dental Therapy and Hygiene (DTH) students**

Inter-Professional Engagement is an embedded feature of the curriculum of the University of Plymouth Peninsula Dental School which enables undergraduate dental and hygiene therapy students to work with groups in the community to address particular societal needs. During the Autumn term groups of 8-9 students work with

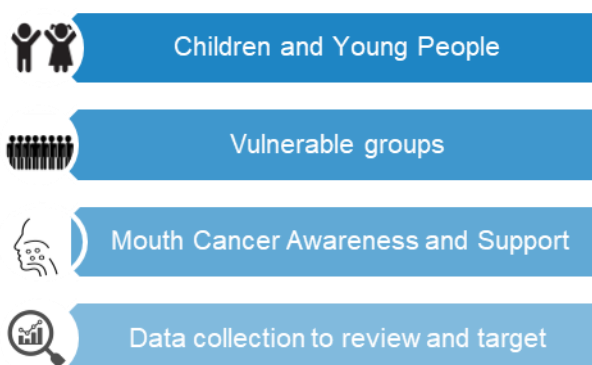
12-14 community organisations. This includes local schools, early year's settings, elderly groups (such as Age UK), the Salvation Army, and charities dealing with vulnerable members of society such as people affected by homelessness and people recovering from addiction. Students deliver oral health themed sessions in the community, sharing key prevention messages, signposting and raising the importance of maintaining positive oral health routines. This project is delivered and co-ordinated by PDSE.

#### **4. NHS Devon ICB OHI Steering Group**

In early 2024, NHS Devon ICB established an Oral Health Improvement Steering Group. This Steering Group is a collaboration of ICB commissioners, Local Authority Oral Health Leads, Dental Public Health Consultants, Healthwatch, Safeguarding Teams, Local Authority Children's Services and wider stakeholders working together to make a long-term commitment to improve the oral health of everyone living in Devon.

The Group's vision is that everyone living in Devon will have access to the information and support needed to improve their oral health. There will be a focus on preventative evidence-based interventions and working collaboratively to promote good oral health. Data will be used to target initiatives to reduce health inequalities and help overcome barriers to good oral health.

NHS Devon ICB OHI Steering Group key priorities:





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Following the success of the process above, the three Devon Public Health Teams are now developing proposals to improve the oral health of the vulnerable populations including the following:

- People experiencing homelessness
- Asylum seekers and refugees

It is hoped that these new proposals, once finalised, will be supported in the same way as the three children's OHI mentioned above.

## **5. Community Water Fluoridation**

Water fluoridation schemes involve adding fluoride to community drinking water supplies in areas of low natural fluoride, increasing the level to that known to reduce tooth decay. This happens in approximately 25 countries internationally, covering an

estimated 400 million people. Fluoridation has the benefit of successfully reducing decay prevalence in all sectors of society irrespective of age, and importantly does not require sustained behavioural change at the individual level. As a community based oral health intervention, it benefits individuals from deprived backgrounds the most thereby reducing inequalities. Water fluoridation alone does not eliminate dental decay but would reduce decay levels and the impact of dental disease as part of a suite of prevention strategies (i.e. alongside supervised tooth brushing schemes, etc).

Around 10% of the population of England currently receive fluoridated water. In the most deprived areas fluoridation has been shown to reduce tooth decay in five-year olds by a third. There is no evidence of health harms from the levels of fluoride used in English schemes, nor the slightly higher levels allowed naturally. Despite this, no new schemes have been implemented for nearly 40 years. Plymouth's water supply is not fluoridated and, as such, Plymouth residents do not currently benefit from the receipt of fluoridated water.

In the Health and Care Act 2022, Parliament granted powers to the Secretary of State to introduce new water fluoridation schemes. It is understood that the revenue costs of the schemes would also transfer to the Secretary of State. This will allow central government to take direct responsibility for fluoridation schemes. Any future decisions on new fluoridation schemes will be subject to funding being secured.

Plans to expand water fluoridation in the northeast of England to help tackle tooth decay were put out to public consultation on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2024. The Government's consultation into the plans were extended due to the General Election and ended on 31<sup>st</sup> July 2024. The evaluation report is awaiting publication. Other areas that are considering similar schemes are waiting for the outcome of the process in the northeast before deciding if and how to proceed.

## **5.1 Issues**

- Fluoridation of the water supply is a very contentious issue. It is not possible to opt out from receipt of fluoridated water.

- The anti-fluoridation lobby are well organised and vocal.
- Plymouth's water supply comes mainly from the Mayflower Water Treatment Works. This would be the most appropriate site for fluoride to be added to the water supply. However, this treatment works does not supply all of Plymouth. There are also areas of neighbouring authorities that receive their water from this treatment works under certain circumstances.
- The views of neighbouring areas and indeed those across the Southwest are still unknown and would need to be sought.
- Even though the Health and Care Bill was enacted in April 2022, it may be many months before the more detailed regulations relating to water fluoridation are available.
- Oral health improvement is a cross-party priority in Plymouth. There would be merit in joint working on this issue at the appropriate time.