DENTAL TASKFORCE UPDATE

HEALTH AND ADULT SOCIAL CARE SCRUINTY PANEL
11/03/2026

PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

BACKGROUND

The Dental Task Force (DTF) was established in July 2023 in response to significant and long-standing challenges surrounding oral health in Plymouth, particularly regarding residents lack of access to NHS dentistry and the persistently high burden of poor oral health among children. The DFT includes representatives from Plymouth City Council, NHS Devon, Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise (PDSE), Livewell Southwest, cross party councillors and MPs, and University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust.

The DTF directly supports the Council's corporate priority to work with the NHS to improve access to healthcare and dentistry. It also aligns with key elements of the Plymouth Plan 'A Healthy City', specifically:

- **HEA1:** Reducing health inequalities
- **HEA2:** Improving outcomes for children and families
- **HEA3:** Supporting adults with health and social care needs
- **HEA9:** Ensuring accessible, high-quality health services

The three priorities of the DTF at the outset were:

- **Priority 1**: Deliver a new dental facility in the City Centre run by the Dental School and aligned to the oral health needs in the city.
- **Priority 2:** Provide additional funding to Plymouth City Council to enable it to enhance the oral health improvement (prevention) offer available in the city.
- **Priority 3:** 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.

This report provides an update on the programme of work undertaken by the Dental Task Force and progress against the agreed priorities.

UPDATE ON PRIORITY 1:

Deliver a new dental facility in the City Centre run by the Dental School and aligned to the oral health needs in the city.

The Peninsula Dental School Social Enterprise (PDSE) opened its new dental facility on New George Street on 9th February 2026. The service is delivered by final-year dental students working under consultant and tutor supervision and operates Monday to Friday. Access is via NHS 111, ensuring prioritisation of patients with urgent dental need.

The facility provides stabilisation care, including temporary treatment and pain relief to prevent deterioration and support patients to return to routine dental pathways. This model is designed to divert demand away from urgent and emergency care, where pressure on capacity remains high.

Since opening, the facility has begun accepting patients and will continue to refine capacity as clinical pathways become fully established. When fully operational, the service is expected to deliver up to 3,500 appointments per year.

UPDATE ON PRIORITY 2:

Provide additional funding to Plymouth City Council to enable it to enhance the oral health improvement (prevention) offer available in the city.

The second task force priority was to secure additional funding to enhance the city's oral health improvement offer. Following proposals submitted in 2023, NHS Devon ICB has allocated £900,000 over three years from dental underspend to expand four key prevention programmes.

Supervised Toothbrushing Scheme

Supervised toothbrushing is an evidence-based intervention delivered in nurseries and primary schools to reduce tooth decay. Staff are trained to run daily brushing sessions and are supplied with toothbrushes, fluoride toothpaste and take-home packs.

In Plymouth, the scheme supports children aged 3-5 years and is delivered in primary schools. NHS Devon funding for this programme is secured until 2029. In addition, national supervised toothbrushing funding has allowed extended provision in priority schools to also support 6- and 7-year-olds.

Participation now exceeds 7,000 children citywide, with around 85% of children in the most deprived areas taking part, and five out of six SEND schools engaged in the programme.

Open Wide Step Inside

Open Wide Step Inside is an oral health education programme designed for Year 2 pupils and delivered through curriculum aligned digital resources. The programme supports children to develop foundational oral health knowledge and complements other initiatives.

Open Wide Step Inside is offered to all Year 2 pupils in Plymouth, and will reach 2,762 children in 2025/26, ensuring equitable access to consistent oral health education. This programme is currently funded until December 2027, with plans to extend the contract pending ICB approval.

Fluoride Varnish Scheme (Healthy Smiles for Plymouth)

Fluoride varnish is a protective coating painted onto children's teeth to help strengthen enamel and prevent tooth decay. This programme is delivered by Livewell Southwest's Community Dental Service in 24 Plymouth primary schools. Children in Reception and Year 1 receive fluoride varnish applications twice per academic year from trained Dental Health Educator Nurses, along with a toothbrush, toothpaste, and oral health information. Complementary oral health education is also provided to pupils in Reception and Years 1, 3 and 6, as well as to parents of participating children.

Further expansion of this scheme is currently pending national guidance on delivery requirements.

First Dental Steps

First Dental Steps is a national initiative within the Healthy Child Programme that promotes early oral health promotion in infancy.

Local Health Visitors are trained as Oral Health Champions, equipping them to provide evidence-based advice on dental attendance, diet, feeding, and toothbrushing as part of routine health visitor engagement with families. They also distribute toothbrushing packs to families in receipt of Universal Plus or Universal Partnership Plus support. To date, 88 Health Visitors have been trained, and these health visitors have collectively supported approximately 9,000 children aged 0 -2.

Funding for this work has been confirmed until 2029.

UPDATE ON PRIORITY 3:

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.

A dedicated dental clinic for people experiencing homelessness has been established through the Peninsular Dental Social Enterprise and embedded within local health inclusion pathways. Operating one day a week, the clinic supports individuals who would otherwise struggle to access NHS dental care. NHS Devon has approved additional funding to expand this provision, enabling increased capacity to meet the high level of need within this population.

The DTF recognises that further high-priority adult groups require improved access, and these are addressed in the renewed priorities.

RENEWED PRIORITIES FOR 2026

In addition to ongoing work on priorities two and three, the DTF has established new priorities.

Ongoing work on original priorities:

1. Providing additional funding to Plymouth City Council to strengthen the city's oral-health improvement (prevention) offer.
2. Using a proportion of Plymouth's annual NHS dental underspend to commission new services for high-priority groups and those without access to an NHS dentist. This priority area will focus on additional vulnerable adult groups.

with additional new priorities:

3. Children who haven't seen a dentist
4. Developing the oral health workforce

Children who haven't seen a dentist:

Improving access to dental care for children is a key priority, and despite robust prevention work, many children continue to face difficulties securing routine dental appointments. Recent data shows that 52% of Plymouth children had no contact with dental services in the preceding 12 months. (OHID, 2024)

Local data shows that almost one in four Plymouth children have experience of dentinal decay, with rates in the most deprived areas almost double those in the least deprived (National Dental

Epidemiology Programme, 2025). Establishing a consistent "dental home" is essential to reduce avoidable extractions and improve long-term oral health. In addition, the number of children awaiting extractions under general anaesthetic who are not registered with a dental provider remains concerning. A pilot project is in development to use student dental therapists to deliver dental treatment for children to address some of this unmet need.

Developing the oral health workforce:

The DTF is committed to strengthening the oral health workforce in Plymouth. This includes continued collaboration with the Peninsular Dental School to advocate for increased local dental training places, supporting sustainable long-term workforce growth in the city.

In parallel, the DTF seeks to maximise the contribution of non-dental professionals in key settings to deliver consistent oral health promotion across Plymouth. This approach broadens reach, reinforces early prevention, and increases system-wide capacity.

Vulnerable adult groups:

Building on the original DFT priority of improving access for high-priority groups, the DTF recognises the significant oral health challenges faced by vulnerable adults. These challenges remain a priority, particularly for those with complex needs.

Results from a survey of oral health needs for older adults living in care homes is due to be released shortly and will provide a clearer picture of local unmet need among this population. The DTF also acknowledges the substantial oral health needs of other vulnerable groups, including adults receiving care in their own homes, people with learning disabilities, and individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Further expansion for dental access for people experiencing homelessness has been agreed. These groups often have complex and underserved oral-health needs, and the DTF is committed to understanding the barriers they face and identifying opportunities to improve access to and support.

SUMMARY

This report outlines the progress made by the DFT. The new city-centre dental facility has opened and is now treating patients with urgent dental needs. Prevention programmes have expanded significantly using NHS dental underspend to fund programmes including supervised toothbrushing, Open Wide Step Inside, and First Dental Steps, now reaching thousands of Plymouth children across the city. A dedicated dental clinic for people experiencing homelessness has been established and funds have been approved to expand capacity.

The DTF has agreed new priorities for 2026, including improving access for children who have not seen a dentist and strengthening the oral health workforce, alongside a continued focus on prevention programmes and vulnerable adult groups.