



# Dental Deserts: Fill the Gap

**Steps to fix the English dental recruitment crisis**

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**The UK is facing a dental workforce crisis. The number of dentists in the UK has been declining for several years, and the situation is only getting worse.**

**You will know many constituents who simply can't find a dentist. There are now more than 5,500 dental vacancies in the UK, and we have per capita among the lowest number of dentists in Europe, with only Bulgaria and Poland having fewer dentists per 1,000 people, according to OECD data from 2022. In some parts of the UK, such as West Norfolk and North Lincolnshire, there are only 34 registered dentists per 100,000 people – lower than any country in the EU.**

**We know steps are being taken to address the problems in dental recruitment. Discussions on incremental dental contract reform began in the summer of 2021 and the outcomes of what we view as a “first step on the road” were published in July 2022. But contract reform is not sufficient.**

**The only way to close the gap in provision vs need is to recruit more dentists. We fully support the NHS long-term workforce plan to increase UK training of dentists, but this will only see significant increases in trained dentists from mid-2030. By that time, many NHS dental practices will be closed, which is why we urgently need to make it easier for high-quality overseas dentists to practice in the UK.**

## **The Government must take action to address this crisis – here's what it should do:**

The Overseas Registration Exam (ORE) is a test that overseas dentists must pass in order to register with the regulator, the General Dental Council (GDC).

Government has given the GDC the powers to reform the exam, but the GDC is taking too long to act, creating a bottleneck of

more than 2,000 applicants. At present, only around 300 dentists pass the ORE Part 2 each year, a tiny fraction of the number needed.



### **Medium-term win**

Government should bring forward reforms allowing the GDC to approve overseas diplomas equivalent to standards approved by the ORE to help speed up the recruitment of overseas dentists as well as looking at new mutual recognition schemes, helping patients get the treatment they need.

There are a number of ways that the GDC could increase the number of applications passing, which would take effect quickly:

- Increase the number of places on the ORE Part 1, allowing more candidates to fill places on the Part 2 exam
- Deliver Part 1 online or in British Council offices overseas, to facilitate an increase in applications
- Prioritise candidates who have already undertaken a preparatory course for the ORE exam, or who have a contract to deliver a minimum of 3,500 Units of Dental Activity, ensuring that the most-prepared candidates who are looking to work in the NHS get access to the exam first
- Open exam slots up to six months before examinations, rather than just four to six weeks in advance as at present, allowing candidates more time to prepare for examinations, and therefore increase the pass rate



### **Quick win**

Government should use every tool at its disposal to encourage the GDC to provide extra resource, and reduce published timelines, to speed up the approval of qualified dentists.

We know that significant investment is required to address the UK's long-term recruitment needs, but it will take nearly a decade for training to be completed and for those new dentists to come on stream. That is why there is an urgent need to not only maintain overseas recruitment, but expand it as much as possible.

The government should work with the GDC to develop new mutual recognition agreements with other countries. The GDC should scope out further opportunities for mutual recognition globally with Commonwealth countries such as India. India produces an excess of high-quality, English-speaking dentists, more than 300,000 every year, many of whom want to build their early careers in the UK. In a recent survey of Indian dentists, 75% said they were interested or very interested in working as an NHS dentists in the UK for up to 5 years and were open to working in any part of the country.

There also is an opportunity for the government to explore bringing forward further reforms to the ORE. Under recent legislation, the GDC is allowed to approve overseas diplomas to as equivalent to the standards examined by the ORE – yet there are no plans to do so for up to two years. By bringing forward these reforms, the GDC could allow several dental schools – including the 14 which, prior to 2001, were already permitted to offer this qualification – to begin offering diplomas this year, taking significant pressure off the ORE as the only means of having their qualifications recognised.



### Long-term solution

The GDC should ultimately ensure the ORE is fit for purpose, meetings modern patient need, and ensures pace and scale is at the heart of processing applications.



### The government must also invest in training more dentists in the UK.

However, in the long-run further action is required. The number of dental students in the UK has been declining in recent years. The government is already addressing this in part by investing in new training places under the long-term dental workforce plan, but this must be supplemented by a national campaign for dental recruitment. Without action, the current plans won't see results delivered until the early 2030s.

The government should also review additional elements of the GDC's ORE in the long run. This could include reviewing the pass rate, ensuring that its procurement process is fit for purpose, and designing an exam that will reduce the processing time for ORE candidates.

# Simple steps – huge impact on patient welfare

By making these three simple changes, the government can quickly and easily increase the number of dentists available to meet the needs of patients. We believe that a net increase of just 1,000 dentists could deliver access to NHS primary dental care for up to 750,000 people. This will alleviate the pressure on the NHS and ensure that everyone in the UK has access to quality dental care.

In the long term, the government will need greater investment in accelerating training more dentists in the UK and consistent assessment of the performance of the GDC's ORE. However, many of the changes mentioned above can be implemented quickly and easily, and they will provide an immediate solution to the dental workforce crisis.

## About ADG

The Association of Dental Groups (ADG) is the trade association for large dental providers in the UK. Our members include 25 of the largest groups of dental practices in the country, representing approximately 10,000 clinicians delivering NHS and private dentistry to more than 10 million patients every year.

### Background

- There is a serious deterioration in the provision of dental health care across England. The 'Dentistry in England' report from the National Audit Office showed a fall in the contribution of NHS funding to primary care dentistry of 10% in real terms in the last full spending period (2014-15 to 2018-19). It is estimated that £880million would be required to restore funding to 2010 levels. Despite the Conservative Party manifesto reference "that between 2018 – 2023 we will have raised funding for the NHS by 29%", none of this funding has found its way to NHS Dental Services, apart from an additional £50 million in January 2022, which was time limited until the end of March 2022.
- The ADG welcomed the lifting of the "cap" on UK dental school places in September 2020 and the subsequent extra places in 2021. The ADG has recommended to government a national recruitment campaign with higher targets to recruit more dentists. We are disappointed that Ministers reimposed a cap on places in 2022.
- The NHS long term workforce plan proposes to increase training places for dentists by 40% to more than 1,100 by 2031/32 – at the time of writing this remains uncostered. However, it is not known how many of the current workforce (40,000 approx.) actually work in the NHS or how many new dentists we need (full-time equivalent).
- Addressing the interrelated problems of recruitment and retention and the NHS dental contract remains the most important step in dealing with the backlog of care and future demand for oral healthcare in England. However, there are more immediate solutions available to the government through the General Dental Council's examination provision for overseas practitioners.