

DENTISTRY

1. STRUCTURE

Primary care dentists (sometimes called ‘high street dentists’) are self-employed and can deliver a mix of NHS and private dentistry. To provide NHS services, the dentist must hold a contract with the NHS¹.

A patient can receive treatment from any dentist because there is no system of registration for dentistry, different to the system with GPs. This also means that once a patient has finished their course of treatment, they are not guaranteed access to the same dentist again in the future.

Other dental services are provided in community care (such as for people who cannot travel to a dentist) and in secondary/tertiary care (such as in hospitals).

2. COMMISSIONING AND OVERSIGHT

Integrated Care Boards are responsible for commissioning health services including dental services for their local area, and are accountable to NHS England.

The Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Integrated Care Board was launched in July 2022, and has a budget of £1 billion².

There are three Integrated Care Areas that sit under the Cornwall and IOS Integrated Care Board: the West ICA, the Central ICA and the North and East ICA. The SE Cornwall CAP and the Tamar to Moor CAP both fall under the North and East ICA, which covers a population of approximately 196,870³.

Dental services are inspected by the Care Quality Commission as part of its role as the statutory regulator for health and care services⁴.

3. NHS DENTAL CONTRACTS

Under the NHS dental contract system⁵, introduced in 2006, the provider agrees in advance to complete a set amount of dental activity per year, measured in units of dental activity (UDA). Commissioners can ‘claw back’ money from providers that under-deliver but providers have little scope to provide more activity, even if they have the capacity and time to do so. This is one reason some patients are told their dentist cannot see them for an NHS appointment but can see them as a private patient.

As part of a series of reforms announced in July 2022, the Government said they would allow high performing practices to provide up to 110% of their agreed activity. In May 2023, the Government introduced further legislation enabling commissioners to change a dental contract where a provider fails to deliver their contracted activity over three consecutive ‘non-COVID’ years, allowing the dental activity to be commissioned from a different provider. Further changes were introduced by the Government’s Recovery Plan for NHS dentistry, published in February 2024⁶, but stakeholders argue that the dental contract is still too inflexible and does not fairly reward dentists for seeing more complex and time-consuming patients.

4. FUNDING

NHS dentistry in England is funded by a combination of payments from NHS England and patient charges. Some groups of patients are entitled to free dental care.

Patients pay one charge that covers the course of treatment, even if it is delivered over more than one session. The cost depends on the band that the course of treatment is in:

In 2022/23 the total cost of dental services in England was £2.9 billion, of which £0.7 billion (around 25%) was covered by patient charges⁷, while a 2024 report by the Nuffield Trust, a health think tank, noted that increases in patient charges have been above inflation⁸.

Dental patient charges from 1 April 2024		
England		
Band	Description	Charge
1	This band includes examination, diagnosis (including radiographs), advice on how to prevent future problems, scale and polish if clinically needed, and preventative care (e.g. applications of fluoride varnish or fissure sealant).	£26.80
2	This band covers everything listed in band 1, plus any further treatment such as fillings, root canal work or extractions.	£73.50
3	This band covers everything in bands 1 and 2, plus course of treatment including crowns, dentures, bridges and other laboratory work.	£319.10
Urgent	This band covers urgent assessment and specified urgent treatments such as pain relief or a temporary filling or dental appliance repair.	£26.80

Source: *Dental Patient Charges Uplift*, Hansard⁹

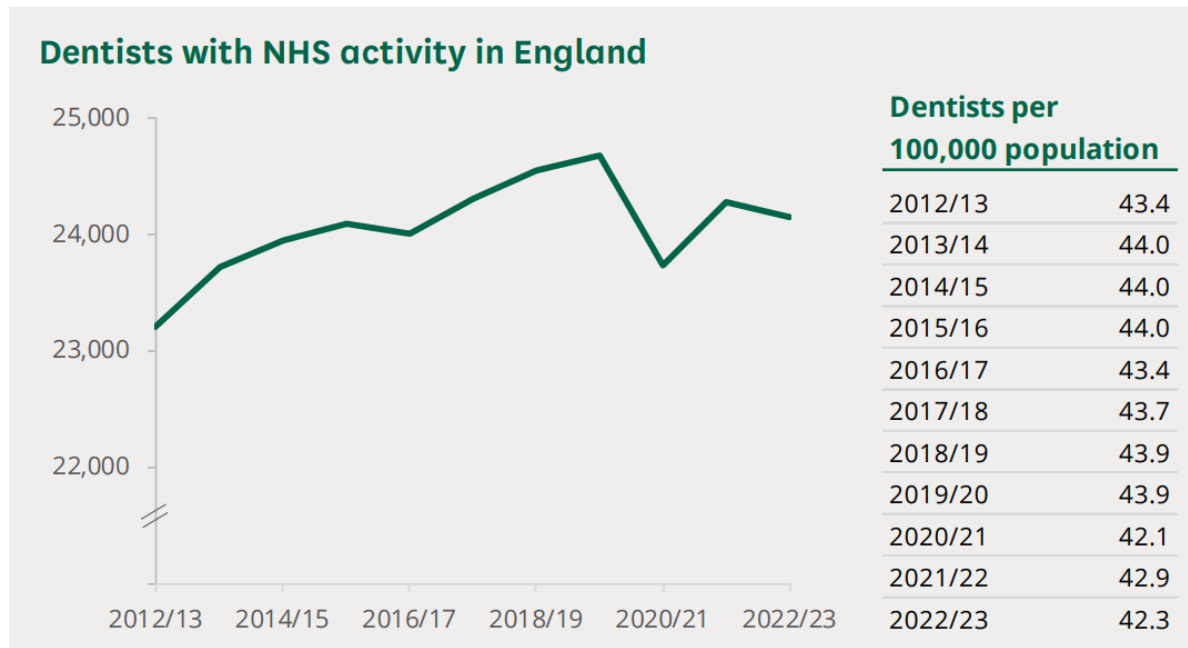
NHS summarised accounts published by the House of Commons Library¹⁰ suggest that real-terms funding for dental services has fallen by 19% since 2010/11, from £3.56 billion in 2010/11 to £2.9 billion in 2022/23.

One issue is that NHS England allocates funding to Integrated Care Boards based on the dental services provided in 2006 (when the current national contract model was introduced) rather than current need, and contracts were established without a time limit. A report in to inequalities by Public Health England published in 2021 suggests that this effectively capped dental care spending¹¹.

5. ACCESS TO NHS DENTISTRY

In 2020, the National Audit Office reported that the UK has the lowest number of dentists per capita in Europe, with England having the fewest NHS primary care dentists per person across the Four Home Nations.

In 2022/23, there were 24,151 dentists with NHS activity:



Source: NHS Dental Statistics for England Annual Report ¹²

It should be noted, though, that dentists are self-employed and can mix NHS and private work, so this data is a headcount of dentists with any NHS activity, not a full-time equivalent.

The British Dental Association (BDA) argues that NHS dentistry is facing a “genuine crisis” of access, with many patients unable to see an NHS dentist, or forced to pay to see one privately if they can afford to do so. Research undertaken by the BBC and BDA published in August 2022, showed that 90% of practices across the UK were not accepting new adult NHS patients. The BBC programme *Disappearing Dentists* is still available on BBC iPlayer ¹³.

A report compiled by the Association of Dental Groups published in May 2022 ¹⁴, identified the recruitment crisis in NHS dentistry, and showed that while North Lincolnshire had the lowest number of NHS dentists per 100,000 of population, Cornwall was also struggling to provide access, and was at risk of becoming a ‘dental desert’.

In more recent figures, the NHS Dental Statistics for England Annual Report 2022-23 ¹⁵ show that in June 2023, 40.7% of adults had seen an NHS dentist in the last two years (the maximum recommended interval). This is around a fifth lower than the proportion in September 2019 (50.9%) before the pandemic. This same Report contains a wealth of data broken down in to local authority areas in England.

Similarly, the percentage of children who had seen a dentist within the maximum recommended interval (one year) in June 2023 was 52.7%, which is lower than the-pandemic proportion of 57.9%.

Data from the General Dental Council (GDC) indicates that dentist registration numbers are relatively stable¹⁶, and there has been an increase from 34,700 in 2011 to 43,292 in 2021. In contrast, according to data provided by the Department of Health and Social Care, more than 2,500 dentists across England and Wales ended their NHS roles in 2021. In a 2023 survey by the British Dental Association¹⁷, over half of the dentists who responded said they had reduced the amount of NHS work they carry out since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost three quarters said they were intending to reduce, or further reduce their NHS commitment in 2023.

The Nuffield Trust health think tank in its 2024 report¹⁸ concluded that “universal dental care has likely gone for good.” Meanwhile, an oral health needs assessment for Southwest England conducted in January 2021 highlighted that access to NHS dentistry is a particular issue in Cornwall. Figures demonstrated that the percentage of children in Cornwall who accessed NHS dentistry is lower than both the regional and national average, while the percentage of adults accessing NHS dentistry is lower in Cornwall than the Southwest average, though similar to the national average.

6. GOVERNMENT RECOVERY PLAN FOR NHS DENTISTRY

A national NHS Dental Recovery Plan was released in February 2024, which included:

- A new patient payment of between £15 to £50 (depending on treatment)
- One off payments of up to £20,000 for new NHS dentists to provide access to care in areas with the highest demand
- The Unit of Dental Activity (UDA) value to be increased from £23 to £28 to make working for the NHS more attractive
- The launch of dental vans offering appointments in rural and coastal communities
- Prevent poor oral health through a ‘Smile for Life’ programme aimed at promoting good oral hygiene for children and providing fluoride varnish treatments for school children in under-served areas
- Making it easier for overseas dentists to work in the NHS

On the back of this, locally:

- The ongoing dental underspend will be used to create a fixed term dental strategy clinical lead who will support the commissioning of NHS dental services and work with dental practices and the wider ICB team
- Cornwall and the IOS will be allocated funding to support one mobile dental van
- Flexibility will be created for providers to use 10% of the total contract value on a sessional basis (which will improve financial stability and potentially increase access to urgent care)

It should be noted, though, that although the national UDA value will be increased to £28, the average in Cornwall and the IOS is £31.43. It should also be noted that the British Dental Association has criticised the Recovery Plan, saying that it does not address the dental contract as the root of the problem, and that the fundamental issue is a lack of new money, with changes to UDA rates and new patient premiums funded through existing contract values.

It should also be noted that during oral evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee, it was confirmed that the money for the actions in the Recovery Plan would come from the existing dentistry budget ¹⁹.

7. NOTES FROM APRIL 2024 BOARD MEETING OF THE CORNWALL AND IOS ICB ²⁰

Primary care dental summary

Category	Number of Contracts	Change since last month
Total	74	Nil
UDA Only	65	Nil
UOA Only	2	Nil
UDA and UOA	1	Nil
Total number of contracted UOA's	27,963	Nil
Total number of contracted UDA's	860,601	Nil

Other	Number of Contracts	Change since last month
Special Care Dental Services	1	Nil
Secondary Care Dental Services	2	Nil

Regional Initiatives	Number of Contracts	Sessions/Patients (Per week)
Stabilisation Pilot	7	25 Sessions
Urgent Care Pilot	1	45 Patients

Units of dental activity

Activity performance for 21/22 and 22/23 are shown in the graphs below.

Scheduled data: The monthly percentage of usual annual contracted UDAs submitted and scaled up to 12 months for the **South-West** was **73%**. The value for **CIOS** was **64%**.



• This graph shows the average monthly performance of the 3 GDS/PDS contracts scaled up by 12 months measured against the delivery thresholds (80% for Apr-Sep 21, 85% for Oct-Dec, 90% for Jan-Mar, 100% for Apr-Jun 22).

Financial overview

Contract Changes in Cornwall

Several contract changes have occurred in the first 6 months of the year resulting in a YTD underspend of £1.8m. Of these changes £1.5m have been recurrent changes.

Patient Charge Revenue in Cornwall

Due to the lower than anticipated performance there has been a reduction of PCR against plan with £0.9m less revenue expected at year end.

Clawback

This is higher than budget due to low performance against target. Target was 67.7% at month 10 it is 61% resulting in an expected underlying £2.2m additional clawback at year end.

8. ORAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND CORNWALL COUNCIL

The 2012 Health and Social Care Act transferred responsibility for oral health improvement from the NHS to local authorities, who are now required to provide or commission oral health promotion programmes to improve the health of the local population. In addition to the Smile for Life programme being rolled out by the NHS, Cornwall Council is also required to provide or commission oral health surveys, to facilitate:

1. Assessment and monitoring of oral health needs.
2. Planning and evaluation of oral health promotion programmes.
3. Advising on the arrangements for the provision of dental services with NHS England; and
4. Reporting and monitoring of the effects of any local water fluoridation schemes covering their area.

9. ORAL HEALTH INITIATIVES IN CORNWALL

- **Big Brush Club** This service will provide support for school age children to improve their oral hygiene. Facilitators are trained to provide guidance and dental knowledge in educational settings and equipping teaching staff to carry out daily toothbrushing sessions from within the classroom, and will cost the ICB approximately £149,000 for 2024 to 2025. More information and resource packs available at: [Big Brush Club](#)
- **Smarter Smiles** The Smarter Smiles accreditation scheme is being delivered through Smile Together CIC (subcontracted to Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise in the east of Cornwall) to 15 schools per ICA, for a total of 45 schools in Cornwall. Smarter Smiles is a 2-year programme, and will include: oral health education; the Open Wide and Step Inside (OWSI) programme and fluoride varnishing of children's teeth. Participant schools have been selected based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, with IMD deciles 1-3 or next lowest. The OWSI programme is being delivered to Key Stage 1 children in these 45 schools. (There are 238 primary schools in Cornwall in total.)

- **First Dental Steps** This will see Cornwall Council's Health Visitors support families with tooth-brushing for 9–12-month-old babies.
- Thanks to support of Smile Together CIC and Go Cornwall Bus Company, **free oral health packs will be distributed to every two-year-old in Cornwall**, estimated to be around 7,500 children.
- Cornwall Council's community health team is supporting **oral health at 1-year reviews** through extra funding from NHS England. The funding covers dental packs that are given out at 1-year reviews, many of which will take place within family hubs. By April 2024, all Cornwall Council's family health workers had completed two training sessions in oral health.
- Oral Health Champion Training is being offered (at £160 per session) through Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise to a wide range of people and organisations. The 2-hour training session covers topics including the impact of poor oral health, common dental diseases and how to signpost to urgent and routine dental services.

REFERENCES

- ¹ [What are the different types of NHS dental contracts? - Customer Self-Service \(nhsbsa.nhs.uk\)](https://nhsbsa.nhs.uk)
- ² [Home - NHS Cornwall and Isles of Scilly \(icb.nhs.uk\)](https://icb.nhs.uk)
- ³ [North and east integrated care area - NHS Cornwall and Isles of Scilly \(icb.nhs.uk\)](https://icb.nhs.uk)
- ⁴ [Complain about a GP, dentist or eye care - Care Quality Commission \(cqc.org.uk\)](https://cqc.org.uk)
- ⁵ [The National Health Service \(General Dental Services Contracts\) Regulations 2005 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)
- ⁶ [Faster, simpler and fairer: our plan to recover and reform NHS dentistry - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)
- ⁷ [NHS charges - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://parliament.uk)
- ⁸ [Bold action or slow decay? The state of NHS dentistry and future policy actions | Nuffield Trust](#)
- ⁹ [Dental Patient Charges Uplift 2024-25 - Hansard - UK Parliament](#)
- ¹⁰ [NHS \(England\) Summarised Accounts 2010-2011 HC 1297 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)
- ¹¹ [Inequalities in oral health in England - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)
- ¹² [NHS Dental Statistics for England, 2022-23, Annual Report - NHS England Digital](#)
- ¹³ [BBC iPlayer - Disappearing Dentists](#)
- ¹⁴ [England's Dental Deserts and the urgent need to level up access to dentistry - Association of Dental Groups \(theadg.co.uk\)](https://theadg.co.uk)
- ¹⁵ [NHS Dental Statistics for England, 2022-23, Annual Report - NHS England Digital](#)
- ¹⁶ [Working patterns data \(gdc-uk.org\)](https://gdc-uk.org)
- ¹⁷ [Half of dentists have cut back NHS work, with more to follow as crisis mounts \(bda.org\)](https://bda.org)
- ¹⁸ [Bold action or slow decay? The state of NHS dentistry and future policy actions | Nuffield Trust](#)
- ¹⁹ committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/14526/html/
- ²⁰ [ICB242510 dental update](#)