

Understanding Current Provision and Requirements for NHS Urgent Dental Care Services in Wales

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Context and Approach:

The vast majority of NHS dental care is provided by independent dental practices through the General Dental Services (GDS) contract. The total number of NHS dental claims in 2023–2024 (1,401,308) has nearly halved compared to 2017–2018 (2,374,570) and the proportion of urgent claims is now 75% higher. Urgent dental care currently constitutes ~16% of all NHS dental activity, however the number of these claims per year has remained relatively constant (despite a pandemic and recent amendments to the GDS contract). Access to NHS Dentistry is a significant problem across the U.K., and in particular Wales. Patients from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to experience urgent conditions, do so more frequently, and often face significant barriers to timely care when private payment is not an option.

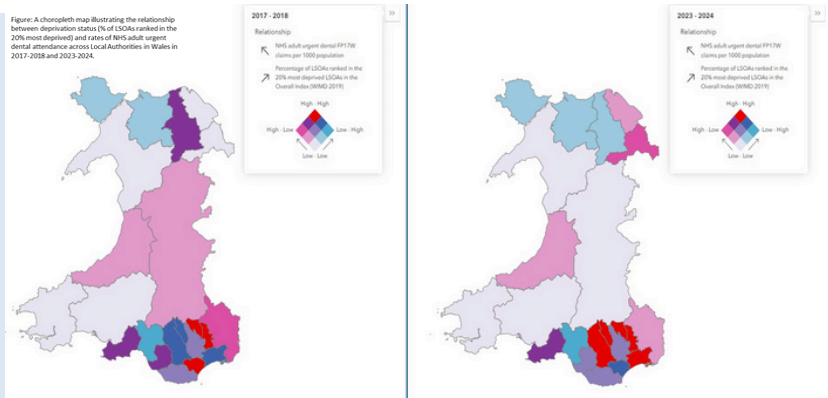
Aim: To develop a Dental Access Clinic (CIC model) to provide reliable quality urgent dental care for a LHB, train the future dental workforce and to deliver improved oral health outcomes for patients in Wales.

Progress to date:

Research:

An overview of NHS urgent dental care provision in Wales: where are the 'hotspots'? – submitted to the British Dental Journal in May 2025.

Highlights that the regions in Wales with the strongest relationship between high adult urgent dental attendance and deprivation in 2017–2018 were Blaenau Gwent, Cardiff and Torfaen. By 2023–2024, Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen remained prominent 'hotspots', with Merthyr Tydfil, Newport, and Rhondda Cynon Taf also emerging as areas of concern (see figure).



Leadership:

There are 3 similar CIC's operating in England but none in Wales. With only two vacant community dental chairs available at a single site, establishing a clinic requires starting anew with a purpose built facility and developing a robust business case. This approach to urgent dental care provision is a departure from convention and an innovative/disruptive model for care delivery in Wales.

Education/teaching :

Presented work to date to LHB Dental Directors, Chief Dental Officer (supervisor for the project) and colleagues in Public Health Wales at the Quality Improvement Group. General agreement that the clinic proposed would have a positive impact for a local community, providing care for vulnerable groups and helping to reduce health inequalities.

Future activity:

Although some aspects for a business case (costing analysis etc) have been explored, I need to compile all relevant sections into a comprehensive and persuasive plan. Have had some help from Life Sciences Hub Wales but critical to define mixed approach to funding model (LHB, loan, Dental SIFT, WG?) and structure for CIC.

Having established where a clinic would have most impact (ABUHB/CTMUHB), to begin discussions with those responsible for commissioning dental services to negotiate and outline contract terms.

To find a suitable site. Ideally on/near a pre-existing health centre or community clinic and with good transport links.

Reflections:

There has been limited reporting on the demand for NHS urgent dental care in Wales and its sociodemographic predictors. Contributing to research in this area has been especially rewarding, providing the opportunity to explore these issues in depth, collaborate with like-minded colleagues and to think strategically about solutions to improve care.

While building a new service is ambitious, this is a timely opportunity, given ongoing consultations on a new GDS contract and increasing uncertainty about the future of NHS dental provision in Wales. Although there is general support for the concept in principle, turning it into a practical reality has faced obstacles, including support with funding and uncertainty around LHB engagement.

Case Study:

The Dental Same Day Emergency Care (SDEC) clinic at University Dental Hospital, Cardiff facilitates in-action training for undergraduate dentists and dental core trainees (DCTs) in acute care management. Daily appointment slots are filled externally via CAV 24/7, with some availability reserved for hospital patients and other clinic functions. Over the past decade, there have been a total of 72,159 patient encounters making SDEC Wales' single largest provider of NHS urgent dental care.

The core benefits of a Dental Access Clinic modelled loosely on SDEC are:

- Definitive care: A dedicated acute clinic would manage patients requiring pulp dressings, simple surgical dental extractions and other time consuming or skill dependant procedures same day.
- Access: A non-selective and inclusive patient acceptance policy would ensure care for the most vulnerable patients in a population.
- Education and training: A valuable setting for dental education and training across all undergraduate programmes.
- Community engagement: A physical presence would improve visibility, helping patients struggling to navigate systems.