

# Fair, free and effective: Green Party proposals for the dental health service

Green Party 2010 general election policy briefing

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## 1. Summary

1.1 Currently, only half the UK population is provided with free dental healthcare. NHS dentistry charges are a regressive tax: they hit the poor hardest and prevent many from accessing dental care.

1.2. Access to dentists should not depend on where you live. But getting access to an NHS dentist is difficult and there is wide variation across the country:

- Between 55% and 60% of NHS practices are not taking new NHS patients.
- Some Primary Care Trusts have no NHS dentists taking on new patients.
- Most areas have around 55 dentists per 100,000 people. But some have as few as 25, while others have over 100.

1.3. Less than half of the UK adult population and only around two thirds of children are visiting NHS dentists. The percentage of children who have visited NHS dentists within the previous 24 months has fallen in recent years – a worrying sign.

1.4. Some areas have opted for the addition of fluoridation chemicals to tap water in a bid improve dental health. The Green Party says:

- The use of fluoridated water to improve dental health is not a viable solution – it's more like "sticking plaster with side effects".
- Any (slight) benefit from fluoride in drinking water has to be weighed against the increased risk of osteosarcoma and dental fluorosis.
- Mass medication may breach the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine – it's unethical to medicate people without their consent.
- The use of fluoridation demonstrates a failure to tackle the underlying problems of dental health provision.

1.5. The Green Party wants:

- Free basic dental care available to all.
- Everyone to have access to an NHS dentist if they want one.
- An end to fluoridation of our tap water.
- A comprehensive dental health strategy including proper education for children and their parents.

1.6. Assuming that some people will wish to remain private, to provide free dental care to 75% of the population would only cost the NHS an extra £1.8 billion a year.

## 2. Green Party policies for a fair, free and effective dental healthcare service

*“Greens think it's unfair that many poorer people including children are going without proper dental healthcare, while NHS money is wasted on botched privatisation schemes.*

*“It's unfair that less affluent populations are having mass medication foisted upon them as a cheap ‘sticking plaster solution’ instead of being provided with a proper dental health strategy, while health services are treated like profit-driven businesses rather than public services.*

*“Green MPs will fight for a dental health service for the UK that's fair, free and effective.”*

2.1 According the World Health Organization: “Oral health is integral to general health”, yet unlike most health care in the UK, access to dentistry is not free at the point of need and access to NHS dentists is poor and worsening.

2.2 Not only are most patients required to pay for dental health care, good dental health requires regular check-ups for most of a person's life. With even NHS dentists charging for care, we think this breaks the fundamental principle of the NHS by not being free at the point of need. Principle 1 of the NHS Constitution states: “The NHS provides a comprehensive service, available to all” and Principle 2 says: “Access to NHS services is based on clinical need, not an individual's ability to pay.” So why does Labour still think that we should pay for basic dental care?

2.3 A recent survey by Which found that 8% of the population have had to resort to doing their own dentistry with one in four of these attempting to pull their own teeth with pliers. This is simply not acceptable. The government claims that access to NHS dentistry is improving, but its own figures show otherwise<sup>6</sup>.

2.4 NHS dentistry charges are a regressive tax, hitting the poor hardest and preventing many from getting dental care. A twice-yearly check up costs £32.80 assuming that no other intervention is needed. In 2007/08 people in England paid £531 million in NHS dentist charges.

2.5 The dental service received £2.1 billion of direct funding in 2007/08. If the current NHS dental service were provided free at the point of use, the total cost to the NHS would increase by £531m to a total of £2.6 billion.

2.6 Even access to NHS dentistry is difficult. There is wide variation of access across the country, with evidence obtained by the Green Party under the Freedom of Information Act showing that:

- Between 55% and 60% of NHS practices are not taking new NHS patients.

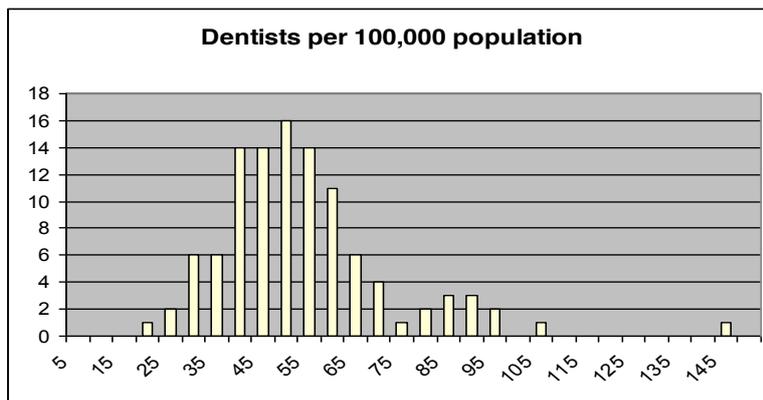
- A wide variation in access to NHS dentists across the country with some Primary Care Trusts having no NHS dentists taking on new patients.

2.7 Further research by the Green Party using the Freedom of Information Act has revealed a wide variation in the number of NHS dentists per 100,000 people. Table 1 below shows just how varied provision is with most areas having around 55 dentists per 100,000 people, but some having as few as 25 and others over 100. We believe that access to dentists should not depend on where you live.

2.8 The percentage of adults who visited NHS dentists within the previous 24 months has fallen from 51.6% in March 2006 to 48.3% in June 2008 (All patients, including children: 55.8% to 52.7%). This means that less than half of the adult population is accessing NHS dentistry and the numbers are continuing to decline.

2.9 The percentage of children who visited NHS dentists within the previous 24 months has fallen from 70.7% in March 2006 to 69.0% in June 2008. Only around two thirds of children are visiting NHS dentists.

**Table 1**



2.10 While the very lowest percentages are found in affluent areas (in Kensington and Chelsea only 28.8% of adults use NHS dentists), there are areas of much higher deprivation with NHS dental access such as Hackney with 36.8% and Tower Hamlets with 44.1%.

2.11 If the NHS wanted to provide free dentistry to 75% of the population (from the current 50% on the assumption that some people will want to remain private) the total level of funding would need to increase from £2.6 billion to £3.9 billion. As the NHS currently provided just £2.1 billion, an increase in funding of £1.8 billion would be required for patients to have dentistry free at the point of access.

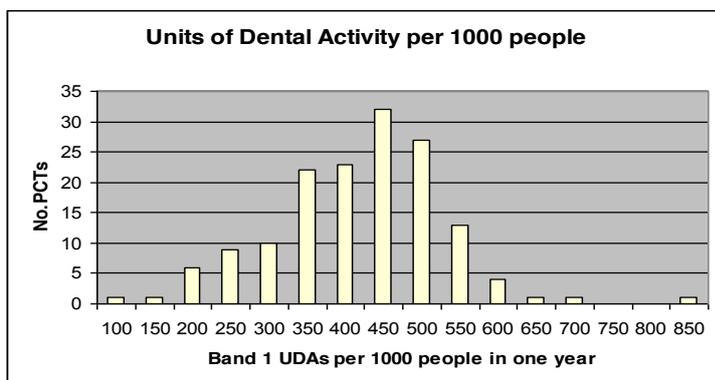
2.12 NHS Dentistry is paid using three bands relating to types of activity, Units of Dental Activity (UDA). Band 1 is simple treatment including check-ups. Assuming that people would normally expect to have two check-ups each year, a rate of 2000 UDAs per 1000 population would be the top level to aspire to.

2.13 Comparisons using the Quarter 1 2008/09 UDA activity data by Primary Care Trusts show further wide variations in access. The England average for Band 1 UDAs was just 396 per 1000 people per year (based on Q1 08/09), suggesting that much less than 40% of the population will have a Band 1 treatment (many people will have more than one if they have two check-ups in a year). Table 2 below shows the variation in Band 1 UDAs.

2.14 It is clear that NHS dental provision across the country is shambolic and where it exists, regressive taxation prevents people accessing dentistry in contradiction to the NHS's founding principles of care being free at the point of need. Some areas have opted for the addition of fluoride to tap water in a bid improve dental health.

2.15 The Green Party views the use of fluoridated water to improve dental health as a "sticking plaster with side effects" solution. The recent decision by Southampton to fluoridate water supplies against widespread local opposition and with only one in four NHS dentists accepting patients in the city, it is clear they have failed to tackle the underlying problems of dental health.

**Table 2**



2.16 Any benefit of fluoride has to be weighed against the increased risk of osteosarcoma and fluorosis of the teeth. Also, and importantly, mass medication probably breaches the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine. Moreover, the mass medication of an entire population in the supposed interests of the under-fives is not only inappropriate, it's no substitute for a proper programme of dental care, including education of children and their parents in the matter of proper dental hygiene and healthy diet.

2.17 Dental health needs a radical overhaul, real investment and proper access for all. It must stop being a health care choice for the rich.

### **The Green Party wants:**

- Free basic dental care for all.
- Proper access to NHS dental services.
- An end to fluoridation of our tap water.
- A comprehensive dental health strategy including proper education for children and their parents.

**For further information see *Protecting and improving the NHS: Green Party 2010 general election briefing*, or contact Green Party press office, 020 7561 0282, [press@greenparty.org.uk](mailto:press@greenparty.org.uk).**