



PREVENTION, CARE, EDUCATION: A PEOPLE'S MANIFESTO FOR IMPROVED ORAL HEALTH IN THE UK

POLICIES TO FOSTER ONGOING POLITICAL
ENGAGEMENT AND DISCUSSION.

JUNE 2024

ELEVATING ORAL HEALTH TO A NATIONAL PRIORITY

Oral health is not a privilege, but a fundamental right that every person should enjoy, irrespective of their socio-economic status. It is pivotal to our daily functions, our interactions, and our self-confidence. Yet, it is often sidelined in the broader healthcare narrative.

Through this manifesto, we aim to elevate oral health in national health discourse, emphasising the importance of preventive care and early intervention. We advocate for equitable access to oral health services for all people, a fair and just working environment for dental professionals and urge for the integration of oral health into mainstream health policies.

We envision a future where oral health is no longer an afterthought, but a priority. A future where every individual in the UK can achieve and maintain optimal oral health. We invite all political parties to join us in this mission, as we strive to make oral health a national health priority.

Together, we can transform oral health in the United Kingdom, because a healthier mouth means a healthier nation.



Dr Nigel Carter OBE

Chief Executive, Oral Health Foundation



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This oral health manifesto, timed with the UK general election, transcends politics. To improve and protect the nation's oral health we must have long-term commitment and unified strategies across all political parties. It's time to move beyond vote-winning tactics and truly address the challenges in our oral health sector.

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OUR THREE PILLARS FOR BETTER ORAL HEALTH

The Oral Health Foundation champions three pillars for better oral health: implementation of preventive measures, access to high-quality care, and investment in educational programmes.

These pillars should guide political priorities, offering a roadmap to improved public oral health. By focusing on prevention, ensuring access to quality care, and promoting education, we can create a future where good oral health is a reality for all¹.

1. IMPLEMENTATION OF PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Preventive measures are the cornerstone of maintaining good oral health. They help in early detection and management of oral diseases, reducing the risk of severe complications².

Regular brushing with a fluoride toothpaste, interdental cleaning, and reduction of sugar in the diet can prevent plaque build-up, tooth decay, and gum disease³. Fluoride treatments and sealants can protect teeth from decay².

A commitment towards preventive measures - like water fluoridation - is cost-effective, promotes overall health, and enhances quality of life by preventing discomfort and preserving natural teeth⁴.

2. ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY CARE

Amidst an escalating NHS dental crisis, precipitated by a discredited contract that leaves both dental professionals and patients in the lurch, access to high-quality prevention and care is extremely critical⁵.

Access to high-quality care ensures timely detection and treatment of oral diseases, reducing the risk of severe complications⁵. Dental services and a skilled dental workforce are essential to address shortages and ensure adequate patient care⁵.

An integrated approach within healthcare is equally important. Involving GPs, pharmacies, and carers in oral health management can ensure a holistic approach to patient care⁵. This model can facilitate coordinated, comprehensive care, and improved health outcomes. Ensuring access for all helps reduce inequalities, promoting better overall health in underserved communities⁵.



3. INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION

We have been critical of successive governments for their inadequate education of children about oral health, ranking poorly compared to other countries⁷. There are significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of oral health promotion initiatives, particularly among marginalised groups and the elderly.⁸

Our data shows that awareness and self-care practices related to oral health remain insufficient. We believe this could be attributed to poor access to education. Investment in these programmes is vital for reversing this trend.

Education equips individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to maintain good oral health, fostering a culture of prevention over cure. They raise awareness about the importance of regular dental check-ups, correct brushing and interdental cleaning techniques, and the impact of diet on oral health⁹. Without these programmes, we risk a future where preventable oral diseases increase further¹⁰.



TEN POLICIES THAT WILL IMPROVE ORAL HEALTH

We are introducing a series of policy priorities aimed at improving the UK's oral health.

These proposals, rooted in our three pillars - preventive measures, high-quality care, and educational programmes, have the potential to significantly improve public oral health.

We urge ministers and policymakers to engage in discussions around these measures and consider their adoption.

We believe these can make a positive impact on the nation's oral health.



1. A NEW NHS DENTAL CONTRACT

We are in desperate need of a new dental contract.

The new payment system should pay dentists based on the number of patients they care for, rather than the number of treatments they perform.

This change aims to encourage dentists to focus more on preventing dental problems before they start, which is better for patients. It means dentists would try to keep your teeth healthy in the long run, rather than just fixing problems as they come up.

We believe this approach could lead to healthier teeth for everyone and make better use of the money available for dental care.



2. UNIVERSAL WATER FLUORIDATION

It's worrying that efforts to add fluoride to public water supplies in the UK have slowed down¹¹.

Adding fluoride is important because it helps prevent tooth decay¹². We think there should be more of these fluoride programmes all over the UK. This would make a big difference in improving oral health for everyone and could help reduce the gap between those who have good oral health and those who don't.





3. PRIORITISE ORAL HEALTH PROMOTION TEAMS

Oral health promotion teams have been facing budget cuts in recent years¹³.

These teams are essential because they go out into the community to teach people, especially children, how to look after their teeth and gums.

They also help spot dental problems early and work on ways to prevent them. We want to see local authority budgets increase for oral health promotion teams.



4. INVEST IN TOOTHBRUSHING PROGRAMMES IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS AND SCHOOLS

Toothbrushing programmes help children learn about correct brushing techniques, promoting good oral hygiene.

More of these programmes can significantly reduce oral health issues, yielding cost savings on the treatment of childhood decay within the lifetime of a government¹⁴. We say their expansion is a vital step towards better oral health, leading to improved overall health.



5. GET TOUGH ON SUGAR

We should expand the tax on sugary drinks to include more types of drinks, like those with milk and sugar.

For example, many drinks you can buy at coffee shops have more sugar than what an adult should have in a whole day, just in one cup¹⁵. We also need to stop ads for unhealthy food, especially during kids' TV shows and video streaming platforms. We should work on plans to get people to eat less sugar.

The money from these taxes could offer extra funding into oral health programmes.



6. PROGRESSIVE SMOKING AGE LEGISLATION

Smoking leads to more than 500,000 hospital admissions and almost 75,000 deaths a year in the UK¹⁶.

It also causes many serious problems with teeth and gums, and can lead to mouth cancer. The next government should pass a new law that would stop anyone born after 2009 from being allowed to buy cigarettes or tobacco.

The law also wants to slowly raise the age when you can legally smoke from 18 to older. This law could be an easy way to save lives, and a lot of people agree with it.





7. RINGFENCE FUNDING FOR EDUCATION

Setting aside specific government money for teaching people about taking care of their teeth can help everyone learn how to prevent oral health problems.

This is especially good for children, older people, and those on lower incomes. It's a way to make sure that people of all ages have better oral health.



8. INTEGRATE ORAL HEALTH AND GENERAL HEALTH

Given poor oral health is linked to conditions like heart disease, strokes, diabetes¹⁷, creating a healthcare system that acknowledges good oral health is essential.

It leads to a healthier society, can cut costs and lessens the burden on health services¹⁷. Sharing data among healthcare professionals and securing funding for oral health services are key. We believe better referral systems between dentists, doctors and pharmacists promote a unified healthcare approach.



9. PROVIDE AN ORAL HEALTH WORKFORCE THAT MEETS THE POPULATION'S NEEDS

The UK's dental workforce is insufficient for population needs¹⁸.

We need to make it faster for dentists from overseas to work here, expand dental schools and student places, improve career development in dentistry, and better utilise existing skills within the wider oral health team.

We also believe that more need to be done to make dentistry a more appealing career for young people.



10. MAKE DENTISTRY MORE AFFORDABLE

Our study shows that more than 40% of adults in the UK don't go to the dentist regularly because it's too expensive¹⁹.

With the rise in cost of living, people have to decide if they can afford dental care or other basic things they need. It's not right that the price of NHS dental services keeps going up faster than other prices.

We need to look again at how much people are charged for NHS dental care, and we need to do it soon.



ORAL HEALTH IS A CORNERSTONE OF OVERALL WELL-BEING

Oral health plays a vital role in the public's quality of life. It's not just about a healthy smile; oral health impacts our ability to eat, speak, and socialise, affecting our physical, mental, and social health.

A FUNCTIONING HEALTHCARE SYSTEM RECOGNISES THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HEALTH, INTEGRATING IT WITHIN GENERAL HEALTH SERVICES.

This holistic approach allows for early detection and treatment of oral diseases, reducing the burden on healthcare resources and improving patient outcomes.

THE ECONOMY ALSO BENEFITS

A healthy workforce is indeed a productive one.

By preventing oral diseases, we not only reduce work absences, which we estimate costs the UK economy more than £105 million each year, but also increase productivity.

Moreover, preventive oral health measures can save significant healthcare costs, with the NHS currently spending around £3.6 billion per year on treating oral health conditions¹⁷.

Additionally, better oral health leads to improved educational attainment and less time off school, contributing to a healthier, more educated population.



POLICY IS CRUCIAL TO ORAL HEALTH PROMOTION

Oral health policy should be comprehensive, addressing the diverse needs of the population, and adaptable, allowing for changes in societal needs and advancements in dental science.

Policies should focus not only on treatment but also on prevention and education, empowering individuals to take charge of their oral health.

It's time we gave oral health the attention it deserves, for the benefit of all.

Let's champion a future where everyone has access to the oral health care they need to lead a healthy, fulfilling life. **Together, we can make this vision a reality.**



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Everyone deserves to have good oral health. That's why the Oral Health Foundation believes in better oral health for all.

By empowering people and communities to improve oral health, we can improve their overall quality of life. We recognise that oral diseases are largely preventable, and by taking a proactive approach, we can create a significant positive impact.

We remain committed to making a tangible difference in the lives of individuals and communities. By empowering people, fostering collaborations, advocating for evidence-informed policies, and addressing the intersection of oral health and diabetes, we are determined to create a healthier future for all.

Together, we can achieve a world where everyone enjoys the benefits of good oral health, leading to improved overall well-being.

FIND OUT MORE AT
WWW.DENTALHEALTH.ORG

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