MPs have criticised the independent review into NHS dentistry in England for failing to have a practising community dentist on its panel.

An independent team, to help improve access for patients who want to see a NHS dentist, was appointed in December by Health Secretary Alan Johnson.

The team led by Professor Jimmy Steele of Newcastle university is made up of Dr Eileen Heenan, Consultant in Dental Public Health, Professor of Salaried Dental Services, Heart of Birmingham Teaching PCT and Tom Wilson, director of contracts, Milton Keynes PCT.

Mike Penning, shadow health minister, expressed his concerns during the debate over the lack of engagement between ministers and the professionals.

He also questioned why no health minister attended the British Dental Association’s conference last year ‘to speak on behalf of the government, given that the contract is so controversial within the profession’.

The BDA event was attended by the Liberal Democrats spokesman, Mr Penning and the Chief Dental Officer, Barry Cockcroft.

Mr Penning and the Liberal Democrats spokesman refused to debate with Dr Cockcroft in public as ‘he is a civil servant – he is not a minister of the crown and he is not elected: he is appointed by the Secretary of State for Health – and it is fundamentally unfair that a civil servant is there to represent the mistakes and problems that the government have got themselves into on dentistry’.

Mr Penning added: ‘As the process goes on and as this contract is reviewed, I am very concerned about whether the government will have the courage to admit how much of the contract they have got wrong and how much of it has affected people in this country.’

Mr Penning would like to see the length of contracts extended so dentists can invest in their practices.

‘If we want dentists to come back into the NHS, or young dentists coming out of training schools—I have visited them and they are fantastic—to come into the NHS, we must give them the confidence to do so, especially in this difficult economic climate,’ he said.

The government has just published its further response to the conclusions and recommendations that were made in the critical Health Select Committee report last summer.

In the report, it accepted that ‘progress on improving access to dental services has been disappointing to date’ and set out the aims of the independent review.