The number of people able to access NHS dental care has returned to the level it was at before the implementation of the 2006 reforms, according to statistics released by the NHS Information Centre.

The figures show that 28,163,000 patients in England accessed NHS dental care in the 24 months ending 31 December 2009, compared to 28,145,000 in the 24 months ending March 2009. As a result of the implementation of the current arrangements for NHS dentistry in England, the proportion of the population who are now seeing the benefits of over £2bn of investment in dental services has returned to the level it was before the implementation of the 2006 reforms, according to statistics released by the NHS Information Centre.

Health Minister Ann Keen called it ‘great news for patients who are now seeing the benefits of over £2bn of investment in improving NHS dental services’.

She added: “There are now nearly 1,200 more dentists working in the NHS than two years ago and practices are opening and expanding all the time across the country.

“We have committed to ensuring that every person who wants to see an NHS dentist is able to do so by March 2011 and this data shows that we are in a good position to deliver that.

“Visiting a dentist regularly is important for maintaining good oral health and anyone who wants to find a dentist in their area should visit www.nhsbs.co.uk.”

Chief Dental Officer Barry Cockcroft also welcomed the news and said: “We introduced new contracts in 2006 to give the local NHS more control over services and it is fantastic that this is now making a real difference for patients. We also know that the NHS is still increasing the amount of dental services it plans to provide in the next two years so we expect the increase in access to continue.

“We’re not just looking at increasing the amount of dental services out there. We’re currently piloting recommendations from last year’s review of dental services which will help us to measure also the quality of services and make sure we are reaching those whom the most.”

However the British Dental Association has warned that a great deal of hard work remains to be done to address the issues facing NHS dental services in England. Dr Susie Sander- son, chair of the BDA’s Executive Board said: “This increase is long-awaited news for the patients who can now see an NHS dentist. However, challenges remain. There are still people who would like to see an NHS dentist who cannot do so and primary care trusts have been charged with delivering access to these individuals by March 2011.

The Department of Health must also look beyond those who seek access to reach out to those who need dental care but do not ask for it. Thirdly, the Steele Re-