this money is invested through open procurement very soon. Patients and dental practices will benefit from this central investment, from April 1.

‘The mini-contracts end on 31 March 2009, when we will need to purchase £2 million worth of dentistry. The likelihood is that many dentists will bid and be successful, in an open and transparent tendering process. This process will involve LDCs who play a constructive part in commissioning and procurement work.’

Eddie Crouch, secretary of Birmingham LDC, says: ‘All PCTs have been given funding, but staffing levels and competence make the transfer to practices extremely difficult and time-consuming.

‘Compliance with European law on tendering makes PCTs wary of legal challenges, so, instead of offering extra funding to expand existing practices, they worry about procedure and delay change.

‘Large tenders for single providers make delivery harder than spreading the money over known successful practices.

‘Whilst HOBT PCT tries its best, without radical changes to the contract, they are paddling uphill.

‘Unless Jimmy Steele, (head of the DH’s independent review), comes up with a miracle cure, this contract is terminally ill.’

Derek Watson, chief executive officer of the DPA, says that formerly, dentists could see investment in the profession because it was a percentage addition on the fee scale, which income paid for everything, including expenses.

He explains: ‘Now, dentists don’t see the investment because they don’t follow PCT budget meetings. Also, because the contract is inflexible, inefficient and unfair, there are considerable worries over wastage. For example, there is a middle management tier to be paid for, any funding announcements invariably include an element of double-counting, eg; they include money from the Doctors and Dentists Review Body, which is given to the profession anyway.

‘In the past, the DH has invested more money in dentistry, mainly for political expediency. Therefore I expect its investment to at least run up to the election in May 2010.

‘Outside of the areas of oral health and prevention, we do not support expansion of the NHS dental service through simple funding increases, until the structural problems are addressed.’

Richard Thomas, General Secretary, Federation of London LDCs, says there are some excellent examples of increased capacity to treat patients under the NHS, due to increased funding, but there are associated problems.

He says: ‘Although there has been additional dentistry funding, we are however aware of situations where funding, allocated to PCTs, has not reached front-line dental services. There is certainly a big difference between various PCTs in their ability or willingness to send out to practices all the funding they receive. We also feel that the present systems used to procure additional services are off-putting to many GDPs.

He says some dentists are saying they have seen no evidence of this investment, because the new contract places a ceiling on the extent of NHS services which each practice can carry out without prior approval. He explains: ‘This limit on their activity necessitates a cautious approach by dentists, as they are penalised for treating more patients than their PCT allows. The systems in place to enable dentists to attract additional funding are bureaucratic and discourage some from applying. Some PCTs offer funding on a non-recurring basis, but dental practices are reluctant to take this up as it creates an insecure business model.

With regard to future funding, he says the DH and PCTs should recognise that it is costly in terms of time and money to take on new patients, many of whom arrive with high treatment needs, costing more for the practice than the UDA system allows. He elaborates: ‘We feel there should be realistic incentives to take on new patients. Those practices whose present UDA values are uneconomic should be offered higher UDA values.’

Thomas claims the new contract has been ‘proven to have an adverse effect on access to NHS dental services’. Ultimately, the federation wants dentists to be able to concentrate on their profession’s purpose, namely, the improvement of oral health.
Conservative dentistry?

In an exclusive interview for the Dental Tribune, Neel Kothari interviews Mike Penning, the Conservative shadow Health Minister responsible for dentistry, and asks him what the Conservatives would do to improve NHS dentistry?

NK: Mr Penning, what are the Conservatives’ plans on taking NHS dentistry forward?

MP: Sadly, we’ve come to the conclusion with many parts of the profession that the present contract as it is formulated and imposed upon dentistry is unsustai-nable and we intend to phase the contract out. We would like to have a system that can put preven-tive dentistry at the forefront and re-introduce registration. But also I think the brand of UDA as is damaged and, I don’t like playing with semantics, but whatever we come up with will not be called UDA.

NK: You mentioned you’re planning on phasing the contract out. How quickly do you think this will happen?

MP: I think there will be some areas where the contract is really not working and here commiss-ioners, the PCT, will work with the NHS dentists to phase it out quite quickly. We think that you should be allowed to have a contract up to five years, in some cases possibly even longer. The reason that’s so important is that, unlike any other area of NHS provision, the dentist is an entrepre- neur where you put up the money.

NK: So you see NHS dentistry as a business as well as a health-care?

MP: Yes, absolutely, and it has to be, in that, if I’m a GP and I want to set up a practice the PCT comes forward and covers the costs... in dentistry that isn’t the case.

NK: By putting a capacity on the amount of work that’s being delivered does this tend to make employment law a bit murkier?

MP: I think it does make it murkier. I think a better word may be rationing, and rationing based on an accountant’s idea of what dentistry should look like, rather than on patient outcomes.

NK: So why do you think this new contract was imposed by the Labour government?

MP: I honestly don’t know. They must have realised that there was going to be a massive problem. I’ve already eluded to the fact that I think it was drawn up by accountants rather than clinicians. Most of the represen-tative bodies either walked away or said, please don’t impose this upon us, it won’t work. They’ve done pilots on other schemes such as personal dental contracts and these were seen to be working, and yet they suddenly woke up with this one morning, with no proper pilots in it came, and the crisis has ensued.

NK: How big an error do you feel it has been not to pilot the contract and are you aware of any other government contracts which have been introduced without piloting?

MP: I think it’s a massive er-ror that has probably put den-tistry, oral hygiene in this country back 20 years. And the reason I say that is because there are now thousands, millions of people that would have had some sort of professional dental oral hygiene routine, which have none today.

NK: What else could be done to encourage dentists back into the NHS?

MP: We’re not going to be short of dentists, we’re going to be short of people working within NHS dentistry. I have often been asked, would I allow chil-dren only contracts? And the an-swer to that is, i’d like to have a perfect world where we’ve got enough dentists to say no, you’ve got to take all or nothing, but we’re not in a perfect world, so I would allow specialty contracts such as child only con-tracts, so we can encourage peo-ple back into the fold who are not likely to come back in otherwise. And to be fair it’s not new what I’m saying, I said it at the BDA conference last year, I’ve said it in the chamber. I’ve said it at busi-ness questions, I think most peo-ple realise that there are parts of the contract that are working in parts of the country and parts of NHS dentistry, I visited Newcas-tle, where there was almost no private provision, but within the NHS there was a surplus of cash and NHS dentistry was actually thriving, not least because of the brilliant work done at the dental school up there as well. But in other parts of the country it’s a massive crisis, where we don’t have any dentistry provision at all.

NK: So you see NHS dentistry as a business as well as a health-care?