Is now the right time to contemplate moving from the NHS into the private sector? This is a question that I frequently hear asked, and the thought process behind the question is also quite common: ‘do I really want change and upheaval?’ and ‘do I want it now?’

However, there has, quite seriously, never been a better time to contemplate change. Those who are comfortable with above-average UDA rates must now be aware that the possibilities of ‘harmonisation’ are looming and in some cases already happening. Recent media stories, which look to blame dentists for the failings of the new dental contract, are also only too familiar.

Access (volume) is the declared goal of the reforms, and it is the profession who will take all the risks involved, while their goodwill and business assets are valued entirely at the whim of their local NHS management.

To quote one colleague, the ideal time to make the move out of the NHS is always a little while before you actually do it. This was certainly true in the last days of the ‘old contract’ when dentists were queuing up for a last-minute conversion. There were inevitably problems with this approach, since plans were rushed, communications brief and objectives not always fully thought through.

Some colleagues on the other hand, have an unquenchable belief that all will turn out well. That’s understandable, as no-one likes to think about the hangover when the party is in full swing. But history does not support this prospect. Every major Governmental reform of dental healthcare has had an uncomfortable outcome for dentists.

Interestingly, dentists are very clear about why they seek relief from managed healthcare. Their reasons, according to Denplan research are: to spend more time with patients; to reduce workplace stress; to offer good quality clinical care; to have clinical freedom; to run their practice without outside constraint, and (in about sixth place) to have appropriate financial reward.

It is always tempting to think that ‘it won’t work for me’ or ‘it won’t work for my patients’, but time and again, over more than 20 years, experience tells us otherwise. A careful analysis, using expert systems and experienced advisors, will reveal what is possible in any practice circumstance, in any location.

And once a realistic goal has been set, and crucially, all the practice team are committed to its achievement, the outcome is entirely predictable. As dentists we are perhaps more likely to be ‘control freaks’ rather than merely swept along by the tide, but this is one time when having knowledgeable, outside advice is essential. Dentists who have moved into the private sector always have one saying in common: ‘I wish I’d done it years ago’.

Roger Matthews, CDO for Denplan

The late Sir John Harvey-Jones, ICI Chairman and Troubleshooter said: ‘in business, there are only forward and reverse gears; there is no ‘park’ option.’ In the turbulent world that is UK dentistry today, this is the very best time to be selecting ‘forward’.