The Government’s response to the Health Select Committee raised a few hackles in the profession, but what does it all really mean? Dental Tribune takes a good hard look at the report and analyses the good, the bad and the ugly parts.

When the Health Select Committee produced its damning report on NHS dentistry in July, many commentators hoped that the Government would rewrite the dentists’ contract. Even before the report was published, Conservative spokesman, Mike Penning MP, had called on the Secretary of State to “scrap this ludicrous contract” which had left nearly a million members of the public with no access to NHS dentistry.

The British Dental Association (BDA)’s chair, Susie Sander son described the report as “damning”, which had highlighted “the failure of a farcical contract.” She called on the Department of Health (DH) to “listen to this condemnation report and act swiftly.” Three months later they produced their “ interim” response. Far from promising radical reform the Government said it was confident that the new dental contract provided “a better basis for Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) to commission services”. Although it accepted the Committee’s view that progress on improving access was disappointing to date, the DH would work to see how the NHS could achieve “the maximum benefits for patients from these reforms”.

It had already started to work with Strategic Health Authorities (SHAs) to improve access to NHS dentistry. This project will be completed later this autumn and the Government will then make a fuller response setting out further actions. Media speculation suggests the DH is planning “a crackdown on dentists who have been exploiting the system to maximise their incomes, denying thousands of patients access to treatment”.

The Committee was most disappointed by the DH’s goal of improving this had not been met and that improvements would soon be seen. It pointed out that “the various measures of access available all indicate that the situation is deteriorating”.

In reply, the Government admitted that progress was “uneven” and that the DH had increased funding for dentistry by 11 per cent this year. This should mean that PCTs could commission more services, and the Government pointed to evidence that this was already happening. There were also more dentists in the system to do the work and the “there was no shortage of applicants when PCTs tendered for new practices”.

The Government accepted that there was more to do, such as addressing the problem that some PCTs are better than others at commissioning in a bid to improve access. Similarly, the public are not using the services in some areas where PCTs have opened new practices.

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