



# The Future of Dental Recruitment in the UK: Trends and Predictions for 2025

BDJ Jobs Recruitment Whitepaper 2024

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## Author

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**BDA**

Ryan Barnett

## Foreword

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BDJ Jobs is proud to present the third analysis of recruitment and retention of dentists in the UK, in partnership with the British Dental Association. This year's whitepaper will focus on analysing trends and making predictions about the future of the UK dental recruitment market.

Using expert data from BDJ Jobs, the BDA, GDC and NHS, we have been able to measure how the market continues to change and provide employers and job seekers with a well-rounded understanding of the various factors affecting recruitment in the industry.

Dentistry has gone through several significant changes in recent years, recovering from both the impacts of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. The last whitepaper found some pre-existing long-term problems had been exacerbated by the pandemic, such as difficulties with recruitment spreading across the whole of the UK.

The data collected suggests that the impacts of Brexit and COVID-19 are subsiding, however the issue of dentists looking to reduce their NHS commitment continues to impact the recruitment market.

As we move into a new political landscape, it is reasonable to predict that stability may be on the horizon, however, this will largely depend on the investment and recruitment policies of the new Labour government.

I would like to thank Tom King and Ryan Barnett from the BDA for their hard work compiling the research, and I hope you find it as valuable as I do.

**Charley Sheppard**

BDJ Classified Team Leader

## Introduction

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This report explores the set of trends affecting the dental recruitment market since the last edition of the BDJ Jobs Recruitment Whitepaper in 2021. As was the case between the two prior publications of the BDJ recruitment whitepaper, a lot has changed since. Though the COVID-19 outbreak, and its impact on dentistry through the closing of practices featured heavily in the previous report, it was the period of follow-on inflation and its impacts which have had the biggest effects on the economy in the following years. Whilst Brexit, then a more recent feature of political discourse has subsided as a prominent policy concern. Although changes in demographic data from the GDC may take a longer time period to reflect the after-effects of leaving the European Union's single market.

Some trends featured then have continued, particularly those relating to pay and geographical distribution. Contract reform remains an ongoing concern in all four nations, and some changes have been made to dentist contracts, but dentists are still seeking to perform more private work.

There is also a new government in place, as of July this year. Their predecessors had set in train a series of policy interventions which would have a long-term effect on the dental workforce, and we are as yet unclear if new ministers will take them forward. Though the Labour party has pledged £125 million worth of investment and policies which may impact the recruitment market.

Hiring conditions may be improving as the economy seems to be entering a less disruptive phase, although there is no guarantee how long this might last. Inflation is now close to the Bank of England's target of 2% and there is growing evidence of better economic growth on the horizon. Theoretically, improved conditions might translate into a more active dental recruitment market as both recruiters and job seekers feel more comfortable taking risks and making changes in their careers.

The report will set out a background of the UK's oral health, economic conditions and labour market context before exploring the more detailed trends in dental recruitment looking at variations in the difference between roles, working patterns and geography.

## Methodology

This report draws on a wide range of datasets to support its analysis including those from the GDC annual reports; NHS Digital figures on Earnings and Expenses Estimates and Working Patterns, Morale, and Motivation; workforce figures from NHS Digital. Supportive data on inflation is taken from the Office for National Statistics and the Bank of England.

It also draws on research commissioned by the BDJ, BDJ Jobs and the GDC, as well as published research. BDJ Jobs data is taken from July 2022 to July 2024.

## Oral health in the UK

There are different methods for assessing oral health of developed nations. The DMFT index (the number of teeth with caries, the number of teeth with fillings and the number of missing teeth) is one such method, using a count and applying a ranking to different countries.

Looking at the DMFT index and ranking the countries from highest to lowest<sup>1</sup>, the UK comes out fourth in the top 10 countries, joint with Sweden and ahead of most other countries in both Europe and the OECD. However, other factors have been included in some studies to assess population level oral health which incorporate the number of dentists per 10,000 people, sugar consumption, alcohol consumption and smoking habits and water fluoridation.

In 2022 the World Health Organisation released a global report on oral health, however many of the findings were taken from 2018 and 2019, meaning they are somewhat out of date. Typically, the UK has a low number of dentists per population compared to other countries in Europe, though their health systems tend to be based on insurance schemes with some level of public provision.



DMFT	Score
Denmark	0.4
Germany	0.5
Finland	0.7
UK	0.8
Sweden	0.8
Switzerland	0.9
Canada	1
Mexico	1.1
France	1.2
US	1.2

<sup>1</sup> Oral Health Country/Area Profile Project - Oral Health Country/Area Profile Project (mau.se)

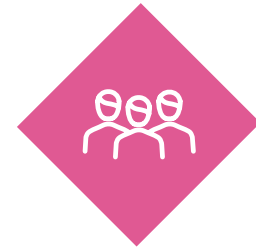
## Dentist demographics

When it comes to the demographic breakdown of the dentist population, it is both increasingly diverse and as a workforce, feminising. 60% of dentists added to the register in 2023 were female, which is a consistent shift seen in the demographics of the profession over the last few years. 48.6% were white, marking a steady decrease from 51.5% in 2019.

## GDC registrations

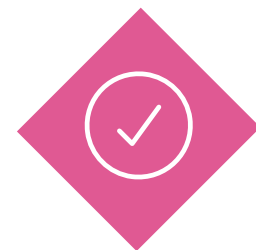
There are in total 120,000 dental professionals registered with the GDC, of which 45,204 are dentists, the remainder being dental care professionals (DCPs). Dental nurses are listed under DCPs, there are at most 61,774 dental nurses currently registered, although some may be training to take on other roles in the dental team, or indeed already working in that capacity and therefore double registered.

The number of dentists has only risen steadily since 2019, rising by just under 3,000 whilst the number of DCPs has increased more recently, jumping 3,500 between 2022 and 2023.<sup>2</sup> There was a 5.4% increase in the overall number of registered dental professionals in 2023, from 122,432 in 2022 to 129,052 in 2023. The roles which have contributed to this rise most were dental nurses, hygienists and therapists. Whilst there has been a consistent year on year fall in technicians, potentially owing to changes in the dental laboratory market.



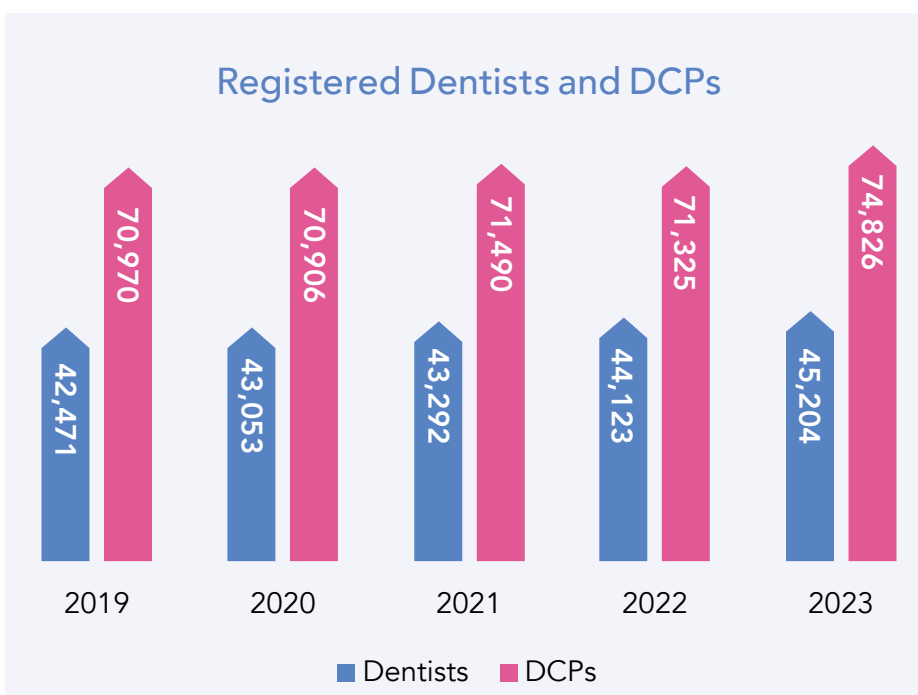
# 60%

of dentists added to the register in 2023 were female



# 120,000

dental professionals registered with the GDC



<sup>2</sup> Registration Statistical Report 2023 (gdc-uk.org)

## The Brexit factor

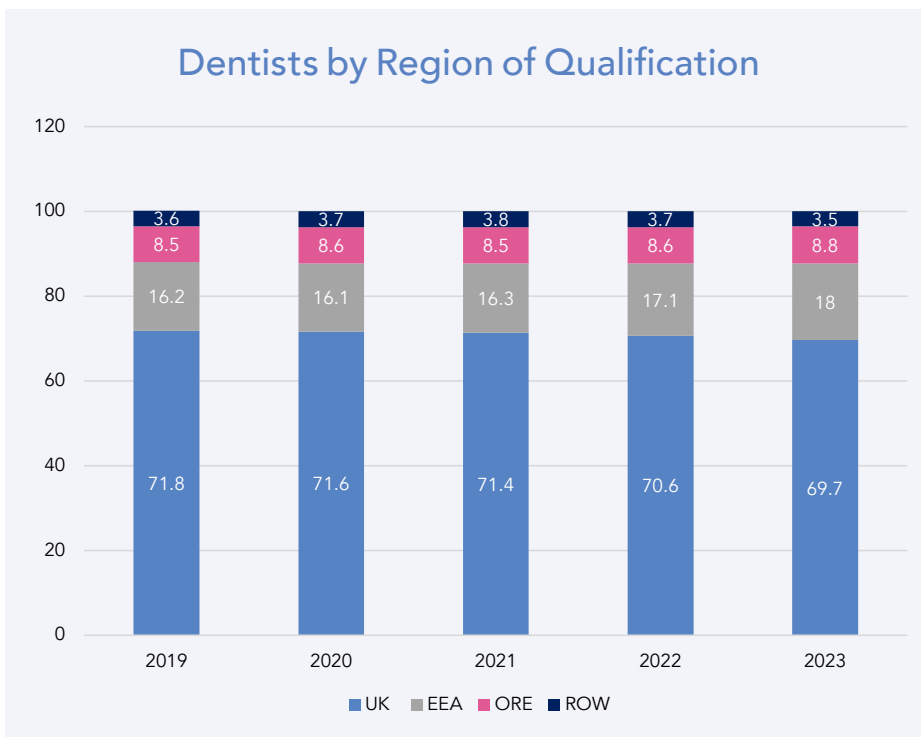
The last edition of this report highlighted Brexit as a potentially important factor in the hiring of dentists from overseas. Having been published in 2021, and at the height of the pandemic, it was unclear what long term affect Brexit might have on the recruitment market. Immigration is again a hot political topic as numbers of migrants have hit record highs, owing to employment and overseas students.

Demand remains high for training places, potentially encouraging some to study in Europe at English speaking dental schools. When it comes to the effect of Brexit, the proportion of new registrants from the EEA took a sharp decline between 2015 and 2016. In the prior half-decade around 580 dentists would join the register from EEA countries. After Brexit, the average was 400. However, over the period there was also a steady decrease in the number of UK joiners.

Since 2021 the intake of non-UK dentist joiners to the register has grown substantially, climbing to 38.4% in 2023, outstripping the previous peak of 33.7%, in 2009.

Over time, EEA registrants tend to leave the register at a steady rate. If we look at cohort data for those joining the register in 2007, there is year-on-year attrition of about 15%.

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Although the UK has now left the EU more than four years ago, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of EEA trained dentists registering. There is anecdotal evidence of prospective UK dental students going abroad to qualify at English speaking dental schools in the EU, due to the high demand for student places.

## Dentist incomes

The latest data on earnings and expenses for dentists was released in July,<sup>3</sup> illustrating a range of different trends across the profession. In England, associate dentist incomes remain essentially static, whilst gains have been made in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. English associate earnings in fact declined slightly, by 1% in cash terms.

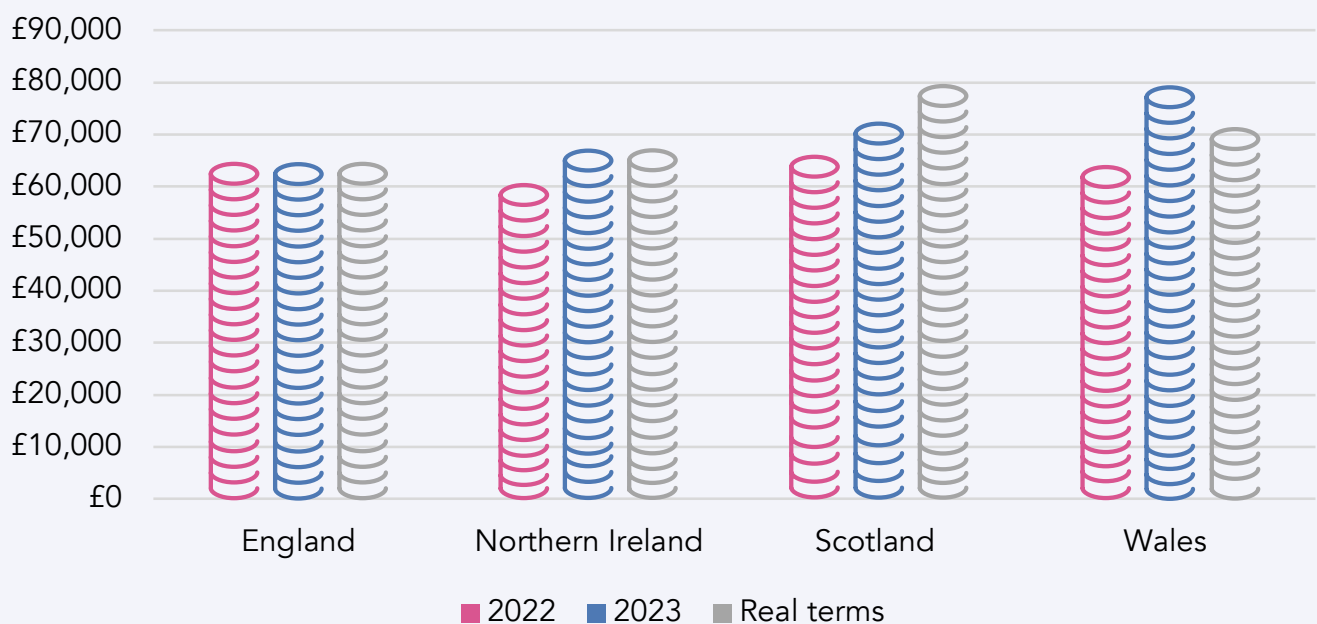
However, in most cases dentists are earning less in real terms than the year before, owing to the rise in the rate of inflation from 2021 onwards. Real terms decreases in earnings have been typical over the medium term as wages have not kept pace with inflation. Only in Scotland have recent gains in earnings offset the real terms drop when compared to 2018. Real terms losses in earnings since the financial crisis in 2008 are typical across sectors.



Growth in incomes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. 1% decline in England.

<sup>3</sup> Dental Earnings and Expenses UK Timeseries 202223.xlsx (live.com)

## Dentist Associate's Earnings





## Economic and Labour Market Context

### Inflation nation

Inflation may have played a key role in the recruitment market over the last three years. The cost of doing business as a practice has gone up. Dentistry is uniquely a combination of elastic goods (which can vary in price sharply and fluctuate up and down quickly compared to others) such as energy and plastic materials, and staffing which makes up most of the cost of care through nurses, receptionists, managers and of course the dentists themselves.

During the period of the rise in the cost of living, food, housing costs and energy costs rose sharply. The rate of the rise in prices has now abated closer to the Bank of England target of 2%, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI).<sup>4</sup> However, other than energy costs which have come down, prices have remained high. The period of uncertainty might have discouraged dentists from seeking new roles elsewhere. BDA research has also found that in this period associate dentists are less likely to have received a pay rise or ask for one, partially discouraged by the rise in overall practice costs. However, the increase in private work being taken on by associate dentists might act as an alternative response.

This follows a long period of both frozen NHS funding and frozen average wages for dentists. Associate dentists have consistently earned £60,000 after expenses going back a decade. Increased cost pressure has mounted given higher than average inflation rates whilst British workers have experienced the longest period of wage stagnation since the Napoleonic war.<sup>5</sup>

### A new government

Following the election in July, where dentistry and the lack of NHS access was a major topic of debate most of the major parties made commitments for investment and reform. The Labour Party, which now forms the government, committed to a combination of 700,000 new urgent appointments, recruitment incentives such as golden hellos, a targeted toothbrushing scheme for primary school children and reform of the dental contract in England to make it more prevention focussed.<sup>6</sup> Their plan was underpinned by £125 million of investment.<sup>7</sup> The party has also agreed in principle to the NHSE long-term workforce plan (LTWP), however they have not outlined how this would be funded. In terms of the wider labour market, the party has an ambition in government to take the percentage of employed working-age adults from 75%<sup>8</sup> to 80%.



## £60,000+

Associate dentists have earned over £60,000 consistently for over a decade

## £125M

of investment pledged by the Labour Party.

<sup>4</sup> Consumer price inflation, UK - Office for National Statistics

<sup>5</sup> 17-year wage squeeze the worst in two hundred years | TUC

<sup>6</sup> Labour's plan to rescue NHS dentistry and provide 700,000 new appointments – The Labour Party

<sup>7</sup> Change – The Labour Party

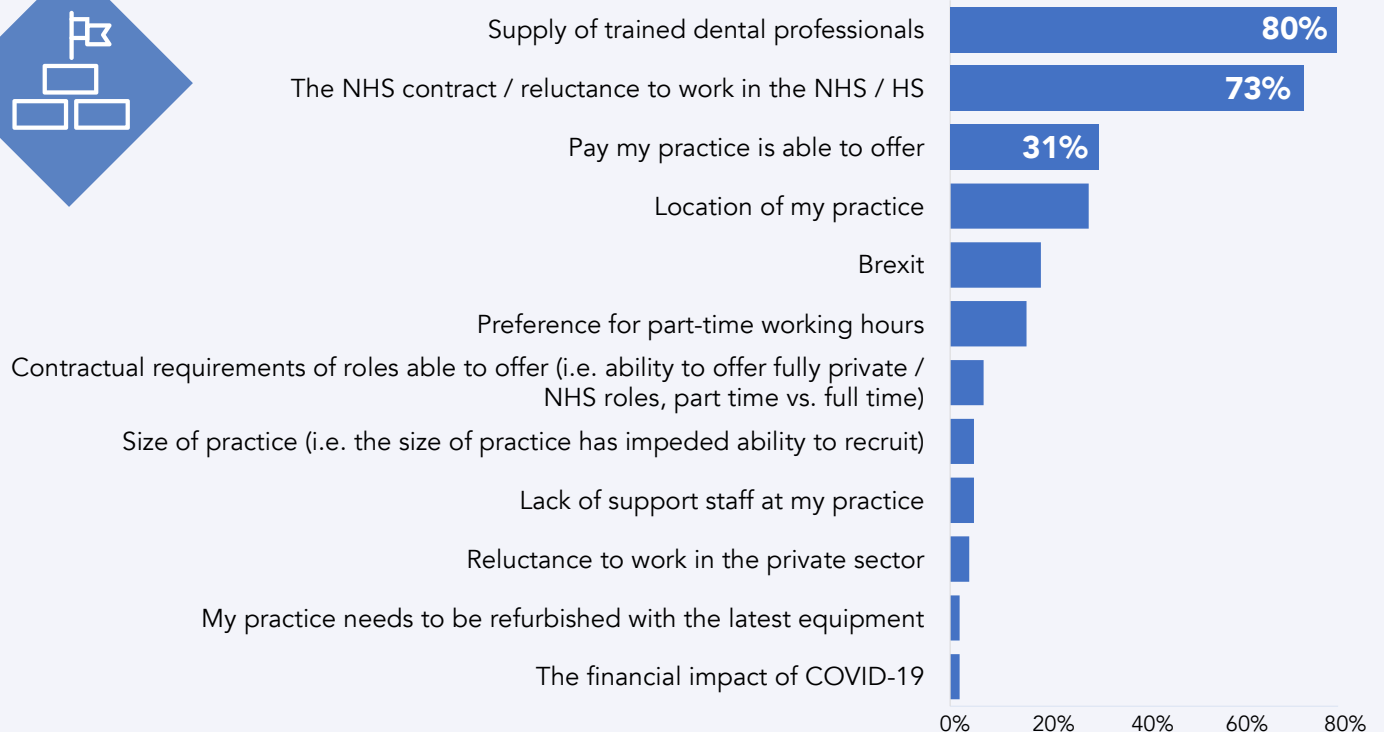
<sup>8</sup> Labour market overview, UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

It is unclear what impact this will have in practice, however funding for workforce incentives such as golden hellos could create competition in some areas for positions. The additional appointments, if funded sufficiently, may drive some dentists to take on more NHS work. However, 700,000 appointments (depending on what this means in practice) may only mean a small increase in the number of patients seen. Golden hellos, payments made on top of contracted UDAs to encourage dentists to work in areas with low provision, were also a feature of the previous government's Dental Recovery Plan,<sup>9</sup> providing dentists with an additional £20,000 to move, potentially driving recruitment and applications in some rural areas outside of London and the Southeast.

Labour's plans were set out to 'rescue' NHS dentistry, meaning that these policy interventions are focussed on first stabilising the service. We may not see movement on contract reform until after these are implemented. In any case, contract reform is not a rapid process given the complexities of the current UDA contract in England (and in the other three nations) and what it would take to be implemented diligently across the thousands of practices which hold NHS contracts.

<sup>9</sup> Faster, simpler and fairer: our plan to recover and reform NHS dentistry - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

### What have been the top 3 things that you believe have had the greatest impact on your practice's ability to recruit during 2023?



## Wider labour market trends

The labour market has gone through several phases of expansion and compression over the last decade, driven by instability in the wider economy. Brexit in some cases discouraged hiring decisions. The pandemic led to a near freezing of job applications in April 2020, followed by a sharp rebound in the September. However, the pandemic has created longer term pressure on the Labour market as costs, health conditions and demographic changes have discouraged many from working full time or returning to work, leading a tight labour market over the medium term.<sup>10</sup>

## The Dental Recruitment Market

### Salaried vs self-employed

Data for salaried jobs over the period shows that aside from seasonal dips around December-January, applications have steadily risen since July 2022. Applications doubled from the second quarter of that year to the corresponding quarter in 2023. By the second quarter of 2024, salaried applications represented a near 250% increase on Summer 2022. Associate applications followed a similar path overall. However, applications outnumbered those of salaried dentists by a factor of 10. This might help explain the much higher response rate, over double of those applying for salaried posts. There are far fewer salaried dental positions, whilst associate dentists represent the bulk of the overall workforce. Roles are harder to come by and so might attract a higher proportionate number of overall applications.

### Private dentistry

Anecdotally, we know that dentists are reducing their commitment, which has been borne out in NHS data as they seek the more manageable workloads and escaping stressful and broken NHS contracts. Whilst private practices did not have the protection for incomes offered to those with NHS contracts, solely private practice job applications are lower now on average than in 2022. Mixed practice applications, whilst making up the vast majority of self-employed roles have actually declined, following a similar path to the applications for private work. As the post-covid jobs market has re-established itself it could be that dentists are choosing other avenues, such as reducing commitment over changing roles and moving to private practices. This would be in accordance with wider trends in the labour market, which remains very tight following covid.



Roles are harder to come by and so might attract a higher proportionate number of overall applications.

<sup>10</sup> Employment in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

## Part-time vs full-time

Whilst part-time applications have been in decline, full-time applications have remained fairly consistent over the previous 24 months. Looking back, at the height of the pandemic there was a spike in interest in part time roles as dentists looked for different working patterns. It is possible that the decline we have seen since is a natural unwinding of the trend as society exited lockdown procedures and moved on.

## Corporates

It is estimated that about 13% of practices are owned by one of the four biggest dental corporate businesses.<sup>11</sup> Response rates for independents have on average been 4.6% higher than for corporates. There are typically 50% more applications for independent practices over the last 24 months and this has been the case in each quarter and month of the time period. There have been fluctuations in the proportion of corporate dental businesses, and the definition can vary between including the biggest organisations down to small chains.

## Future of the workforce

Dental student numbers remain static each year, however as set out in last year's LTWFP, student numbers are set to expand in three phases starting in 2026. DCP training places are also due to expand. Currently there are 826 dental places in England, at an average of 72 per school. This is set to expand to over 1,100 per year, but not until the late 2030s. The new influx will not begin joining the dental market, if the expansion sticks to schedule until 2032 after five years of school and one year of foundation training. It is unclear currently how this will alter provision in each school, but more detail is expected from the government over the coming months. Calls for new dental schools have been made regularly by politicians since the pandemic, as a way of encouraging dentists to train and remain in areas with low levels of patient access.

## Geography

The majority of job seeker respondents to our survey were associates, between 35 – 54 years of age and based in the South East, London or North West England. When surveyed, the greatest challenge among half of job seekers was a lack of roles in their desired workplace setting in their search area.

Response rates vary by region, with South East England and Greater London receiving the highest response rates. According to a survey of BDJ Jobs users, of job seekers, the region with the highest share of



**24%**  
of applications came  
from South East

<sup>11</sup> Dental-Market-Review-2023\_final49.pdf (dentistry.co.uk)

applications came from the South East at 24%, followed by London 18%. Just over half of job seekers were looking for a change of working environment, and over 2 in 5 were looking for career development.

Given the demographic skew in England to the South East and the propensity for higher remuneration rates, this is in line with other trends across recruitment and the wider economy. However, looking at BDJ jobs data Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland also receive higher average response rates than the remaining English regions. There are several factors which likely influence this, including but not exclusive to the social-cultural familiarity of those applying to stay within the given nation as opposed to an alternative English region, benefits which differ with the English system for dentists (such as in Scotland, where a range of career-linked allowances remain) and the pull of the Capital and its higher density of dental practices.

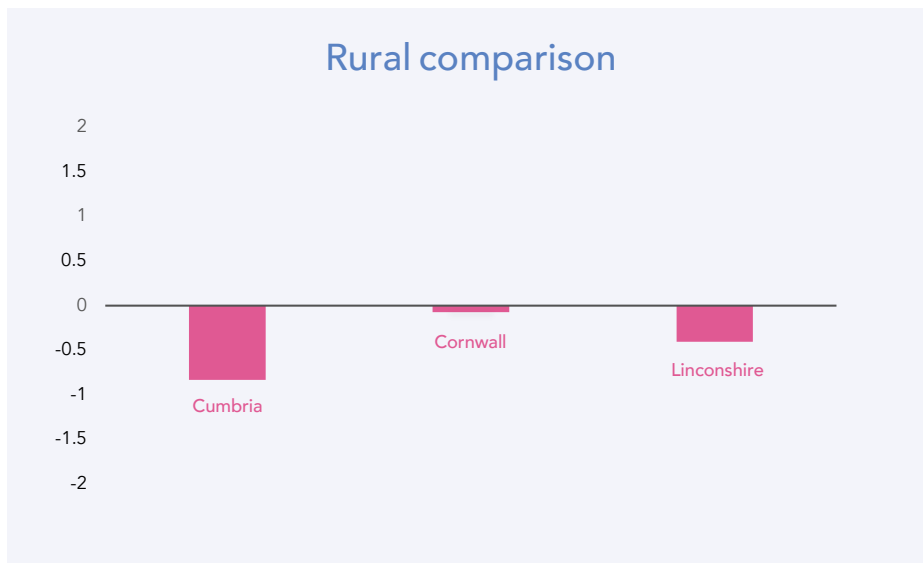
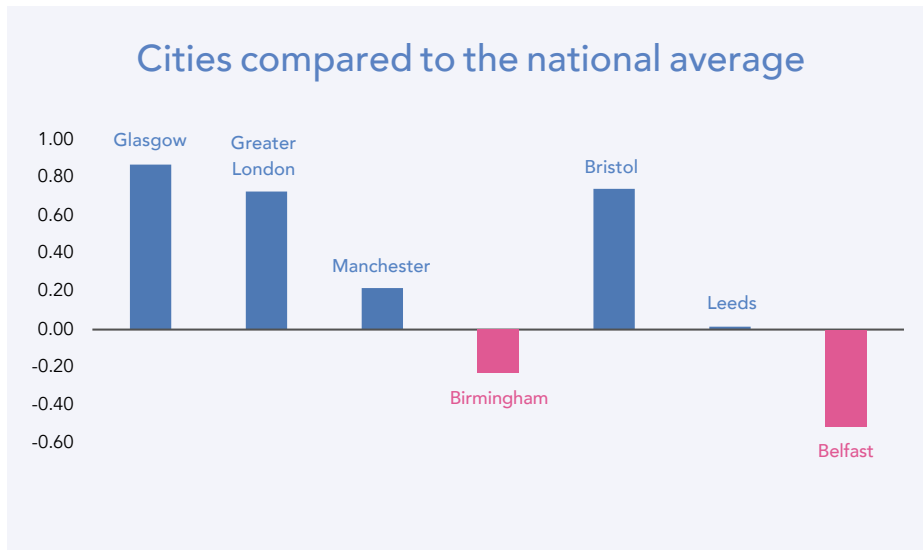
Trends have continued from the previous report when it came to English regions, response rates all being below average apart from Greater London and the South East. However, the aforementioned better than average scores for Scotland and Wales representing a positive shift since the last paper.

Northern Ireland, whilst still just below average has at least improved its response rate to come close to the average over the last two years.

### Response rates per region compared to the average



In the previous paper, we looked in depth at the performance of cities and some rural areas too. Here there has too been a shift in the last two years as most of the cities analysed last time have moved above the national average.



Revisiting the three counties the previous report compared, their response rates have improved slightly, bringing each much closer to the national average.

## Conclusion

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The wider labour market, and dental recruitment market have experienced several phases of fluctuation over the period of which the BDJ recruitment whitepaper has focussed. However, evidence shows that from summer 2022 until now, the jobs market in dentistry has moved on from the covid period to a new phase.

Whilst the after-effects of Brexit and the pandemic have largely subsided, international entry into the recruitment market is higher than ever before, complicating the picture. Dentists are reducing their NHS commitment but looking for avenues to improve earnings, for instance through taking on more private work or switching practices.

On the upside, the economic uncertainty during the period of high inflation and the 2022 budget has eased, inflation is now at around 2%. Although the newfound stability may prove brittle and could change at any time, a less disruptive, more consistent period of economic conditions might provide the stability for dentists to enter the recruitment market and practices to expand their workforce. Much will depend on the investment and recruitment policies of the new Labour government, whilst the ongoing issues with NHS dentistry continue to bear down on hiring decisions.

**Dentists are reducing their NHS commitment but looking for avenues to improve earnings, for instance through taking on more private work or switching practices.**

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## Contact

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