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Jane Hutt AM
Minister for Health and Social Services

Our ref: MB/318/04
Your ref:

Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Kirsty Williams AM
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

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Following questions you raised about dentistry in plenary on 24 February the First Minister has asked me to update you on progress in implementing "Routes to Reform: A Strategy for Primary Dental Care in Wales" and the current position regarding a new contract for the General Dental Service in Wales.

We received a large number of responses to our consultation on Routes to Reform, the vast majority of which supported the recommendations outlined in the Strategy. However, no sooner had the consultation period closed than the Department of Health came forward with proposals for major changes to the way primary care dental services are organised and delivered along with new primary legislation to underpin these changes. Although the detail of the proposals were not finalised there was still a need for us to consider their impact on our agenda for improvement and the how far the proposals may deliver the recommendations outlined in Routes to Reform. We also needed to secure the same legislative provisions for Wales which would keep our options open to implement reform once the position in England became clearer and we had decided on the correct course of action here.

As the First Minister mentioned, the initial work undertaken by England on the new contract was fast moving. As a result we felt it was right and proper to take the time to fully assess the impact on Wales of any new arrangements to ensure we achieve a balanced outcome which will provide rewards for dentists, improve quality of care for patients and deliver value for money for the taxpayer. However, my officials have been fully engaged with the Department of Health and the dental profession throughout the process so far. The position is now clearer and I am currently considering the options available and will be making a statement on the way forward in Wales within the next few weeks.

We are currently working from action plans which take forward those recommendations of Routes to Reform not directly linked to the wider proposed changes and a number of these are already being implemented. For example the current review of the Community Dental Service and the need for LHBs to have in place oral health action plans by March 2005. However, I still intend that our response to the consultation, and an update on

progress, will be reported upon. Following my announcement, I propose to bring a paper to the Health and Social Services Committee encompassing all of the proposals for changes to primary dental services in Wales.