A senior member of the Northern Ireland branch of the British Dental Association has told the Western Health and social services council of his concerns for the future of dentistry in the north-west.

Mr Barry McGonigle made his comments at the monthly meeting of the Council. He said he held deep concerns for the industry and not least about the proposed process that could see services contracted out.

Warning that committed community-based dental provision would not come from ‘birds of passage’ style provision, he said one of the biggest stumbling blocks to increasing the number of dental practices was the prohibitive start-up costs – estimated at more than £100,000.

He added that for students who had just qualified after five years or more of study there were no grants or financial handouts available to alleviate financial pressures.

‘Getting started is an 18-month to two-year process,’ he said.

Mr McGonigle said practices now simply could not take on any more patients because they did not have the capacity to do so.

A key issue of the problems facing the industry, he said, was that provision had to come from qualified personnel and stressed was not a matter of ‘dentists just looking for more money’.

Calling for imaginative solutions to the problems, Mr McGonigle contended these would not have to cost vast sums of money, and he went on to ask the Council members to allow him to give a presentation at their next meeting in September.

Mr McGonigle gave assurances that special needs and child cases in need of urgent treatment would be seen as priorities, but stressed that every time a person was admitted as an emergency case it put additional pressure on the patient treatment lists.

Mr McGonigle also highlighted that, from August 1, all dental nurses have to be registered. Dental nurses are practice trained, he said, and if ‘flying squads’ or contract dentists advertised for nurses locally it would remove skilled staff from existing practices.

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Earlier in the meeting the chief officer, Maggie Reilly, outlined the results of the mystery telephone survey, which showed that between April and May this year, service had deteriorated to the extent that adults, and in some instances children, are not being registered with dentists. She said she had received assurances from chief executive Elaine Way that all would be turned to improve the current situation.